

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

Level: Intermediate to upper intermediate (B1–B2)

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;
- talk about career choices.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet

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. The words can be divided up amongst students so that they search for six words each and then share their answers with students who search for the other six words.

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 read the statements and decide whether they are true or false according to the article. Then they should rewrite any that are false to make them correct.

Key:

1. *False, he was a talented cricketer who recently retired at the age of 25.*
2. *False. He played cricket at international level for England. He went on tour with the England cricket team to India and Bangladesh.*
3. *False. That was what one of his cricket teammates said, but that's not what Ansari thinks about himself.*
4. *False. Ansari said that there are lots of intelligent cricketers, many of them cleverer than he is.*
5. *True.*
6. *False. He says that people who want to be top managers need to be able to make tough decisions*
7. *True.*

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.

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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. *make (150 employees) redundant*
8. *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-group feedback session and compare and contrast each group's answers and input.

6. Wider business theme

Students first read the text and complete it with information from the article. Then they answer the questions as part of a small group discussion about career choices. The students should speculate what the answer to the first question might be based on what they read in the article. E.g. *We think he might become a sports psychologist / a cricket coach / a politician ... because ...*

Key:

1. *politics*
2. *master's degree*
3. *cricket*
4. *retire*

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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. make something happen, as if by magic (2 words, para 4) _____
2. the most successful 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. caring about what happens to someone, and giving them your attention (para 9)

6. moving or leaving a place (para 9) _____
7. not wanting to do something difficult or 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 of respect (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

Are these statements true or false according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Zafar Ansari was a talented cricketer who recently retired at the age of 65.
2. Zafar Ansari played cricket at international level for India and Bangladesh.
3. Ansari thinks he is way too clever to be a cricketer.
4. Ansari said that there are lots of intelligent cricketers, but none of them as clever as he is.
5. The author of the article thinks that Ansari showed a lot of self-awareness for someone of his age.
6. He says that people who want to be top managers need to be able to avoid making tough decisions.
7. Leaders need to be fair and know that their decisions will affect other people's lives.

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

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b. Use them to complete the sentences below.

1. There are a lot of future _____ at this business college.
2. In the UK, the _____ age for women is 65.
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. Donald should be careful. He has had two _____ already this month.
7. The company has to _____ 150 employees _____ by the end of the financial year.
8. Belinda has been a member of two other company _____; this will be her third.

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 questions

- Zafar Ansari's childhood ambition was to play cricket for England (para 1). What was your childhood ambition?
- 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 says that leaders need to have a splinter of ice in their heart (para 11). Do you agree that leaders and managers sometimes need to be cold and hard?
- The author also says that 'real self-awareness is rare, in any field' (para 16). Do you also believe that people don't realise what things they are good (or not good) at, at work? Give examples.

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6 Wider business theme – Career choices

Complete the text below with information from the article. Then answer the questions.

Zafar Ansari got a double first from Cambridge in _____ (1), psychology and sociology and a _____ (2) from Royal Holloway, University of London. He went on to play _____ (3) for England at international level. Then at the age of 25 he decided to _____ (4).

- With this kind of background and experience, what do you think he might be doing now?
- If you could retire at 25 (or immediately if you are older than 25 now) and had enough money to do what you liked, what would your next career step be?