

Admiral Jacky Fisher and the Art of **DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP**

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Firms around the world strive for disruptive leadership. Through a case study of Admiral Jacky Fisher, who completely disrupted the immensely powerful British Royal Navy at the beginning of the 20th century, preparing it for the onset, just four years later, of World War I, Jan-Benedict Steenkamp identifies six key characteristics of disruptive leadership.

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“Big risks bring big success!”
- Jacky Fisher

Corporate leaders around the world strive to master disruptive leadership. Competitive pressures, new technologies, new business models, and new entrants are constantly disrupting the established ways of doing business. Nonetheless, disruptive leadership is hard. Many, if not most, people instinctively dislike change. So any disruption you engineer is likely to immediately meet with organizational resistance, which can bring you down. So what makes an effective disruptive leader?

To find answers, we can turn either to present day business leaders or to historical examples. The advantage of finding leadership lessons in history is that the virtues and vices of leaders of the past, their accomplishments and failures, have by now been firmly established. Historical figures offer us valuable leadership insights while allowing us to avoid simply embracing the latest fads, only to find them contradicted and disowned a few years later. As *The Economist* put it, “Those [historical leaders] who have passed through the fire surely have something to teach modern-day managers.”¹

British Admiral John Arbuthnot (“Jacky”) Fisher (1841-1920) is one who passed through the fire, facing tests far greater than those most CEOs of today encounter. Historians regard Fisher as one of the most consequential leaders in military organization of the last two centuries. If not for him, many believe Germany would have won World War I and the world we now know would not exist. Framed in the terms of business, Fisher was the CEO of a huge, complex company with global interests. During his time as CEO (1904-1910), he completely restructured the organization, cut

countless serviceable business lines, and introduced a new main product that made the organization’s existing business, which had a commanding lead over its competitors, obsolete. And he accomplished it all in the face of fierce resistance, both from within his organization and from its outside stakeholders. Yet Fisher was not the CEO of a single company, but the head of the immense Royal Navy. And he was not fighting for the survival of a single company, but for that of Great Britain itself, under threat from a new entrant in its “market” – Germany.

In 1900, Great Britain was the most powerful nation on earth. But Britain’s strategic situation was fast deteriorating.

Context

In 1900, Great Britain was the most powerful nation on earth. And as long as the Royal Navy maintained absolute supremacy at sea, it enjoyed invulnerability to any foreign adversary as well as complete freedom of action. But Britain’s strategic situation was fast deteriorating. The biggest threat was Germany, which had been unified only three decades before and was industrializing rapidly. By 1900, Germany had begun to aggressively expand its navy. At the same time, a century of undisputed naval mastery had led the Royal Navy into an organizational culture of complacency and conservatism. Many senior officers preferred not to notice the increasingly rapid change in the weapons and tactics of naval warfare. The prevailing sense was that, “Anything new was suspicious and potentially dangerous.”² The Navy’s effectiveness was also undermined by rigid barriers of social class. Deck officers – who would advance to become captains and admirals –

came from the higher levels of British society. Engineering officers came from the lower classes. They did not mingle.

In short, the Royal Navy’s organizational culture, core competencies, and human resource management had not kept up with the times. Meanwhile its technological edge over the rapidly growing *Kaiserliche Marine* (Imperial German Navy) had all but disappeared. Yet while the Royal Navy urgently needed disruption, most of its senior leadership wanted anything but, preferring to ignore outside threats. Fortunately for Britain, its government had just appointed Jacky Fisher as First Sea Lord (professional military head of the Royal Navy), and he was cut from a very different cloth. During his tenure in the position (1904-1910), he completely disrupted this hide-bound organization. He prepared the Royal Navy for the daunting challenges it would face during the Great War, which he foresaw, and which would begin a mere four years after he stepped down.

Fisher’s life and leadership exemplify six vital factors for leading disruptive change (Table 1). He was a brainiac; was always willing to disrupt his own frame of reference; prioritized the long term over the short term; had a high tolerance for uncertainty; was passionate about his organization; and developed a disruptive network of followers who helped him in his efforts and carried his torch onwards. His use of these qualities offers powerful lessons for disruptive leaders today.

