

Not all high-flyers are suited to life at the top

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Business topics: Human resources, career planning, leadership & management

Business language focus: HR and career paths, managerial qualities, awareness of professional strengths and weaknesses

Activities: In this lesson, students will:

- read a business article first published in the *Financial Times* and look at the language necessary to understand and talk about the article;
- look at business-specific words and expressions and apply them to their own personal work experience;
- discuss aspects of the article in greater depth;
- research and discuss three further principles concerned with attitudes towards work and with self-awareness in work situations.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student, internet access for exercise 6

Group size: All of the tasks can be completed in pairs or groups, so that as much communication as possible takes place in the class. However, this lesson plan can also be used in a one-to-one teaching situation.

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This lesson is based on an authentic article from the *Financial Times*, republished here with its full, original text.

The article talks about professional abilities and one's own perception of them, the kind of qualities that a manager needs and how to know when it is time to move on to another profession or field of work.

1. Warmer

Students complete the sentence with their own ideas and then compare what they have written.

2. Key words and expressions

Students search for words and expressions in the text and write them next to the definitions while noticing how the words are used in context.

Key:

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>conjure up</i> | 7. <i>shrinking from</i> |
| 2. <i>pinnacle</i> | 8. <i>tampering</i> |
| 3. <i>demands</i> | 9. <i>shredded</i> |
| 4. <i>nature</i> | 10. <i>blunder on</i> |
| 5. <i>civil</i> | 11. <i>admirable</i> |
| 6. <i>budging</i> | 12. <i>evident</i> |

3. Understanding the article

Students work in pairs and answer the questions with as much information as possible from the article.

Key:

1. *England.*
2. *They assumed that he found it insufficiently stimulating as he is so clever.*
3. *He didn't say that. That's what one of his teammates said about him. Ansari himself said that there are lots of intelligent cricketers, many of them cleverer than he is.*
4. *He was on tour with the England cricket team in India and Bangladesh in 2016–17 and realised he didn't have the same amount of competitive spirit as his teammates. Although he admired them, he felt left out (alienated) and so he decided to leave.*
5. *He says it was a brave and honest choice of what to do. He also says it was admirable that he had so much self-awareness at such a young age. He says that it shows how intelligent Ansari is.*
6. *He says you need to be able to accept that your former workmates (crew) might no longer be your friends or include you in their group. You should also be able to make tough decisions that may be unpopular but necessary for your organisation. And you have to be fair and show respect and realise that your decisions will affect people's lives. You need to be hard – as though you have a splinter of ice in your heart – but not too hard. You should not act in ways that might damage your organisation's reputation or moral standing. And you should have enough self-awareness that you release what you are good at and where you might need to make some improvements.*

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4. Business language

In part a, students read the business words and phrases in the box and find and underline them in the article, noticing how they were used. Note: The word 'field' appears twice in the article, once in a business sense and once to describe the place where people play cricket. Therefore, make students aware before they start the task that they should concentrate on looking for business-related vocabulary.

In part b, students then use the words and phrases to complete the sentences before, in part c, deciding which of them are likely to be useful for them and writing sentences of their own that contain these words but also reflect their own work situation or previous work experience. E.g. a student decides that *goal-setting* and *boards* are not important for them but that being able to talk about *retirement* and *making people redundant* is, so they ignore *goal-setting* and *boards* and concentrate on writing sentences that use variations of *retirement* and *to make someone redundant*.

Key:

1. *high-flyers*
2. *retirement*
3. *field*
4. *head of a department*
5. *probationary period*
6. *warnings*
7. *goal-setting*
8. *make (150 employees) redundant*
9. *cost-cutting*
10. *boards*

5. Discussion

In small groups, students discuss the questions which pick up on and expand on topics and quotes from the article. Hold a short whole-class feedback session and compare and contrast each group's answers and input.

6. Wider business theme

Divide the students into As, Bs and Cs. The As should work together and find information on the Peter Principle and make notes in the appropriate box on the worksheet, while the Bs do the same for the Dunning Kruger Effect and the Cs for the Imposter Syndrome.

