

ROBERT Hogan does not do sugar-coating. The president and founder of Hogan Assessment Systems is acknowledged as an international authority on personality assessment, leadership and effective organisations. His personality assessment tools are used in major companies and government organisations around the world. And he tells you cheerfully: "We've had to push very, very hard in the teeth of a fair amount of academic criticism."

Not that he's losing any sleep over that. "Academics don't have a clue," he declares with cutting disdain.

Talking with Dr Hogan is a bit like white-water rafting: you have to manoeuvre the torrent of words pouring from him in rapid-fire sentences that the guru often doesn't bother to complete, so quickly is he on to another idea.

"Am I talking too fast?" he asks at one point. "As the man used to say, I talk fast because I think fast." Charming; you have to smile at the *Pulp Fiction* reference.

We are in the Centennial Tower office of Optimal Consulting Group, which markets and administers the Hogan assessment tools to organisations in Singapore and the region, and Dr Hogan is on fire. A sprightly 73, he is a born raconteur, even if the anecdotes and comments often carry a sting that belies his avuncular bearing.

As when he is asked if he can summarise the key tenets of his theory of personality and leadership in five minutes. "Yep, absolutely," he replies.

And he's off: "The first point I would like to make is that leadership really matters. There are a lot of academics who don't believe that, particularly the business faculty at Stanford, who say leadership's irrelevant."

"But consider the following: In the 20th century, 167 million people were killed for political reasons, 30 million people were killed by invading armies, 137 million people were killed by their own government. So it really matters who's in charge. I mean, if you get the wrong people in charge, they'll kill you."

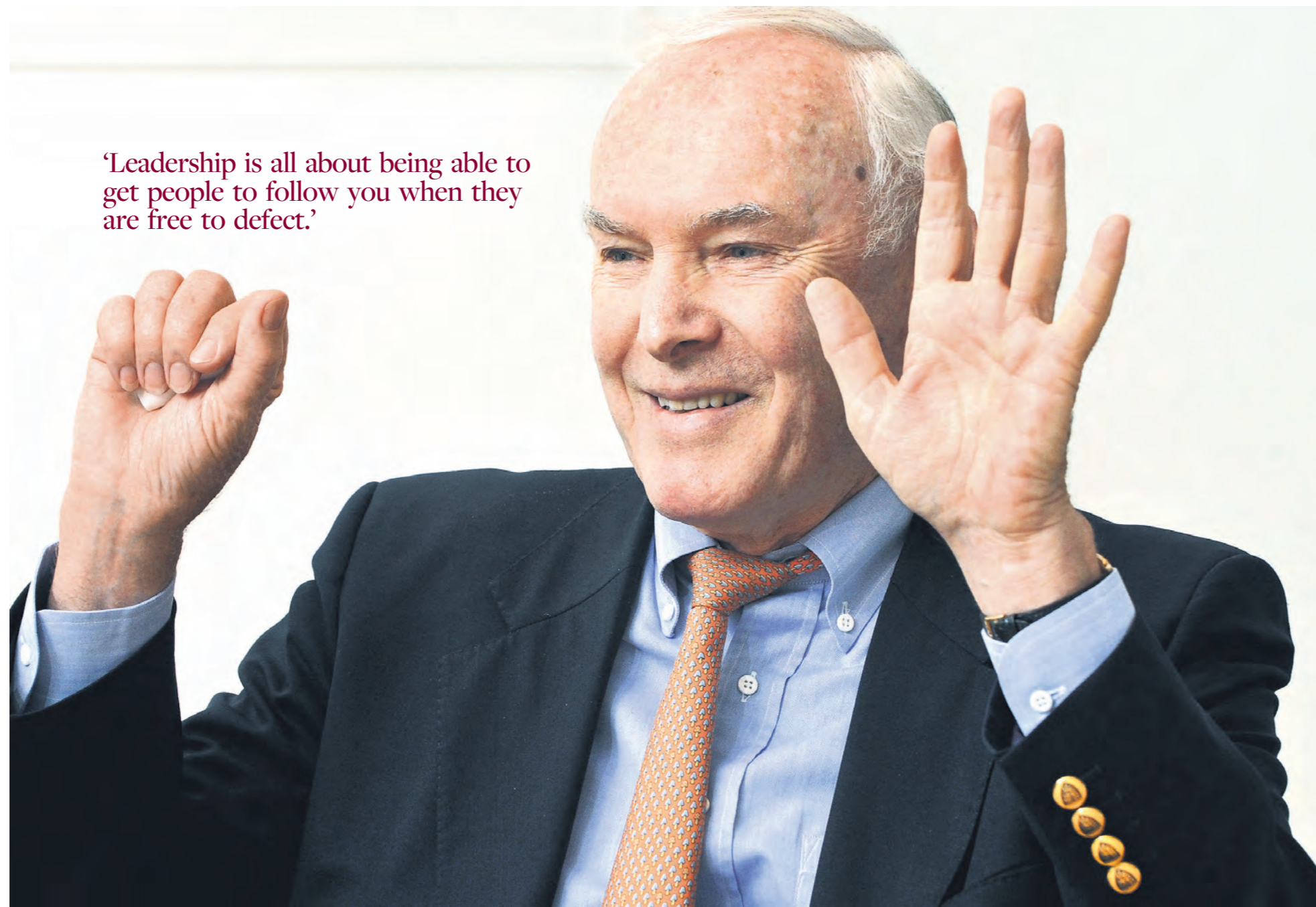
"But more to the point, research shows that not all bosses can lead. From the point of view of a lot of economists, leadership ability is completely fungible, completely interchangeable. It's simply not true. Some people have a talent for leadership, most people don't have much talent for leadership, and some people are like Muammar Gaddafi, they're just actually quite disastrous."