Fisher was committed to lifelong learning.

Be a Brainiac

Fisher was an avid student. When he sat his lieutenant’s examination, he earned top grades in seamanship and gunnery, as well as the highest

score ever for navigation. But he did not stop there. On the contrary, he was committed to lifelong learning. Over the course of his career, Fisher not only had many operational commands, he also spent four tours of duty, fifteen years, at the navy's elite Gunnery and Torpedo Schools, both naval research centers. At these schools, he studied gunnery and

emerging new technologies including torpedoes and submarines. According to Press and Goh, disruptive leaders should take any chance to be "a mad scientist,"³ experimenting and exploring the "what if." Fisher experimented extensively with systems and tactics for quick-firing breech-loaded guns and different types of torpedoes. As command-

er of the huge naval base at Portsmouth, he supervised extensive experimentation with submarines.

Fisher's experience both in the field and at the navy's research institutes allowed him to become not only an excellent operational (line) manager, but also a technical expert on navy hardware (innovation/R&D). Being a brainiac

TABLE I: Characteristics of Disruptive Leadership

Disruptive leadership factor	Examples from Fisher's life	Challenges for today's leaders
Brainiac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher earned top grades; Fisher continuously updated his technical and strategic knowledge; He ran countless experiments to test his ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lifelong learning takes a lot of time; Because you may not know a priori what information will be useful, lifelong learning can be inefficient; Experimentation is expensive and time-consuming; when is it enough? Will it lead you to paralysis or action?
Disrupt own frame of reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher challenged existing class barriers in the Royal Navy; Fisher redistributed the fleet; Fisher acknowledged the threat posed by torpedo boats and devised a solution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pressing daily concerns make it hard to find the time to really think and thoroughly analyze; Cognitive myopia - to see new threats, you need to step completely out of your current context; Do you have the required high-level abstract/conceptual thinking ability?; Do you have high openness to new experience (a Big Five personality trait)?
Prioritize long term over short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher introduced H.M.S. <i>Dreadnought</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no certainty that you will achieve long-term gain, while short-term pain is a (near) given; Financial markets will react adversely if quarterly expectations are not met—can you weather that storm pressure?; You need the resources to pay for short-term pain.
High tolerance of uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher introduced untested turbine engines; It remained to be seen whether <i>Dreadnought</i> could actually fire a broadside without being ripped apart. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humans are not wired to embrace uncertainty; Be willing to risk failure by having either a golden parachute or a very strong organizational commitment.
Passion for the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher's entire life was focused on the success of the Royal Navy; Fisher worked 24/7; Fisher valued the organization's success over his own; He rejected lucrative outside offers; Despite fierce resistance and vicious personal attacks, Fisher persisted, but was eventually forced to resign early. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> True passion for one's organization is rare; Disruptive leadership soaks up time, which conflicts with desire for work-life balance; If necessary, are you willing to prioritize company success over your own?; Are you ready to take the risk that if you lose your protectors in the C-suite, you may be fatally exposed?
Develop effective disruptive networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisher's officers were free to offer ideas and disagree with him, as long as their arguments were sound; Fisher valued ideas over hierarchy; Fisher's vision inspired his followers; Fisher was a strong role model and led from the front. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding pockets of people with the right mindset. Can you identify your Fishpond?; Creating a culture that encourages openness to change, risk taking, and tolerance for failure; Disruptive networks are especially difficult to establish in bureaucratic, hierarchical organizations.

may be easier if you have had advanced education, but Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have amply proven that it is not necessary. What Gates and Zuckerberg share with Fisher is not formal education but a lifelong passion for learning. Still, becoming (or staying) a brainiac has its costs. It takes time away from daily operations and can be inefficient. Indeed, you may spend a great deal of time learning things that are not quantifiably useful. Experimentation can also be costly and, in the worst case, may lead to dithering rather than learning. Anybody who has run experiments knows that, all too often, the results are not as clear as we would like them to be.

