The future of leadership: A practitioner view

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Summary
This article explores the crisis in leadership focusing on the period since the banking crisis. It is written from a practitioner perspective and includes a review of a survey of 16 global companies and their attitudes and perspectives on leadership development. The article also explores applications of a framework developed at MIT looking at leadership in an age of uncertainty. There are in-depth recent case studies on leadership development at Sony Europe and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Key assumptions include the fact that leadership is distributed across an organisation and that leadership evolves as an organisation’s environment shifts. The article concludes with some views on future leadership development.

Introduction
In 2006/2007, just before the global financial crisis, two of the authors, surveyed the Heads of Leadership and Talent in 16 global companies (Chambers and Drysdale, 2007). These companies came from a range of sectors including Banking, Insurance, Technology, and Food. They had diverse national ownership: Dutch, French, Swiss, US, UK and Japanese.
In the 2007 study we found that less than a quarter of these companies were satisfied with the development of their leadership talent and that senior stakeholders in less than half of these companies had clear expectations of talent development.

The minority of companies that were satisfied with leadership development had a number of factors in common:
• Strategic intent clearly articulated each company’s impact across a broad range of stakeholder interests i.e. clients/customers, markets, financial performance, culture, corporate and social responsibility.
• Integrated business and people planning processes linked performance and people development goals.
• Leaders’ remuneration was linked to an assessment of “how” they led as well as “what” business results they achieved.

Three years ago the majority of leadership practitioners were not satisfied with the impact of leadership and talent...
development. Since then life as a practitioner and as a leader has become much more challenging. Press coverage of business leaders’ behaviour clearly shows heightened public, regulatory and shareholder scrutiny. At the same time our study showed that leaders have to balance many competing demands within their roles. We therefore welcomed the invitation from the Windsor Leadership Trust to explore from a leadership development practitioner’s perspective, how things have changed. In particular, we looked at how requirements of business leaders have changed, what companies are doing to enable leaders to develop the required capabilities and what has been the impact.

We focused our attention on the European businesses of five global companies, two of which were Sony Europe and PwC UK. In all five companies, we interviewed the Heads of Talent and Leadership Development. The other three companies included the UK business of a European owned telecoms company (Telco), the European business of a global US owned technology company (Techco) and a global UK owned publishing and media company. These companies employed on average 20,000 people in Europe. We feature in more depth, the experiences of the consumer electronics company (Sony Europe) and the professional services firm (PwC UK), both of which have made considerable investments in leadership development which they have sustained throughout the global economic crisis.

A crisis of leadership

Since our first study, the global political and economic landscape has shifted considerably. In the autumn of 2008, after the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the government rescues of what had been financial power houses, such as AIG, RBS and Lloyds Banking Group, the financial crisis deepened. Since the Enron collapse, public opinion surveys have shown deepening distrust in our business leaders, which in turn caused a crisis of faith in our institutions and ultimately in our government. The speed of the credit crisis was exemplified in the case of one of the companies in the 2007 survey. In the spring of 2008, the survey company held a top Leadership Summit, exhorting its leaders to pursue opportunities for business growth in Asia. The same company six months later was fighting for its very survival and had to be bailed out by the national government. The speed of the downturn took many leaders by surprise. It was difficult for us all to comprehend how the financial system had begun to unravel and had done so at such a deep-rooted level and in such a short time.

A mood of deep uncertainty prevailed. Many questions were asked about how and why Banking leaders had not just caused their own organisations to falter, but also impacted the whole economy and contributed to its downward spiral. Press articles abounded about reckless leaders who showed apparent disregard for their shareholders and for the general public, whilst rewarding themselves with substantial bonuses and share options. Sample public commentary is included in our references to articles and speeches by Bain et al., The Governor of the Bank of England and a special issue from the Institute of Directors.

Some individual leaders received more criticism than others — perhaps because of a perceived lack of remorse or humility. The public, as well as the regulators, were in no mood for excuses — there was simply too much at stake. The overall impact was an increased public focus on integrity, ethics and accountability leading to demands for greater scrutiny and stronger regulation of financial services companies (those organisations who had dared to challenge the underlying principles).