"And the data shows that the personality of the CEO counts for somewhere between 14 and 17 per cent of the variance in a firm's performance. So it really matters who's in charge from a financial point of view."

The bad news, according to Dr Hogan, is that people rarely get appointed to senior positions based on their talent for leadership. "They get appointed to senior leadership positions based on internal politics."

He continues: "My second point would be that the academic study of leadership has failed. There's absolutely no consensus regarding the characteristics of effective leadership."

'Leadership is all about being able to get people to follow you when they are free to defect.'



ARTHUR LEE

Psychology's iconoclast

The psychology of leadership and effective organisations is hugely misunderstood, says Robert Hogan, president and founder of Hogan Assessment Systems.

By Kenneth James

"Third point is, then you have to go to a complete rethink. And I think the appropriate way to think about people is in terms of human evolution, in terms of human origins."

As he propounds his theories, and relates with relish the events and developments that shaped his thinking, a common thread becomes apparent: a passionate commitment to the scientific approach; and conversely, a deep disdain for theories and methodologies that appear elegant but actually have little or no empirical basis.

At the heart of this philosophy is an innate curiosity he's had since childhood.

"I have always been curious about how the world works. And when you're a little kid, the world consists of dogs and cats and snakes and lizards and flies and insects and ants. I had ant colonies, and I had bees and stuff."

"And then, at some point I thought, 'Well, I really want to know how the world works, maybe I should study physics.' And so I went to college to study physics. I beavered away and worked really hard at it. And at the end of the first year I went to

my teaching assistant, and I said, 'When are we going to talk about the nature of reality?' And he said 'What?' And I said, 'That's why I'm studying physics! I want to know what reality is.' He said, 'That's not what we do.' And I said 'Oh, then I don't think I want to be a physicist.'"

He then considered psychology. He had read Sigmund Freud's 1900 classic *The Interpretation of Dreams* while in high school. "I thought it was absolutely fascinating. Freud was an avid fan of Darwin, so he starts with evolutionary theory. He thinks people are inherently biological ani-

mals; that's true. He says development matters – what happened to you as a child will impact the way you behave as an adult. And that's absolutely true. (Although) I can assure you, a whole roomful of psychologists will say I'm wrong."

"He said, most of the people don't know what they're doing when they do it. It's called the pervasive power of the unconscious; or you call it just self-deception. It's true. Most of the people lie to themselves about what they're up to. So Freud's great."

"And so I said, 'Well, maybe I'll be a psychologist.' And then I discovered that the academic psychology (fraternity) hates Freud."

A stint in the navy taught him some hard facts about leadership – more accurately, how leadership was perceived by some of his fellow officers: "My brother officers were all Ivy League graduates – seriously wealthy guys. And they thought that working-class people were put on earth to serve them."

Young officer Hogan identified himself with those "working-class people", and under his leadership his gunnery division won several fleet-wide awards. That didn't sit well with his peers, Dr Hogan claims. "They hated me for that. For three years, I took abuse (from) these other officers because they said that I didn't understand anything about leadership."

In 1964 Robert Hogan was offered an assistantship at the University of California, Berkeley, with its renowned Psychology Department. A graduate student now, he was invited to participate in a project at the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR). "And that changed my life," he says.

IPAR was the right place at the right time for the aspiring psychologist. "There were two things about the assessment centre that were really important. The first thing was the focus on competence and effectiveness (in personality research and assessment). And the second part of it, and the part that I just really respected, was paying attention to data. To see if the stuff works. And that's completely missing from the modern assessment tradition."

Not that everything was smooth sailing. Combative as ever, he was openly critical of academic colleagues he felt were placing political expediency above academic principles.

He relates with great gusto this story about an IPAR staff meeting in 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War protests.

"Things were completely out of control ... I'm sitting at this staff lunch, and here are my colleagues, they're all in their tweed jackets and their little bow ties. Right outside the window is a riot. There are helicopters, there are police cars, there are sirens, and there are crowds surging up and down, and there are the poor cops trying to deal with it. And we're all sitting there like this, having our meatloaf, and we're having these absolutely vapid conversations."