Disrupt Your Own Frame of Reference

Fisher built his career in an organization that was characterized by: 1) social segregation and 2) an emphasis on gunnery. Yet, unlike many of his colleagues in the Royal Navy, he was willing to question and disrupt his own frame of reference by continuously thinking about potential new threats and devising ways that they might be addressed.

Social segregation: By thinking in this way, Fisher came to understand that the traditional barriers of social class harmed the Royal Navy. In an early example of diversity and inclusion thinking, when he took charge, he made all ranks open to all cadets, regardless of their social origins. He also ensured that all cadets would be educated in both seamanship and engineering. It sounds reasonable now, but the decision met with great resistance. Members rose in Parliament to protest the disgraceful proposal to send “our (upper class) officers ... down in the coal hole.”

Gunnery: In the late 19th century, simple gunnery was no longer sufficient. Torpedo boats – fast, cheap ships designed to launch torpedoes – had become a viable threat to the dominance of the Royal

Navy’s battleships. When they first appeared, the then First Sea Lord protested that “there were no torpedoes when I came to sea and I do not see why the devil there should be any of the beastly things now.” He was a leader unwilling to disrupt his own frame of reference. When Fisher took over, he acknowledged the threat, came up with the solution – destroyers - and gave them their name.

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In order to disrupt your own frame of reference, you have to be willing to treat your accumulated experience as sunk cost, to be discarded as circumstances require. It’s a psychologically difficult thing to do.⁴ Moreover, ordinary daily pressures make it difficult to find the time to really think about, and thoroughly analyze, environmental trends. Many people, managers among them, suffer from cognitive myopia, the inability to step outside their current context to do the high-level conceptual thinking necessary to see new threats. To be a disruptive leader, you must be intellectually curious and investigate new things proactively, identifying and solving unprecedented problems, and devising new ways of doing business.⁵

Focus on Long-Term Gain Instead of Short-Term Pain

Fisher’s most controversial decision was to introduce what we would now call a radical product innovation, viz. H.M.S. *Dreadnought*. In Fisher’s day, the backbone of every major navy was the battleship. Naval strength was assessed by the number of battleships each country had, and

Britain had the most by far. When this new *Dreadnought* appeared, standard battleships in the world’s major navies carried four 12-inch guns, supported by various guns of smaller caliber. The *Dreadnought* carried ten 12-inch guns and nothing smaller. The *Dreadnought* was therefore equivalent to two or even three (depending on the line of fire) earlier battleships. Using new and essentially untried steam turbine engines, the *Dreadnought* could also sail 50 percent faster than existing battleships, putting them at a serious disadvantage.

The launch of the *Dreadnought* sent shockwaves around the world. It was immediately obvious that the revolutionary ship made all existing battleships instantly obsolete.

For launching the *Dreadnought*, Fisher was savagely attacked by his naval peers, Parliament, and the press. Critics regarded it as a horrendous blunder because it threw away the Royal Navy’s overwhelming superiority in the existing type of battleships (quickly dubbed “pre-dreadnought”). Fisher responded with his usual direct language, observing: “Only a congenital idiot with criminal tendencies would permit any tampering with the maintenance of our naval supremacy.” Yet unlike his peers, including several former First Sea Lords, he understood that, as the leading maritime power, Britain should *lead* – not follow - in naval innovation. And already there were worrisome indications that others were beginning to think about all-big-gun battleships. In 1903, the chief constructor of the Italian navy wrote an article for *Jane’s Fighting*

Ships in which he proposed just such a ship. Fisher saw clearly that Britain's current lead in battleships was only a short-term advantage.

The launch of the *Dreadnought* sent shockwaves around the world. It was immediately obvious that the revolutionary ship made all existing battleships instantly obsolete. Britain's head start nonetheless proved decisive a decade later in the Battle of Jutland (May 31, 1916), "the mother of all sea battles." Winston Churchill, who was Navy Secretary at the time, summarized what was at stake when he said that Admiral Sir John Jellicoe (the commander of the Royal Navy's fleet) was "the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon." It was not to happen. At Jutland, the Royal Navy, with its superior number of dreadnought battleships, beat back the challenge of the German Imperial Navy. Without Jacky Fisher's innovation, there is little doubt that Germany would have won The Great War. In World War II, the Germans did not even make a serious effort to challenge Britain's naval mastery.

