Inspiring

You don't get the best out of people by hitting them with an iron rod. You do so by gaining their respect, getting them accustomed to triumphs and convincing them that they are capable of improving their performance. I cannot think of any manager who succeeded for any length of time by presiding over a reign of terror. It turns out that the two most powerful words in the English language are 'Well done'. Much of leadership is about extracting that extra 5 per cent of performance that individuals did not know they possessed.

It was always important that the players erased the memory of the previous season, whether we had won or lost. If we had done well in the previous year, it did not guarantee that we would automatically do so again. And, if we had lost, I had no interest in prolonging any hangover of defeatism. The coaching staff, in particular the sports science crew, would come to me with new ideas before or during the pre-season, but I would never conduct any big post-mortem with the players. I used to gather them around me in a semi-circle at the training ground and re-emphasise my desire to win and use it as an opportunity

to set expectations. I used to ask the mature players, who had begun to acquire a taste for United's victory habits, how many medals they had won. I told them that they could not consider themselves to be a United player until they had won ten medals. I remember saying to Rio Ferdinand that he could never think of himself as a United player until he attained the level of Ryan Giggs. Of course, that was mission impossible.

It is much easier to do difficult things if others like you. Though I have never tried to court popularity, I always tried to pay particular attention to people at United – or at the other clubs I was involved with – who worked behind the scenes and were our unsung heroes. It wasn't a false front; it just seemed like the right thing to do. These people weren't getting the multimillion-pound salaries or public acclaim, and didn't wear Patek Philippe watches or drive Bentleys. Some of them – the laundry team, the groundsmen, the hospitality waitresses – took the bus to work. They were the mainstays of the club. At United, some of them have been there even longer than Ryan Giggs. In a way, they are the club's equivalent of the Civil Service – they outlast the governments and, at United, they provided continuity and a connection with our heritage. It was very easy for me to feel affinity towards them, since most had backgrounds much like my own.

Some managers try to be popular with the players and become one of the boys. It never works. As a leader, you don't need to be loved, though it is useful, on occasion, to be feared. But, most of all, you need to be respected. There are just some natural boundaries, and when those get crossed it makes life harder. When I was playing at Rangers, they hired a new manager, David White. He was young and a good man but just out of his depth. He was overawed by the club, while at the same time he was living in the shadow of Jock Stein over

at Celtic. The players didn't have much respect for him, and part of the reason was because he was too close to them. The same thing happened at United when Wilf McGuinness succeeded Sir Matt Busby in 1969. Wilf had several things going against him. He was succeeding a legend; he was only 31 years old and had no management experience. But, worst of all, he was managing a group of men with whom he had played. It was an impossible position for him. My immediate predecessor at United, Ron Atkinson, had a similar issue. He had enjoyed much more success as a manager than Wilf, but he too chose to fraternise with the players. It just doesn't work. A leader is not one of the boys.

It is vital to keep some sort of distance. This could be expressed in small but significant ways. For example, I generally rode at the front of the team bus. The players understood the distance, and at the end of the season when they had their parties, I was never invited. They'd invite all the management staff, but they wouldn't invite me. I wasn't offended by this. It was the right thing for them to do. With one exception in Aberdeen, I never attended any of the players' weddings. There was a line that they were not prepared to cross and they respected my position. It also makes things easier because, as a manager, you can't be sentimental about them. Jock Stein told me once, 'Don't fall in love with the players because they'll two-time you.' That may be a bit harsh, but Jock was right that you cannot get too attached to people who work for you. The one time you must have that attachment is when they are in trouble – when they need your advice. I couldn't count the number of times where I helped players with personal matters, and I'm proud of the fact they trusted me and that they knew that discussion would stay private. In these situations I acted as a priest, father or lawyer – whatever it took to make the problem

go away. Even to this day, many former players still come to me for advice; this is a reflection of the trust that underpinned our relationship.

When players got too old I couldn't afford to be kind to them at the expense of the club. All the evidence is on the football field. It just doesn't lie. I had to make a lot of horrible decisions and I had to be ruthless. I never expected the players to love me, but neither did I want them to hate me, because that would have made it impossible to extract the most from them. All I wanted was for them to respect me and follow my instructions.