Although the crisis was averted, many questions remain about the leadership of those organisations who had brought the global economy to the brink of disaster — to what extent did they contribute to it? To what extent should they have had greater foresight and be more attuned to the real risks posed within their own businesses? This has led us to look at leadership post the crisis in a new light — and in particular to focus on how organisations can prepare future leaders for the extreme challenges of leadership in the 21st century — i.e. balancing increasing uncertainty and ambiguity whilst handling greater regulation.

A framework for our inquiry

All the companies we surveyed in 2007 had a framework or model that defined their requirements of leaders. The majority of these models were bespoke and focused on a combination of behaviours, intellectual capabilities and values. In a third of companies, these models had been in place for five years and they provided the basis for much of the leadership development activity in these companies.

Much has been written recently about “Leadership in challenging times” as academics, consultants and companies themselves seek answers to the questions of “what must leaders do now?”. We found the work of Deborah Ancona and her colleagues at MIT particularly helpful in providing a frame of reference to guide our inquiry. (Ancona, 2005). They have developed a framework which integrates prior theories of leadership whilst focusing on what leaders actually do. Developed by four MIT Sloan faculty members, Deborah Ancona, Wanda Orlikowski, Peter Senge and Tom Malone, it has the following core assumptions:

- Leadership is distributed.
- Leadership is personal and developmental.
- Leadership is a process to create change.
- Leadership develops over time.

We found the model particularly apt as it helps us as leadership development practitioners to build hope — in fact the very representation of the model is a compass to help our leaders navigate through these turbulent times. Their framework has four key leadership capabilities:

- **Sense making** — seeking many types and sources of data and involving others in the process.
- **Relating** — developing key relationships within and across organisations.
- **Visioning** — providing people with a sense of meaning about their work and answering the question “why am I doing this?”.
- **Inventing** — creating new ways of working together, including the processes and structures needed to make the vision a reality.
Ancona et al. make an interesting point about the role that polarity or paradox plays in leadership, which they refer to as tensions:

"These capabilities can also create tensions that need to be managed. It is difficult to hold an image of the future and the present simultaneously. Balancing people and processes, action and understanding, individual and collective aspirations, can be challenging. Yet it is inherent in the framework that managing these very tensions is the essence of leadership." (Ancona et al., 2007, p. 3)

Examples of this dynamic emerged in our interviews with leadership development practitioners, e.g., in every company we spoke with, the leaders who were performing best were those who were able to manage that tension between holding sight of the vision whilst delivering short term results.

**Signature style**

The last component in the MIT framework is the individual leader’s "signature style" which they describe as "...the change signature that determines how and what the tool is used for" (Ancona et al., 2007, p. 3). While the capabilities focus on what leaders do, the change signature is about who a leader is. It develops slowly based on experience and skills. It is a key part of this leadership model because it represents who we are as leaders'.

The change signature is made up of a credo and the characteristic way in which the leader creates change. The term "credo" refers to a person’s core values and beliefs both for themselves and for their organisation (this concept is built on that of Kouzes and Posner, 1993). The second aspect of the change signature is the way an individual typically embodies the four capabilities and the characteristic way in which that person makes change happen. For example, what are the skills, abilities, tactics and modes of operating that characterize how you carry out your leadership activities? Some people might carry out sense making in a very interpersonal manner, moving from office to office learning from everyone they meet. For others it might be a purely analytic process that starts and ends on the computer.

**Business priorities**

In this section we look at the overall business context within which leaders are currently operating. The dominant business priorities that were emerging as a result of the global economic crisis were: cost reduction; customer focus and innovation.

