

Six paradoxes of leadership: insights 1/7/22

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We are having to do our jobs and deliver results in a very complex and multifaceted environment caused by the rapid global change. The list of decision-making criteria has also become quite long. On the one hand, companies still focus on making a profit, but ESG matters often dictate a diametrically opposite approach. Change is inevitable and leaders must be able to benefit from various approaches that might initially seem conflicting and incompatible. In our [December edition of Flash News](#) we wrote about six paradoxes of leadership. This article explores them in detail.

Tech-savvy humanist

How do you become increasingly tech savvy and remember that organisations are run by people for people?

In a world where technology is taking over some of the jobs people used to do, it is crucial to assess what should be delegated to technology and what should be left to humans. The paradox lies in the fact that those who have been contributing to technological advance have failed to look through human eyes in many cases. And those looking from a human perspective have not always understood what effects might be achieved through technological advance.

Responsibility for solving technological problems has often been placed on IT teams, yet this approach is not really going to work any more. Technology is taking over practically every process in an organisation, from implementing innovations to customer service, production and back office, so leaders must be knowledgeable enough about how technology can help us. At the other end there are teams being affected by technology very directly. With a great deal of empathy, leaders must stay with their teams and engage them in all processes, as well as helping them to adapt and see the benefits. Our goal is to create a better future for people through technology.

Globally-minded localist

How do you navigate a world that is increasingly both global and local?

The technology environment has changed the world and wiped out many borders. This allows us to work with clients at various locations of the world and significantly increases the availability of labour.

Yet clients still want us to consider their individual needs and offer tailor-made solutions regardless of globalisation. So, despite operating globally, organisations must be able to adapt to their clients, social groups and local ecosystems they operate in.

High-integrity politician

How do you navigate the politics of getting things to happen and retain your character?

Today's environment requires constant interaction, and we have to be able to solve situations involving many stakeholders. This requires leaders to demonstrate truly diplomatic skills in the positive sense of this word – persuading, negotiating, working together, forming coalitions, finding compromises, overcoming

resistance and accruing support in implementing ideas, plus sometimes conceding to maximise future benefits.

There is another facet to this too. It is easy to lose your identity, beliefs and values along the road. Long-term success can be achieved by building trust and maintaining integrity in your beliefs and actions. A good practical example is customer data protection and processing – whether your organisation is open about how customer data is being used and whether the client is willing to confide in you.

Humble hero

How do you have the confidence to act in an uncertain world and the humility to recognise when you are wrong?

In this time of change, the world needs leaders who are capable of making brave and sound decisions. In the business space, for instance, these decisions may be related to changing a line of service, abandoning a business activity, or launching a new one. Yet considering the rapid change and many variables, the probability of making the wrong decision is high. If we are aware of this, then making big decisions is heroism, and even more so because the followers expect confidence, specific guidance and security from their leaders. It is important to note that confidence in this paradox has nothing to do with arrogance, an inability to admit mistakes, or unwillingness to accept the truth or to change the plan of action in the face of insurmountable obstacles.

Hence humility as the other side of the coin: an ability to ask for and accept help, to be aware that you just can't handle everything on your own, and to bring together people with a wide range of expertise in different fields. It is essential for a leader to create an inclusive environment and build a team encompassing a wide variety of experience, knowledge and skills. It is the diversity that allows us to learn and grow, taking the best from everyone.

Strategic executor

How do you execute effectively while also being highly strategic?

You must be able to think strategically in order to see future trends and your organisation's place in the new world and to see what it is going to be like, thereby creating advantages for your organisation. Yet strategic vision is not enough. Leaders have to find combined solutions to urgent problems, while transforming your organisation and leading it into the future. A successful strategy is based on a vision that is dynamically adapted to the changing environment during execution.

Coming back to the paradox, it is about finding a time balance between developing a strategy and tackling today's challenges from a future perspective to get everything done.

Traditioned innovator

How do you use the past to help direct your future success and build a culture that allows you to implement innovations, make mistakes, learn, and continue to grow?

In changing and turbulent times, it is important for the organisation to be aware of its nature, why it exists, what its goals, values and principles are that form the basis for creating added value.

At the same time, continuous innovation is a prerequisite for survival. Sometimes there is a great temptation to do things the old way, as usual and as has been successful in the past, thereby missing out on opportunities. The other side of this paradox is being innovative, creating new ideas, solutions and goals, and doing this faster than before. Leaders must have the courage to try out new things and possibly make a mistake or have their team make a mistake. Yet it is not about experimenting and running unreasonable risks because, for instance, innovation may be added to a ready solution. A leader has to figure out when we should keep the old thing and go forward and when we should create everything from scratch.

These paradoxes are certainly not the only ones, and we will probably be talking about others in the near future. It is both challenging and exciting to be a leader today. It is no coincidence that a leadership role in one of the paradoxes is indirectly equated with heroism.¹

¹ Sources used:

<https://hbr.org/2021/04/6-leadership-paradoxes-for-the-post-pandemic-era>,
<https://www.pwc.com/paradoxes>