Focusing on long-term gain rather than short-term pain is hard because the pain is all but guaranteed while the gain may never materialize. Financial markets typically focus on the short term and, while you innovate, your share price may take a hit. You'll need to have the financial resources to bridge the gap between the short term and the long term. Great Britain had the wealth to build a large number of dreadnoughts quickly, though the expenditure did contribute to the constitutional crisis of 1909-1911.

Have a High Tolerance for Uncertainty

When the *Dreadnought* was built, the standard reciprocating steam engines were simply incapable of driving her at twenty-one knots. Turbine engines offered a solution, but in 1905 turbines were on the tech-

nology frontier. Their thousands of blades had only a few thousandths of an inch of clearance. One defective blade could well destroy the entire engine and make the ship a sitting duck for enemy torpedo boats or submarines. It was also uncertain whether the ship could actually fire its full broadside, since its structure had not been tested against the potentially devastating recoil of so many 12-inch guns firing simultaneously. If the *Dreadnought* failed on either count, Fisher's career would be over.

But Fisher had an uncommonly high tolerance for uncertainty. For the most part, humans are not wired to embrace uncertainty. Most people prefer a certain outcome, like a guaranteed \$100, over a rationally more attractive uncertain outcome, like a 50 percent chance at \$400 paired with a 50 percent chance of losing \$100.⁶ Disruptive leadership requires handling high levels of uncertainty. To find out whether your disruptive actions will succeed you have to try, and once you have you can't turn back. To be willing to risk such failure, you need either a golden parachute or a very strong organizational commitment.

Have Passion for Your Organization

At various times, private shipbuilding and armaments companies offered Fisher top positions in which he would have earned much more. Although he was tempted, he never made the switch. The Royal Navy was the central passion of Fisher's life, driving his actions over fifty years of service. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to improving its efficiency, modernizing its structure, increasing its readiness, and revolutionizing naval combat. Fisher had a colossal ego, but it was focused on advancing his organization rather than his own career.

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Fisher's passion allowed him to overcome the fierce resistance to his reforms. By 1907, that resistance had found its spokesman in Admiral Lord Charles Beresford – a charismatic leader who was enormously popular with both officers and men, and who had many friends in society, the press, and Parliament. He used his position as a Member of Parliament to decry everything Fisher proposed. At the same time, Fisher's position was severely weakened by a change in government. Arthur Balfour's conservative administration, which favored Fisher's reforms, was replaced by a liberal government that cared much less about the navy. Fisher's new political overlords were weak and indecisive. They created a Committee of Inquiry to look into the conflict between Fisher and Beresford, organizationally his subordinate. This action was unprecedented in the long history of the Royal Navy. In an effort to avoid antagonizing the popular Beresford, the committee returned overall conclusions which were critical of both sides. The resulting damage to Fisher's reputation eventually obliged him to retire slightly early, in 1910. Although Fisher claimed to have the skin of a rhinoceros, these relentless attacks hurt. He told a friend that he would someday write his reminiscences and title them "*Hell. By One Who Has Been There.*"

How many managers today are as passionately committed to their organizations as Fisher was? How many prioritize their company's success over their own or forgo large salaries elsewhere to achieve their mission? At universities, for example, disruptive change can

be difficult because many scholars are more committed to their academic discipline than to their employer. And if your protectors – like Fisher’s Prime Minister Balfour – are replaced, you can find yourself fatally exposed if your disruption does not have broad support in the company.

Develop Effective Disruptive Networks

Your organization probably has a few members who are passionate

about change and a great many others who don’t really want to upset the status quo. To succeed, a disruptive leader has to motivate hidden pockets of people with the right mindset so that their actions will support the leader’s goals.⁷ Leadership expert John Kotter calls this “building a guiding coalition.”⁸ Bass and Avolio’s transformational leadership paradigm outlines four factors that can help a leader to build such a coalition.⁹

The Fishpond, as Fisher’s network of disruptive followers came to be known, helped him to achieve his reforms.