**Cost reduction** featured strongly as a priority for the companies we spoke with.

- Telco was operating in a saturated market with intense price competition and took the opportunity of a tough market to focus attention on getting costs under control.
- Techco was faced with a 30–40% reduction in markets and cost reduction was critical to weather the storm. Operating costs were reduced through consolidation, standardization and redundancies (20%) and outsourcing. Operations were consolidated in low cost geographies to support recovery of profitable growth.
- Media Co was reducing costs and prices to enable them to access new markets. Traditionally focused on large developed markets, they were now assessing at which point a new market becomes scalable.
- Sony had seen a major downturn in sales in mature markets and growth in Eastern Europe not delivering expected growth due to the credit crunch. Price competition had intensified. Cost reduction was achieved through global/regional economies of scales, synergies and transformation of business processes.
- PwC are focusing on holding their nerve throughout the downturn — and on helping clients manage in a downturn. There is a clear investment strategy in their chosen markets and a determination to apply lessons learned from previous downturns.

**Increasing customer focus** ranked high in the list of priorities.

- In Telco’s markets, customers had become more discerning. With market saturation, efforts were redirected from customer acquisition to retention, clarification of the customer service proposition, "value for money" branding and a restructuring based on customer segments.
- Techco introduced a new global business model and organisation segmented around customer enterprise size.
- Media Co developed new services to directly engage better with consumers.
- Sony was directly engaging with consumers, to understand their needs better.
- PwC have renewed emphasis on client relationship skills alongside technical expertise as a key business differentiator.

**Innovation** was important in finding ways to work smarter and more efficiently. In the companies we spoke with there was less emphasis on innovation. In Mediaco's case they were cannibalising existing products, creatively destroying old products to create something new.

PwC were looking at new ways of adding value to audit clients, as the audit process itself becomes more commoditised and fee rates increasingly under pressure.

**Changing requirements of leaders**

We now examine the key messages emerging in our interviews with leadership development practitioners and what they revealed about the impact of the recent global economic crisis on the requirements that companies have of their leaders.

We found from Executive interviews that Sony Europe and PwC UK had both launched strategic leadership development programmes in 2007, which emphasised the development of an approach to leadership which has since become a business imperative. We saw these programmes as innovative, progressive and in line with the latest thinking on leadership development. We now believe that the dramatic events of the last two years have brought the
programmes into the mainstream. The levels of complexity, ambiguity and unpredictability since 2007 mean that programmes like these, which help people to deal with these elements, are likely to become more commonplace.

These conditions require flexibility, collaboration, innovation and the courage to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity. The view of leadership development practitioners we spoke to is that we do not have time to develop the required capabilities gradually by modifying our approach to leadership development. Such extreme challenges require radical solutions and the transformation of leadership development. PwC and Sony Europe took bold steps three years ago in transforming their approach to leadership development, which has equipped their leaders well for the challenges they now face and are likely to face in the future. For these reasons we have decided to feature their experiences prominently in this article and have included separate sections on each company.

First let us look at how the requirements of leaders in our other three companies, Telco, Techco and Mediaco have changed in the light of the downturn. To do this we have used the elements of the MIT model.

**Sense making**

"Sense making" features strongly in the requirements of leaders in all companies, particularly understanding and working with interdependencies. The cost reduction drivers have intensified the importance of sense making. For example, in Telco they are making decisions by taking more account of the broader cross company impact. They are more disciplined in balancing costs and revenue – a tough challenge when they haven’t had to manage costs so much in the past. In the face of greater complexity of relationships to manage inter-company and across the market, focusing on fewer things with the greatest leverage has become their mantra.

In Techco, strategic agility has become critical, with the need to locally interpret the new global strategy, whilst dramatically reducing costs and sustaining employee engagement. This balancing of running the business and managing change at the same time has emerged as one of the key leadership capabilities within five of the companies we spoke with. In Mediaco, leaders have become more commercial, getting their heads around new business models and managing ambiguity, as there is no right answer anymore and they can not reference the old ways of doing things.