Unless you understand people, it's very hard to motivate them. I learned this years ago in Scotland when I was handed a lesson by a young lad. While I managed Aberdeen, we used to travel down to Glasgow every Thursday night to coach young kids on an AstroTurf field so that we could identify the best young talent. I was down there one night, dressed in my track-suit emblazoned with its 'AF' initials, when I saw this kid, who was about eight, smoking a cigarette. I said, 'Put that cigarette out, son. What would your dad think if he saw you smoking?' The boy looked at me and he said, 'Fuck off!' and walked away. My assistant manager, Archie Knox, who was with me, burst out laughing at the way this kid had chopped my legs off. But when I started thinking about the incident, I realised that I knew nothing about that boy. I had no idea where he came from, what his parents were like, whether he was taunted by his pals and why he harboured such anger. Unless you know those sorts of things and have an understanding of someone's personality, it is impossible to get the best out of them. Before we signed players, especially youngsters, I always tried to understand the circumstances in which they had been raised. The first ten or 12 years of anyone's life have such a profound influence on the way they act as adults.

Another crucial ingredient of motivation is consistency. As a leader you can't run from one side of the ship to the other. People need to feel that you have unshakeable confidence in a particular approach. If you can't show this, you'll lose the team very quickly. There is a phrase in football about players 'not playing for the manager', which I have seen happen a thousand times. Once that happens, the manager is as good as dead, because he has failed in his major undertaking – which is to motivate the players to follow him. The time to be inconsistent is when changes need to be made because the world is changing around you. There was always the temptation when things weren't going well to change or to leap to a new lily pad. That doesn't work. Sometimes, if we lost some games, we'd hear that the players thought that our training should be more light-hearted; that our results would improve if, instead of concentrating our training sessions around technical skills, we played mock games. I always refused to bow to those suggestions. Any field on a Sunday is full of people playing park games, work games or pub games, but that doesn't make these people better footballers. I just believe that continual devotion to improving technical skills, and the enhancement of tactics, lead to better results, and I wasn't about to change just to temporarily please others.

Leaders are usually unaware, or at least underestimate, the motivating power of their presence. Nobody sees themselves as others see them. I'd never really understood this until Rio Ferdinand buttonholed me one day because I had missed some training sessions while travelling abroad to scout a player. Rio said, 'Where have you been? It's not the same when you are not here.' It didn't matter that Carlos Queiroz was running the training sessions and the routine and drills were exactly the same as if I had been there. Rio had noticed my absence,

and perhaps some of the players had eased off a little because I was missing from the sidelines. I don't know whether that actually happened because I wasn't there – and maybe that's the point.

I took Rio's observation to heart. After that, if I had to go and watch a player or check out a team, we chartered a private plane so I could be at the training ground the next day even if I hadn't got to bed until two in the morning. The lesson I absorbed was that even if I said nothing during the practice (and I rarely said much), my physical presence was a more important motivational tool than I had realised. Anyone who is in charge of a group of people has got to have a strong personality. That doesn't mean dominating every conversation or speaking at the top of your voice. Some quiet people have very strong personalities and rooms fall silent when they have something to say. A strong personality is an expression of inner strength and fortitude.

I always got more out of players by praising them than by scorning them with criticism. Footballers, like all human beings, are plagued by a range of emotions that run all the way from profound insecurity to massive over-confidence. Trying to measure where, along this spectrum, each of these players was on any particular day was very important. If you hope to motivate people, you need to know when to prey on their insecurities and when to bolster their self-confidence. People perform best when they know they have earned the trust of their leader.

My father was a man of few words. He didn't dole out praise. His main desire was for me to keep my feet on the ground and retain my humility. After I scored three goals in one game and got home, he just handed out stick. He said, 'You don't shoot enough. You don't pass enough.' I suppose my dad's remarks

made me want to work harder so that I could garner praise from him but, after I had played well, it was always deflating to hear him utter those sorts of remarks. By contrast, my mother and my granny used to be full of compliments and praise, and their joy in my successes was evident. In retrospect I sometimes wonder whether my parents inadvertently supplied me with two engines: one that made me want to try even harder and a second that made me feel I was capable of anything.