Individualized consideration: Listen carefully to your followers and consider their individual needs. As Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Fisher insured that

Moral Dilemma – Improving a Lethal Organization

Leaders often face moral dilemmas. The leaders of lethal organizations all the more so. Military organizations such as the Royal Navy are the epitome of lethal and there are a range of views on the leadership and role of such organizations.

Some feel that violence begets violence, and that Fisher’s work to improve the Royal Navy was a primary driver of the Anglo-German naval arms race before World War I. Indeed, many historians believe that this naval race was a key element in touching off the war. Political scientists later used it as an example of “conflict spiral theory,” in which greater power increases the likelihood of armed conflict. A strict moralist might then argue that Fisher should not have done what he did because it increased the chances of war. And even that if he was unable to stop it, he should have resigned, rather than being complicit.

Others argue that the best way to preserve peace is to be prepared for the worst. As the Romans said, “*si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war).” In Fisher’s time that meant optimizing the lethal capabilities of the Royal Navy, just as in our time it means optimizing the U.S. military. Political scientists call this view “deterrence theory,” according to which strong military power contributes to peace by deterring adversaries from opening hostilities. One common example is the nuclear standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Jacky Fisher certainly subscribed to deterrence theory. He was a British delegate at the First Hague Peace Conference in 1899 and wrote: “The supremacy of the British Navy is the best security of peace in the world.” He was not alone in this view; the British cabinet had instructed the delegation that Britain must retain its naval supremacy.

We will never know for sure which, if either, of these views is correct. There is certainly good reason to doubt whether the Royal Navy’s standing down or disarming would have caused Germany to do the same. Most historians attribute the Anglo-German arms race to the German Emperor Wilhelm II, not to British actions. Interestingly, though, there is evidence that Fisher may have struggled with this moral dilemma, but decided that building H.M.S. *Dreadnought* was the right thing to do. In the words of one of his protégés, who was on the design committee: “Knowing what we did, that the Dreadnought was the best type to build, should we knowingly have built the second-best ship? What would have been the verdict of the country if Germany had ... built a Dreadnought while we were building Lord Nelsons [pre-dreadnoughts], and then forced a war on us and beaten our fleet? What would have been the verdict of the country if ... the Admiralty had deliberately recommended the building of second-class ships?”

Britain engaged in disarmament in the 1920s, and accommodations with Germany in the 1930s, but World War II came anyway. And as in World War I, the Royal Navy, revitalized and prepared by Fisher, was the shield that protected not only Britain, but the world. In his December 29, 1940 Fireside Chat, Franklin D. Roosevelt said: “Does anyone seriously believe that we need to fear attack anywhere in the Americas while a free Britain remains our most powerful naval neighbor in the Atlantic? ... If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas—and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere.” One of the greatest presidents in U.S. history, then, deemed the Royal Navy to be the barrier between the free world and Nazi domination.

So countries most likely do need a lethal military apparatus to protect themselves and working to make that military more effective furthers the greater good. But what about working for a company whose products are lethal or have lethal side effects? The leaders of such a corporation may need to look beyond accomplishing the company’s mission and consider such questions as: Are the company’s products likely to be used in committing violent crimes? Does the company manufacture demonstrably unhealthy products such as the habit-forming drugs that kill thousands? Does the company cut corners in the pursuit of financial goals and manufacture substandard goods that can cause death or harm? Is the manufacturing safe for workers? For those who live nearby? Today it is easy to think of companies to which these questions apply. When faced with this sort of ethical uncertainty, you may have to think carefully about whether you feel comfortable working for your firm as it currently exists (after all, it does employ people, provide benefits, and pay taxes), whether you should try to change company practices from the inside, or whether you should find work at another firm. And there is no easy or universal answer; that’s how moral dilemmas work.

all officers, junior and senior, had free access to him. One lieutenant brought him a carefully conceived plan for defending the fleet against torpedo attacks; the following week, Fisher ordered all his captains to practice the lieutenant's tactics.