**Relating**

As leaders come to terms with the reality that there is no known solution to most of the challenges they are facing; they recognise that they need to work with others. Relating features prominently in their approach. In Telco, they are displaying a more enlightened approach. They are engaging people, not just saying no, but rather "here’s what we need to achieve, what can we stop or do differently?". As Techco slashed costs, there were no longer budgets for large off sites and specialist support staff (who in the past would have provided "programmes" to support change), were made redundant. Leaders now have to look to their own people for the solutions. In the face of unrelenting commercial pressure, it has become essential to maintain a strong focus on people and peer relationships across the organisation. It is only through collaboration that solutions are found and that the commitment can be built to successfully execute. In Mediaco, a priority has been placed on maximising assets by reconfiguring content. Such deep focus on content specialism has meant that leaders are increasingly finding that they are required to lead people whose jobs they do not understand and they are having to build more trusting relationships.

**Inventing**

In Telco and Techco, much effort has gone into creating the processes and structures needed to translate company wide visions into reality. In Telco, they are being more proactive, putting issues on the table and taking responsibility for developing and executing solutions. At Techco, the emphasis has been on translating global strategy into local action, by rolling out the global vision, mission and values. Whilst in Mediaco there has been more scope for leaders to shape strategy, particularly in reconfiguring products and services with reduced costs and prices to enable the company to access new markets.

**Visioning**

At Telco and Techco it has been about ownership, translating the global strategy into a compelling vision and selling it locally. At Mediaco, a creative company there is less standardisation and more opportunity and requirement for leaders to be more strategic, thus creating the big picture.

We will now look at how the requirements of leaders have changed in our two featured companies.

**Changing requirements of leaders — PwC**

The drivers of change for leaders in PwC include public scrutiny, the continuing information revolution and the rapid and dynamic business environment. These have presented a relentless sequence of challenges from climate change to major shifts in demographics, from regulation to corporate governance. Leaders at PwC need to make sense of all of this real-time while offering fresh perspectives on a daily basis to their clients and maintaining focus on delivering world class professional services.

The PwC Vision is to create:

"'One firm – a powerhouse of a commercial enterprise that does the right thing for clients, people and communities’’ and in turn supports their driving ambition to become the "'Iconic professional services firm, always front of mind whenever professional services are mentioned.'"

This vision is supported by transformation plans to drive the necessary change while keeping the vision clear and alive.

Through strong senior leadership, PwC is focusing on a "'holding our nerve’’ message as a Cultural Signature linked..."
to the vision of “doing the right thing for our clients”. PwC hope and expect to take business relationships to new levels by demonstrating commitment to clients by staying alongside them during the downturn and helping them find robust business solutions. Another cultural signature is “tell it how it is”. These statements mean that all at PwC can “download” these messages and create a cultural change signature through following clear principles. This is indicative of the leadership belief that key principles clearly communicated coupled with trust in individual partners will allow the organisation to be agile and responsive to the changing requirements of leadership.

Sony Europe

In 2007, revitalisation of Sony Electronics was the number one corporate priority: the way in which this was to be achieved was by getting even closer to consumers, understanding and responding better to their needs; increasing creativity in engineering; reducing costs through global/regional economies of scales, leveraging synergies and streamlining business processes. Leadership capability was recognised as directly impacting the company’s ability to execute its strategic priorities.

Fujio Nishida, President of Sony Europe, articulated this vision of leadership in November 2006 at the launch of the Sony Europe Leadership Programme:

“We must continue to develop our leadership capability, build a culture that focuses on growth and encourage more creativity and risk-taking in our business.”

The business case for the investment in leadership development was supported by two major pieces of research. Corporate Leadership Council found in 2003 that organisations with a strong leadership ‘bench’ over a 3 year period returned nearly 10% more to their shareholders than those with a weak leadership ‘bench’. Bain et al. (2004) found that “companies that systematically and continuously put the right leaders in the right jobs outperform companies that do not — by a wide margin”.

Sony Europe developed its own framework which defined its requirements of leaders (Figure 1). It has three interconnected dimensions: Confidence, competence and courage and is known as the “3 Cs of leadership”. The framework which is described below provided the focus for leadership assessment and development.

The Sony Europe Executive Team recognised that to thrive in a fast changing environment, they needed their leaders to play a key role in making the cultural shift described below (Table 1).