I wasn't afraid of criticising a player when I felt I could help him improve, but I always tried to couch this in a positive way. For example, I would tell a young player that he would be far more effective if he passed the ball more. That message is more likely to be absorbed than barking, 'You're never going to be any good if you keep hogging the ball.' After a game I would always try to avoid criticising the players. They had enough pressure, without me piling it on in public. I saved my criticism for the private sessions away from prying eyes. I tried to employ heat shields to deflect criticism from a player who had misplaced a pass that gave away a goal, or another who had missed a sitter that could have won us a game. It was always easy to give the press something else to write about – a couple of decisions that had gone against us, a penalty that should have won us the game, a long injury list or a pile-up of fixtures. I tried to take the pressure off the player who did not need me or anyone else to remind him of his mistake. Most players are mortified when they let down their team. My first inclination was always to defend the player and sort it out afterwards.

Every player is different, and I came to learn that they all required different care and feeding. Some would be at one extreme and need little from me. This was particularly true of players who had made a couple of hundred appearances, had inner confidence, and understood me. The youngsters and those

who, for whatever reason, were less assured, needed different handling. I'm sure that, from time to time, I underestimated the degree of intimidation experienced by new players. All the youngsters who had been part of the United system for years were intimidated enough by the first-team dressing room. But imagine what it was like for a player signed from overseas who had never played in England and sometimes could not understand what was being said. I know that Tim Howard, whom we signed from the American team MetroStars, in 2003, and quickly started to employ as our first-team goalkeeper, found a massive contrast between his former team, which had been at the bottom of the MLS, and United. He had to quickly adjust to the notion that men whom he had worshipped from afar were now his team-mates, and to our more direct and confrontational style of management. I'm not sure there is anything that can prepare someone for a dose of Glaswegian bluntness, doled out by a shipyard worker's son, particularly when that man is in ultimate control of your destiny.

You might think that team-mates would resent another player who was treated differently. That would probably be true if he was an everyday character. But, once in a while, someone would appear who required something special. Eric Cantona fits into that category. He had been a bit of a wayward character at his other clubs and had gained a reputation for being unruly and difficult. His disciplinary record was longer than your arm. It was almost as if he was considered some sort of demon. That made no sense to me. When you are dealing with individuals with unusual talent, it makes sense to treat them differently. I just made it a point to ignore what had happened in the past and treat Eric as a new man when he joined United. When Eric was with us I would always make a point of talking to him every day – on the training ground, or in the cafeteria or

dressing room. He was a sensitive person who was easily bothered by all sorts of things, but he loved talking about football and that was a way to help restore his spirits. I did things for Eric and for the really special players that I did not do for others, but I don't think this was resented, because the players understood the exceptional talents had qualities they did not possess. My relationship with Eric might also have been helped by the fact that neither of us were English and, to some degree, we considered ourselves outsiders. But even the players I thought I understood well could react in unexpected ways. I did not realise until fairly recently that, when he was far younger, Gary Neville was unable to sleep after I handed him a tongue-lashing. It just emphasises how any leader needs to put himself in the shoes of the listener. For example, I was always very careful when I rested a player to emphasise how I was counting on him for a subsequent, crucial fixture. This helped – but probably didn't completely satisfy – their desire to play in every game, and hopefully prevented them interpreting my decision as a lack of confidence in them.

With most players I did not have to urge them to increase their work rate or expend more energy, but there were a few, like Gary Pallister, who played 437 games for United between 1989 and 1998 who needed the extra poke. The irony of this is that Pallister was probably the best defender I ever managed, but he had a laidback attitude towards life. He did not like training, and in games it always seemed to take him 15 minutes to coax his engine into life. There was a first half in a game against Liverpool in 1990 when he just tortured me. At half-time I said to him, 'You are coming off.' Then I thought better of myself, changed my mind and told him, 'No, I'm not taking you off. You can suffer along with me.'

Paul Ince was another. He was a good player but he had a

tendency to run with the ball rather than pass it. Every now and again I'd have to upbraid him and I did so after a game against Norwich in 1992, which we had to win in order to have a shot at the League title, and he went berserk. He started yelling that I always blamed him, and the other players had to hold him back. I told him, 'I'm not blaming you. You made mistakes. You ran with the ball when you should have passed it.'