Intellectual stimulation: Encourage your followers to be innovative, challenging their own and others' beliefs. When Fisher was Commander in Chief of the North Atlantic and West Indies Station, he regularly invited junior officers to join him and his wife ashore for the weekend. In this more relaxed environment, he encouraged them to talk freely and share their ideas. When they disagreed with him, he welcomed it, provided their arguments were sound, a most uncommon response in such a hierarchical organization.

Inspirational motivation: Having a vision and presenting it clearly will allow you to inspire and motivate your followers. At the Royal Navy's elite research institutes, Fisher gathered a coterie of younger officers who came to share his sense of alarm and urgency about improving the offensive capabilities of the fleet in the face of the growing strength of Britain's adversaries. When he was assembling the committee to design the *Dreadnought*, he recruited these reformers. The committee was therefore composed of young, exceptionally able men who had shown their eagerness to embrace new ideas. Fisher gave them considerable creative leeway.

Idealized influence: Be a strong role model for your followers. Fisher's drive, relentless search for efficiency, energy, and unapologetic hounding of those who did not measure up inspired and awed his junior officers, binding them to him. He was an electrifying speaker whose fiery language, wit, and sly digs at naval tradition entranced his listeners.

The Fishpond, as Fisher's network of disruptive followers came to be

known, helped him to achieve his reforms. Several of them subsequently held senior positions in the Royal Navy, including First Sea Lord Louis of Battenberg and John Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet at the Battle of Jutland.

A 2008 McKinsey study showed, however, that finding people with the right disruptive mindset – your own Fishpond – may be challenging.¹⁰ The study further emphasizes that organizational culture is a major inhibitor of disruption. Managers generally regarded bureaucratic, hierarchical organizations

that make extensive use of incentives to promote short-term performance (e.g., quarterly targets), and which refuse to tolerate failure, as the strongest barriers to disruption. The good news is, that description exactly fits the Royal Navy of Jacky Fisher's time, and his determination broke down those barriers.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Conspicuously missing from Fisher's case study are the softer elements of leadership, especially humility, patience, and respect in helping

TABLE 2: Self-Assessment Questions	
Disruptive leadership factor	Questions to ask
Brainiac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you consider yourself a lifelong learner? Do you have a thirst for knowledge? What is your evidence? • Do you make the time to pursue new insights, even when you cannot see an immediate use for them?
Disrupt own frame of reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you earn a new position, do you immediately look for ways to do things better? • Do you habitually monitor and analyze your environment for new opportunities and threats and consider how to address them? • Are you a conceptual thinker or an operational one? • How do you rate yourself on openness to new experience?
Prioritize long term over short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you endure short-term pain in the pursuit of a potentially great payoff in the future? Can you give examples of when you have done so? • Do you have the resources to bridge the gap between short-term losses and long-term profits?
High tolerance of uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How comfortable are you with high levels of uncertainty? Have you taken any major risks in your own career? • Look at your investment portfolio. How much of your money is invested in stocks versus bonds?
Passion for the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you truly passionate about the company you work for? Is its success one of your most important goals? Is it the most important? • Do you consider yourself tenacious when compared to others? Do you refuse to give up in the face of organizational resistance or practical obstacles?
Develop effective disruptive networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you built a network of followers in your organization? Who are they, how strong is their loyalty, and how much influence do they have? If you don't have such a network, could you build one? • Have you earned the strong trust of your superiors? Will they back you when the going gets tough? How secure are they in their positions? • Does your organization encourage openness to change, taking risks and learning from failure? If not, can you change that?

marginal performers to improve. When Fisher discovered incompetence or inefficiency, he was ruthless. He scorned the notion of second chances, dismissing offenders on the spot. Disruptive leaders are, by their nature, ahead of their time, seeing things that others cannot, or will not, see. And disruptively leading an organization may require a measure of ruthlessness and autocratic behavior. The questions in Table 2 are designed to help you assess whether disruptive leadership is for you. They can also be used to assess the potential for disruptive leadership in others. ■

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