In Sony, the Leader’s role is to act as a catalyst — helping employees tap into their expertise and creativity — to bring

Table 1  Towards a different leadership culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control (I tell you what the answer is)</td>
<td>Trust (we develop the answer together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependence/boundaries</td>
<td>Interdependence/alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and resource orientated</td>
<td>Purpose and people — orientated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk avoidance</td>
<td>Innovative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling</td>
<td>Learning</td>
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<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Product focus</td>
<td>Customer focus</td>
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<td>IQ</td>
<td>IQ + EQ</td>
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different parts of the organisation together to create efficiencies and synergies for the benefit of the consumer. This shift in culture was seen as crucial to the company’s transformation and to regain the magic of Sony.

These expectations were influenced by the results of the company’s open survey of all employees and key people assessments. The 2007 survey results confirmed that employees were proud to work for Sony, felt part of the company and found their jobs challenging. Needs for improvement were identified in the following areas: managers to provide more motivation and guidance; more career development opportunities; increasing emphasis on excellence, creativity and innovation. Employees considered it was important for them to have pride, passion and belief in the organisation but less than a third actually felt that way.

Sony Europe has since updated their leadership model. It was felt that the 3 C’s model had been valuable but no longer captured the leadership requirements for the business going forward. Specifically, the new model, which is described above (Figures 2 and 3), is intended to reflect future business needs, including speed of change, drive to deliver, and external market awareness as key attributes.

As a result of the global economic crisis of 2008/2009, Sony had seen a major downturn in sales in mature markets. Growth in Eastern Europe was not delivering expected growth due to the credit crunch and price competition had intensified. The strategic priorities identified in 2007 had become even more critical. This impacted the requirements of leaders in a number of ways. More decisions were made on a pan-business basis with less accommodation of individual business unit preferences. There was a greater need for Inventing and Relating by boldly doing things in completely different ways, e.g., partnering with other organisations, new ways of interacting with customers and balancing the longer term vision with what we need to do in the short term. Leaders needed to be open to new ideas, including others in decision making and showing more trust.

How companies are developing leadership capabilities for the future

In this section we will first of all look at how Telco, Techco and Mediaco are helping leaders to develop the capability to
meet the challenges they now face. We will then look at our featured companies in more detail.

With the deep cost cutting at Telco and Techco, leadership development budgets were drastically cut and no specific programmes were planned to help leaders develop the required capabilities. Local HR and training departments were providing some tactical support and group wide leadership development programmes were under review. It is likely that new programmes and strategies will emerge on the back of the learning of this period. In these companies, one year since the start of the crisis, those leaders who were performing best were displaying the following "Cultural Signatures":

- Ownership: Taking more responsibility. Owning the goal. Being more choiceful and engaging people in those choices.
- Strong and courageous. Demonstrating personal strength, clear views and pushing them but also being prepared to be flexible. What makes the difference is the extent to which leaders have moved away from ego.

In Mediaco, levels of investment in strategic leadership programmes had been maintained. This company had always been very focused and selective in its investments which had high levels of credibility and support. They had decided to segment their development offerings, targeting investment more on key talent, segmenting programmes more on specific types of leaders and specific leadership challenges.

PwC — developing leadership capabilities for the future

The PwC leadership development strategy follows the findings of the Centre for Creative Leadership that 70% of learning takes place on-the-job. The culture at PwC encourages people to learn hour by hour through fresh approaches to familiar tasks — and being regularly exposed to new challenges and situations. There is a strong belief that leaders never stop learning, and if they do, they will very likely also stop being leaders.

PwC started their exploration of Responsible Leadership with their Global Ulysses (GU) programme. GU started in 2001 and 120 international partners have experienced the programme. The GU programme sourced challenging international projects in which partners could experiment with and expand their leadership repertoire. This often resulted in personal transformations and deep learning. This was the start of the process to create the PwC UK Responsible Leadership Programme (RLP), which has now been successfully trialled for three years, 2007–09, with the same outcomes — many partners experiencing major shifts and breakthroughs in their leadership approach.