When I was younger I was more inclined to be severe. I cringe when I think back to a live TV interview moments after Aberdeen had won the 1983 Scottish Cup final against Rangers – three days after winning the European Cup Winners' Cup final against Real Madrid – when I blasted the team for a 'disgrace of a performance'. Later, after I had tucked more experience under my belt, I took a different approach. There is no benefit in engaging in public hangings. It just doesn't buy you anything. It humiliates the victim and does not do much to encourage those around him. So I tried to stick to a few rules. While not always succeeding in the heat of the moment, I would try to reserve my severest comments for a private session with a player. I would always try to meld criticism with support by saying, 'You know you are capable of better. What were you thinking?' It was also important to make everyone understand that any disciplinary action was not arbitrary: it applied to everyone and it was unchangeable. When Ryan Giggs started arguing with me at half-time during a game against Juventus in the 1996–97 season, I stapled him to the bench for the second half. When Paul Scholes, one of the best players ever to wear United red, committed a few daft tackles that resulted in needless red cards, I would always discipline him. His actions had let the side down; however valuable a player he was, he wasn't above the law.

One other aspect of managing high-achievers that is worth emphasising is the need to restrain them from trying to do the impossible. Every now and again someone would pull off an acrobatic goal or some other exquisite form of mastery, but you can never count on these. There is always a temptation when the chips are down to try and resort to stunts that might have worked in the pages of the old comic magazine *Boy's Own Paper*, but were almost always guaranteed to fail in front of 75,000 desperate fans. Whenever we were in a tight game and trailing by a goal, I would always emphasise to the team that we should not panic, and I would implore them not to try and shoot from outside the box. Instead I would want them to keep their heads, retain possession and get crosses into the penalty box. Gary Neville, who was our indomitable right-back for so many years, had this habit of trying to shoot from 35 yards. It drove me bananas. After the game I would always be asking him, 'How many times have I told you it doesn't work?' Disciplined perseverance pays far more dividends than impetuous attempts at individual heroism.

Part of the way to extract the most out of people is to show genuine loyalty when the rest of the world is baying for blood. Football provides plenty of opportunities to do this. After Eric Cantona's famous kung-fu attack on what appeared to me to be – when I reviewed tapes of the incident after the match – an aggressive, foul-mouthed fan at Crystal Palace in 1995, the club, which gave him a four-month suspension (which was doubled, in a punitive manner, by the FA), did everything we could to support him. Eric had been sent into exile and forbidden from training or travelling on our pre-season tour, so it was natural for him to feel isolated and forgotten. I worked very hard to make sure he understood that we cared about him, and eventually, when he was teetering on the edge of departing to play

in Italy, our loyalty towards him caused him to stay in Manchester.

Some years later, in the 1998 World Cup in France, after David Beckham got sent off for lashing out at Argentina's Diego Simeone, now the Atlético Madrid manager, we wanted to be sure we were by his side. The entire press corps was convinced that David's dismissal from the game had cost England the fixture, and the headlines reflected this. They were merciless: '10 Heroic Lions, 1 Stupid Boy' was the headline in the *Daily Mirror*, while the *Daily Star* blared: 'Beck Off'. There were effigies of David hanging from lamp-posts, and it wouldn't have surprised me if an immigration officer had refused him permission to re-enter Britain. After I saw what happened, I immediately phoned David, because I knew he would be devastated. He was. I learned afterwards that he had burst into tears when he saw his parents after the game and was almost inconsolable.

The last thing David needed was criticism from me, because he had already found himself guilty. So I phoned him, tried to bolster his confidence, told him that I understood what had occurred, that these things happen to us all, and that Manchester United, and everyone associated with the club, knew he was a wonderful player and were looking forward to his return, and that we would take care of him. United's first away game of the following season was against West Ham, where an effigy of Beckham was displayed hanging from a noose en route to the stadium, and the United team bus was pelted with stones and pint glasses.