Then ask the students to sit together in groups of three (one A, B and C in each group) and tell each other what they have found out. While they do this, they complete the remaining two boxes with the information they are given. Then, in their groups, they discuss how these principles might affect business in general, and in particular how they might affect employees when one of their co-workers displays one of these kinds of behaviour patterns.

Finally, they should compare and contrast them to the way Zafar Ansari behaved and talked about his own abilities.



One-to-one teaching

This task can be adapted so that the student researches the above as homework and then reports back (to you) in the next lesson what they found out. They should also be prepared to discuss these principles in the way outlined above.

Help them prepare by asking them to consider the following questions:

- How might these principles affect businesses in general?
- How might they affect employees when one of their co-workers displays one of these kinds of behaviour patterns?

Key (possible answers):

- *The Peter Principle states that in a hierarchy each employee has the tendency to rise through promotion to a level where they are no longer competent.*
- *The Dunning-Kruger effect shows that people believe they are cleverer and more capable than they really are. It happens when people do not possess the skills needed to recognize their own incompetence and they overestimate how good they are at something.*
- *The Imposter Syndrome refers to a pattern of behaviour where people doubt their (work) accomplishments and have a persistent, often internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud.*

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1 Warmer

Complete the sentence in your own words.

A good business leader or manager should be _____ and _____
as well as _____ and _____.

2 Key words and expressions

Find the words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. create or achieve something difficult or unexpected, as if by magic (2 words, para 4)

2. the most successful or exciting part of someone's life (para 5) _____
3. the things that need to be done in a particular situation (para 6) _____
4. a basic quality or feature of something (para 6) _____
5. polite, especially in a formal way and without being particularly friendly (para 9)

6. moving or leaving a place (para 9) _____
7. not be willing to do something difficult, or to not deal with something unpleasant (2 words, para 11)

8. changing something to give yourself an unfair advantage (para 13) _____
9. destroyed (para 13) _____
10. continue in a careless way, making mistakes or creating problems as you go (2 words, para 15)

11. deserving to be respected (para 16) _____
12. easy to see, notice, or understand (para 16) _____

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Not all high-flyers are suited to life at the top

Few are good at management — and even fewer know when to quit

BY MICHAEL SKAPINKER



Michael Skapinker, 17 April 2018.
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1 “Way too clever to be a cricketer!” That was the reaction of one of his teammates when Zafar Ansari announced last year that he was giving up cricket just a few months after achieving his childhood ambition of playing for England.

2 Many assumed that Ansari, who has a double first from Cambridge in politics, psychology and sociology and a master’s degree from Royal Holloway, University of London, found international cricket, and cricketers, insufficiently stimulating.

3 Last week, he denied that an intellectual gap with his team mates prompted his retirement at the age of 25. “There are lots of intelligent cricketers, many cleverer than I am,” he wrote in an article for the *Wisden Cricketers’ Almanack*, which was reproduced in *The Times*.

4 Instead, he realised he was just not competitive enough. While on tour with England in Bangladesh and India in 2016–17, he watched his teammates “with admiration and alienation as they conjured up a hyper-competitive spirit, whether on the cricket field or at the hotel ping-pong table”.

5 As he was not like that, he thought it best to do something else. It was a brave and honest choice — one facing many when they reach the pinnacle, or just a slightly more elevated ridge, in other areas of life.

6 Every field is different. International sport is not everyday work. The demands are often different. Yet, unlike Ansari, many struggle to understand the nature of their top jobs, or why they find them so difficult.

7 Ansari identified the demands of top-grade cricket. What are the managerial qualities for work? The competitiveness is there too, but there are other demands when you become a leader.

8 First, the ability to do without your friends. When you are put in charge, you leave your crew behind. Once you have power over people, you can no longer be mates.

9 You can be friendly, civil and concerned but those you manage need their space, without you. Once, as head of a department, I noticed that a small group was working late. Not wishing to be seen heading home when they were still hard at it, I carried on working too. Only when they showed no sign of budging did I realise that they were waiting for me to leave so that they could all go out together.