PwC has long recognised the need to invest in developing leaders able to deal with increasing complexity and ambiguity.

The purpose of PwC's Responsible Leadership Programme is summed up by the Programme sponsor:

"RLP is a key strand in the PwC Leadership Development strategy, providing an experimental forum for senior leaders to understand their leadership signature and develop personal vision. This is all in service of building a cadre of leaders within PwC that are able to relate to an increasingly diverse range of stakeholders and deal with high complexity, balancing polarity and working with paradox as required."

The programme is a 6 week development process starting with a Foundation Workshop preparing the Partners for their Field Experience with the organisations hosting the Partners Field Projects. During weeks 2—5, the Partners develop their leadership skills in a very different environment during their Field Experience. Each project has two or three Partners working with a leader from the host organisation on particular areas of focus which are designed to be open ended, systemically complex and challenging. They are also 100% live and real: there is no element of simulation. Host organisations have varied from national charities to emergency services and issues have had a strong social inclusion focus ranging from homelessness, domestic violence and prostitution to economic deprivation.

When Partners have completed their field experience they return to the office for a couple of weeks before attending the final element of the programme: the Review Workshop. The host leaders join PwC Partners for a deep dive to make sense of leadership learning at the individual, group and organisation levels. They prepare to share their insights and leadership development with a panel of PwC UK Executive Leaders. All of this planned leadership development activity has a specific focus on leading through ambiguity.

The impact of PwC UK's Responsible Leadership Programme

PwC have maintained commitment to the Responsible Leadership Programme. After the second year they completed a series of structured interviews with participants and a sample of their clients and colleagues to check the business impact of the programme.

Leading Beyond Authority was a key theme of the Responsible Leadership Programme at PwC, and recent research found that many partners have taken up discretionary roles following their attendance on the programme.

After the second year of the programme, individuals reported a diverse range of enhanced abilities including: setting the agenda; working with the big picture; suspending judgement; entrepreneurial activity; being true to self; inspiring others.

Partners also reported a strong desire to step up and take on new responsibilities to support the firm's strategy. At the heart of all of this was a clear sense of leadership based on clear values and a desire to create exceptional results supported by a broadened perspective and the ability to set priorities and maintain focus.

RLP Partners are on a rapid journey of sense making and orientation as they enter the Host organisations’ worlds and discover new forms of leadership. During their time on RLP, Partners are encouraged to suspend their existing frameworks and remain open to the new situation, taking in many new sources of data. A key outcome of the programme has been the chance to explode stereotypes.
Charities have discovered business people with heart and soul while Partners have spent time with passionate leaders in the third sector with powerful visions and amazing organisational skills.

At a personal level, Partners on RLP spend time creating special personal journals to keep track of their sense making — and some have also posted blogs to share this more widely. All RLP Partners spend time creating a Personal Leadership Vision that gives a sense of their key leadership signature — the essence of what they bring to all situations.

RLP focuses strongly on storytelling as a critical leadership skill and participants are encouraged to dig deep into their experience to create powerful stories to communicate their leadership learning.

PwC UK plan to continue investment in RLP and related activities and recognise that they are still in the early stages of realising the full potential of these leadership interventions.

Sony Europe developing leadership capabilities for the future

In 2007, Sony launched its Senior Leadership Development Programme (SLDP). The programme was targeted at key Directors, with potential to progress to Executive positions.

The Sony Europe Executive Team had clear expectations of the programme participants:

• There should be visible signs they have changed and in doing they will change the culture.
• They will have learned the art of inviting participation by others and being open to opinions that differ from our own.
• They will be known for teaching others, not telling others... sometimes we think we are teaching when really we are ‘dressing up’ telling.

The SLDP Programme was 9 months duration. It had four core elements: visionary leadership; emotional intelligence and coaching for potential i.e. turning potential into bottom line ROI. The programme followed an “inside/out” approach by starting to look “inside” at individual leaders’ values and purpose, then focusing on the impact of their leadership on their people, organisation and customers. The programme is visibly supported by the CEO who attends the launch event of each cohort and attends events at the end of the programme when participants make their leadership commitments.