Something similar happened when we went to sign Ruud van Nistelrooy from PSV Eindhoven in 2000. We had agreed on terms and I was stunned when Ruud failed his medical test. PSV claimed that Ruud was fit, and to demonstrate this arranged for a filmed training session. He broke down on camera and

you can see the film of the session on YouTube, with Ruud howling in pain on the ground. It turned out that he had torn a cruciate ligament. So we suspended the deal but I immediately flew to the Netherlands to see Ruud, who was bed-ridden. I told him that it was not like the old days; that cruciate ligaments could be repaired; that he would regain his fitness and we would then sign him. I think that helped reassure Ruud, and it was also a way of ensuring that he did not go to another club. Just over a year later he was in United red, scoring on his debut.

Occasionally players can face much bigger challenges. Fortunately it is extremely rare for a top-notch player to come down with a life-threatening illness, but when Darren Fletcher fell sick with ulcerative colitis, it presented an opportunity for United to demonstrate unflinching support, because he was out of the side for a very long time. Darren had tried to muscle his way through this debilitating condition for a couple of years, but eventually it made him housebound and he underwent surgery. Coincidentally my sister-in-law had died of complications from the disease, so I was all too aware of the torture Darren had been silently enduring. It would have been easy for the club to consign him to the wilderness, but we made sure that he understood we wanted him to get well and return to the side and gave him a new contract. He had come to United as a teenager and never let us down, so while he was undergoing treatments we made him a reserve team coach so that he would not feel abandoned. I poked my head into one of his half-time team talks and he was spectacular. He was berating the players and I listened to him tell them, 'If you think that performance is going to get you in the Manchester United first team, you have to be joking. You have no chance.' In due course Darren recovered, felt great personal relief when he publicly revealed his private battle and is now the proud captain of West Bromwich Albion.

Though this sounds odd, I would sometimes protect players by leaving them out of the first team. It happened at both ends of the spectrum. For youngsters (as I have mentioned), I thought it best to gradually introduce them to the rigours of life in the first team. And for players in their thirties, I often rested them to make sure they did not overtax their bodies. When Eric Cantona and Gary Neville came to me to say they wanted to retire, I tried to talk both of them out of doing so. I urged Eric to talk to his father, but that didn't work. Gary, being a proud professional, was also adamant. I had urged him to wait until the end of the 2010–11 season to make his decision but he just said, 'No, Boss, I'm finished. I am just kidding myself on.' On more than one occasion I left Wayne Rooney out of battles on Merseyside with Everton, not because of fitness concerns, but because the Everton fans could be merciless on him. Even though Wayne, particularly as he has got older, can shield himself from most abuse, it just did not seem sensible to expose him, or more particularly the entire team, to the abuse that would have been levelled at him. The abuse is so extreme that even Wayne's father, a diehard Everton fan, skips United's games at Goodison Park.

Football provides plenty of opportunities for a manager to show his support. There may be the times, like with Beckham or Van Nistelrooy, where the players were dealing with ugly situations. But, more often than not, it is the little things – helping youngsters improve their technique, making suggestions like one I made to Cristiano Ronaldo that he shorten his running stride when he was preparing to cross the ball, standing by players when they get injured, blooding a teenager when he makes his way into the first team – that instil a sense of loyalty. I was not doing these things because I was trying to emulate Mother Teresa, I was doing them because they would help

United, but they had the side-effect of demonstrating to the player that we had confidence in him. This instils tremendous loyalty; it also helped them to lift their game. Their way of returning these favours was to give that extra 5 per cent during a match. And so, inadvertently, I gradually came to understand this back-door route to inspiring people.

The criticism of others also provides a way to rally the troops. It is one thing for an individual to be singled out for a press savaging, particularly when some of it may be deserved. It is quite another when a whole organisation is pilloried. I almost used to enjoy it when that happened, because it played right into our hands. It would get under the collective skin, it would bring people closer together, and it offered me a convenient rallying cry. In 1996, after we were clobbered in successive League games by Newcastle and Southampton, we lost our third League game in a row against Chelsea and BBC radio broadcast a programme about our supposed demise. It was a perfect tonic for us, and I am sure helped us go on to win the Premier League. In hindsight, I can see why it was such a big story as in my last 20 years at United it only happened on two other occasions.