10 Second, there is the need to take tough decisions that may hurt individuals but are necessary for the organisation. Management books talk about the need to coach, to engage, to inspire. Those are all vital leadership traits. But sometimes you need to tell someone they will not be staying on beyond their probationary period or that, in spite of all the warnings and goal-setting, their work is not good enough.

11 At the very top, you may need to make dozens, or thousands, redundant, to close factories or pull out of countries. Shrinking from tough decisions is understandable, but you should not take these jobs unless you feel you can do them. Graham Greene talked of writers having a splinter of ice in the heart. Leaders need the same.

12 But, third, they need to do all this within an atmosphere of fairness, of decent respect for the effect their decisions have on people’s lives. There are too many managers with a block rather than a splinter of ice in their hearts.

13 And they need to act in ways that do not damage their organisations’ reputations. You can go too far, in business and in sport: witness Australian cricket’s recent ball-tampering scandal, involving the captain and his deputy. Their careers have been shredded, along with their team’s moral standing.

14 Overly brutal cost-cutting, or going beyond what is legal or decent, has the same effect in business. Look at Volkswagen or Wells Fargo.

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15 Finally, the best leaders know what they are good at and where they need to improve. The very best understand when they are not right for the job, but that is unusual. Most blunder on until they have done themselves and their companies damage, or until their bosses or boards finally tell them to go.

Real self-awareness is rare, in any field. That is why Mr Ansari's admission is so admirable, particularly as he made it at such a young age. He is modest about his intelligence, but it is pretty evident.

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3 Understanding the article

Answer the questions with as much information as possible from the article.

1. Which country did Zafar Ansari play cricket for?

2. What did people assume the reasons were that he left international cricket at such a young age?

3. When did Zafar Ansari say that he is way too clever to be a cricketer?

4. Why, where and when did he make his decision to stop playing international cricket for his country?

5. What does the author of the article think about Ansari's decision?

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6. According to the author, in addition to competitiveness, when you're at the top of your game, either in sport or business, what other qualities do you need to have? (mention at least five qualities)

4 Business language

- a. Find and underline these business words and phrases in the article.

boards cost-cutting field goal-setting head of a department high-flyers
make (someone) redundant probationary period retirement warnings

- b. Use them to complete the sentences below.

1. There are a lot of potential _____ in this year's new recruits.
2. The government is debating whether to raise the age of _____
by two years.
3. Harry Edwards is one of the top earners in his _____
of business.
4. If you work hard, you could become the _____ within 5 years.
5. After a three-month _____, Tanja was offered a permanent
position in the company.
6. I don't know how much longer he will be able to keep his job. He's already received two written
_____ for inappropriate behaviour.
7. We expect our employees to be able to deal with their own _____
for the next year.

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8. The CEO has to _____ 150 employees
_____ by the end of the financial year.
9. There's a lot of _____ going on in the newspaper industry
these days.
10. Belinda has been a member of three different _____ so far; this
will be her fourth.

c. **Decide which of the words and phrases are useful for you, and then use them in sentences of your own that reflect your own work situation or previous work experience.**

5 Discussion

- Zafar Ansari's childhood ambition was to play cricket for England (para 1). Talk about your childhood ambition(s).
- The author says that as a manager you must be able to 'do without your friends' (para 8). Do you agree with him? Give reasons for your answer.
- The author paraphrases novelist Graham Greene who talked of writers having a splinter of ice in the heart and says that leaders need the same (para 11). What do you think he means, and do you agree with the sentiments?
- The author also says that 'real self-awareness is rare, in any field' (para 16). Have you noticed this in others, too? How can we become more aware of our own professional strengths and weaknesses? Why is it important that we do so?

6 Wider business theme – Psychology at work

Find information on the Peter Principle, the Dunning Kruger Effect and the Imposter syndrome and how they might be relevant to business.

Make notes in the boxes on the next page.

Then compare the principles to the way the author describes how Zafar Ansari behaved and talked about his own abilities.

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The Peter Principle

The Dunning Kruger Effect

The Imposter Syndrome