Impact

The commitments made by participants following the programme are focused on Visioning, Sense making, Connecting and Inventing. Here are some examples:

• We will establish a new style of leadership.
• We will start to recruit for “emotional intelligence” (not just technical skills).

We will build/grow our One Idea initiative (to ensure that the network and learning continues after the programme).

We will make our people strategy management a core part of our budget and business planning.

We will cascade EQ and coaching in the organisation — create an “ask not tell” environment — to create a significant change in how we interact with our customers.

The comments made by participants are consistent with the assumptions that Leadership is distributed, personal, about creating change and develops over time:

• “This has been an experience like no other for me and impacts positively both my personal and professional life. I am richer in so many ways for this”.
• Tools and approaches to coaching are hugely valuable.
• The strong personal network that is built during the programme is extremely valuable.
• External Coach helps to reinforce learning.
• People have much greater insights into their leadership role and own strengths and weaknesses.
• Visible differences in behaviour for some — impacting on culture.
• Personal approach is challenging and stimulating (“emotional hard work”) and has increased peoples’ confidence in being a leader.
• “Bringing your whole self to the leadership role really is the key to inspiring others”.

Three years since its launch the programme continues to have considerable impact. Firstly, alumni from the programme have been promoted to very significant positions of responsibility. Secondly, alumni of the programme have continued to connect and have demonstrated ownership leading initiatives to help the “company get closer to customers”. At a time when there has been an overall reduction in the amount spent on training and development, the proportion spent on leadership development has increased. In line with its strategic priorities, the company will have a more consistent approach to leadership development across Europe with less country specific programmes. Interestingly Sony, like PwC, are planning to include Corporate and Social Responsibility projects in future leadership development programmes.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we highlight three major themes which have emerged in our review and which we believe are significant in terms of developing future leaders.

Given the increasing levels of ambiguity and complexity, it is now essential that leaders can manage the tensions which are inevitably present in organisational life. To manage these polarities between, e.g., creating an inspiring vision and managing costs, between regulatory requirements and pioneering new ways of serving customers, requires a high degree of sense making, of asking the right type of questions and most of all, having the humility to acknowledge the need to ask questions of others.
It takes a certain type of leader to inspire others with a sense of purpose inside and beyond the organisation. This is a critical foundation for building long-term trust and engagement. We believe this requires a level of authentic leadership, which is strongly rooted in the leader’s personal “signature”. The important feature here, we believe, is a transparent link between the leader’s values and what they say and do in practice. This in turn will align cultural norms and values within the organisation. The endgame is a situation where employees, shareholders and other key stakeholders begin to relate to the organisation and what it stands for, as well as rallying behind the leader. The model then potentially becomes a virtuous circle of success, with confidence in the leader leading to confidence in the organisation and so on.

The question then remains as to whether one can build this level of authenticity in future leaders’ change signatures or whether it is a personal characteristic, which is unique to the individual. We believe that it is possible to develop authenticity, though it takes a particular type of intervention to bring out this characteristic. In the case of PwC, it is about giving leaders the opportunity to make a difference in the third sector, to grapple with challenging social issues and to come face to face and relate to people who have none of their privileges. It is this very personal reaction to difficult social issues that is the pivotal point for personal insight and growth.

In Sony, the focus of the Senior Leadership Programme is on the leader’s impact at a number of different levels. This programme again reinforces the link between the individual leader, the context within which they are operating and the change signature by which they bridge the gap between their own sense of the world and the organisational view.

We have seen how both companies have anticipated the future needs of their leaders and have been bold in providing radical solutions, which remain ahead of their time. Since then the financial crisis has ensured that the content of the programmes is mainstreamed and of significant importance for the new business environment. The leaders themselves have to make sense of and shape their own worlds and create an engaging vision for the future, which people will want to be part of and help build.

As ever, our role as practitioners is to help leaders to develop a sense of their own identity and purpose and to motivate them to inspire others through their example.

References


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