"I had a background in law enforcement. And I said to them ... the Department of Justice was funding criminal corrections and law enforcement research, and (the Institute) needed money... And I said – and this was an institute that was designed to study effectiveness – I said, 'Wouldn't it be interesting to do a study of police effectiveness?'"

"And it was exactly as if I had let out a

Robert Hogan
Psychologist; founder and president, Hogan Assessment Systems

1937 Born Los Angeles, California

1960 Graduated summa cum laude, University of California, Los Angeles

1960 Commissioned as navy officer

1967 PhD University of California, Berkeley

Academic positions/honours:
Johns Hopkins University: Professor of Psychology and Social Relations
University of Tulsa: McFarlin Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology
Fellow, American Psychological Association
Fellow, Society for Industrial/Organisational Psychology
Author of more than 300 journal articles, chapters and books

"*t. There was this ... 'Eeeew'. You know? Like, 'You're crazy'. And they told me, 'Don't ever talk like that again.' And I said 'You people are hopeless. I mean, look out the window! You're hopeless.'"

To his – and probably Berkeley's – credit, Robert Hogan received his PhD anyway. Then came a stint at Johns Hopkins University, which was followed by an offer to chair the Psychology Department at the University of Tulsa. The terms of the contract allowed him to start a consulting business, together with his wife Joyce. Thus were sown the seeds that became Hogan Assessment Systems.

More Spartacus than Seneca

Dr Hogan is the first to admit that his journey has not been smooth. That's hardly surprising, given his non-mainstream approach to psychology – in particular the areas of personality, leadership and organisations – and his combative style. More Spartacus, the gladiator fighting his way past ever more formidable combatants, than Seneca, the philosopher-statesman.

But he is convinced that he's on the right track. And he can point to the fact that governments and major corporations successfully use his assessment tools, which are based on his iconoclastic theories, as testament to that.

It all comes back to the correct understanding of the role of leaders, a role which has been crucial throughout human evolution, he says.

"In the context of human evolution, leadership was an absolutely essential resource for the survival of the group. The best-led groups were the ones that prevailed. The worst-led groups ended up being someone else's dinner."

"And my point is, people have built-in, pre-wired cognitive categories that they use to evaluate the leadership potential of other people. Because it was so important in the history of the species, we're pre-wired to be able to evaluate."

There are four things that people look for in a potential leader, he says.

"The first thing people want to see, is integrity. Is the person honest, can you trust the person, is he going to sell us out to the neighbouring tribe, is he going to exploit

the tribe's resources for his own purposes, will he keep his word."

"Second thing people want to see is judgement. And it turns out, empirically, that there's basically no such thing as good judgement. The base rate of good decisions in businesses is about 50 per cent; half of all decisions that people make in business are wrong."

"So good judgement is not about getting it right, because in principle it's a random walk. It's being willing to evaluate your decisions and then see if you got them right. And so good judgement is all about being willing to repair bad judgement."

"The third thing people want to see is competence. They want to know that you know something about the business that you're in."

"And then the fourth thing they want to see is vision. Can you explain it, can you justify it, can you make what we're doing seem worthwhile."

"And when you get a CEO or a boss or a manager or supervisor who fails across those four categories, you've got an alienated workforce. They will not want to work for the person."

Conversely, an identifying characteristic of a good leader is that people want to work for that person of their own free will.

Dr Hogan explains: "Leadership is all about being able to get people to follow you when they are free to defect. And I can tell you where it is relevant; it has to do with, how do you retain high potentials. Because the high potentials are free to defect. So then leadership becomes absolutely essential to keep them on board, because they can take their act elsewhere."

"If they're not free to defect, it's not leadership, it's something else. This is why I always say military leadership is an oxymoron. Because in the military, they say 'Do this' and you say 'Why', they say, 'These stripes on my sleeve, that's why.' Or, 'I can have you shot if you don't do it. That's why.' That's not leadership. That's just coercion."

For the rest of the organisation who are not free to defect, engagement becomes important, Dr Hogan says.

"Good management is all about creating engagement. And it's very simple. How a manager treats his or her staff drives their level of engagement. When engagement is high, you get good business results. You get low turnover, low absenteeism, high productivity, and high customer satisfaction ratings. Those all mean dollars. When engagement is low, you get high turnover, high absenteeism, low productivity and low customer satisfaction ratings. So, good managers make more money for you, bad managers drive unnecessary costs."

Which is why the way the staff perceive their manager – his reputation, in Hogan-speak – is crucial to the proper assessment of the manager's leadership qualities. "It's actually the subordinates' evaluation of a manager that predicts the performance of a group," he emphasises.

Ultimately, what do leaders actually need to do? The goal of leadership is to build a team, he says. "Leadership should be defined in terms of the ability to build and maintain a team, and leadership should be evaluated in terms of the performance of the team."

"And if you define leadership that way, the whole empirical literature then comes together in a way that makes sense." kenjames@sph.com.sg