

Leading Globally – What Makes A Successful Global Leader In Today’s Turbulent Times

Dr. Patrick Kim Cheng Low
Department Business and Management
University Brunei Darussalam
Gadong, Brunei

Abstract

Leadership, as the driving force of organizations, has played a vital role in every society, nation, profit or even non-profit organizations. We are now facing turbulent times, the credit crunch with recessionary pressures; and if we want business, company, national and regional growth, then we need resilient and capable leaders. Of great interest, in this paper, is the discussion of “What qualities or skills the leader should possess?”, and “How can the leader lead in today’s context?”. More specifically, we want to gather some insights on: “How can leaders build resilience in their work team/organizations in today’s tough times?”

Introduction

Warren Bennis, organizational consultant and author once said, “The truth is that no one factor makes a company admirable. But if you were forced to pick the one that makes the most difference, you’d pick leadership”. Indeed leadership as the driving force of organizations has played a vital role in every profit or non-profit organization, society and nation. It is about producing results and making the most out of people, and also the people are happy. If the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN] countries and companies want to be resilient, then it needs strong, able and resilient leaders.

Being resilient is about being able to produce and attain results – a high output while cutting costs, [meaning the organization is prudent in its spending] yet it maintains a high relationship, a high touch with its employees; employees retained and are in fact motivated and happy working in the organization. The organization makes progress and, in fact, emerges stronger, in spite of the recent stock market collapse, economic downturns and crisis faced.

Objective

The aim and objectives of this paper is to provide some answers to these questions: “What qualities or skills the leader should possess?” and “How can the leader lead successfully in today’s turbulent times?”

More specifically, we want to develop some insights on: “How can leaders build resilience in their work team/organizations in today’s tough times?”

**Key Quality/ Skill #1: Possessing A Global Mind Growth
& A Universal Heart of Caring for the People**

As mentioned in Low 2009, there would indeed be no progress when leaders stick to see their noses and not beyond. History has seen examples of it; a case in point is the 17th century Galileo’s championing of Copernicans’ view which was controversial within his lifetime. Though tried and regarded as a heretic during his lifetime, Galileo’s presentation of heliocentrism as proven fact resulted in much progress and later in the 21st century mankind’s landing on the moon and further exploration of space.

First and foremost, for the global leader to be successful, he/she needs to have a global mind growth (This author prefers the term ‘mind growth’ (Low 2000, 2006) rather than mindset as the former denotes mind expansion while the latter implies rigidity and/or a form of psychic prison); and what takes an ordinary leader extraordinary is when one shows extraordinary care and concern for the ordinary people.

Unlike the European Community with its common free trade area, ASEAN still lags behind. Besides, ASEAN needs to pull itself together further to grow in spite of the bad times. We need leaders with an ASEAN mind growth too, caring for the ASEAN peoples. Such leaders would also be servant leaders and would be helpful to give Asia the necessary boost in service. Interestingly, TIME magazine speaks of, “The end of customer service”, and “With a self-serve technology, you’ll never have to see a clerk again” (Kiviat 2008). However, one can argue that the human touch is always needed; and Asians and more specifically, ASEAN are well known for service – take the Thais for example, they are well known for “Land of ten thousand smiles” and Thai Airways, and Singapore for Singapore Airlines: SQ for its service excellence. In fact, all in all, the Bruneians, Burmese, Filipinos, Indonesians, Kampuchians, Laotians, Malaysians, Vietnamese and all ASEAN nationalities are known for their friendliness and gentle touch. Indeed so, customer service with human touch adds to the service leadership and can thus build the organization’s/ ASEAN’s competitive edge.

Caring for the people and spreading the milk of human kindness – is a global mind growth as well as ‘a universal heart’ which transcends racial, ethnic or national boundaries and barriers – is of paramount importance. Indeed, historically, leadership “that goes beyond the nation-state and seeks to address all human beings “has been the most important, but rarest and most elusive, variety of leadership” (Former United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Alder and Gundersen 2008).

A universal heart of caring for the people also means selling products and services with the customer’s needs in mind. One sells well when one sells products and services, meeting the customer needs. Sensitive

to the needs of their customers and buyers, the (sales) leaders do not go into high-pressure mode. Instead of being aggressive, they ask what they can do to help their customers GAIN or WIN. And being customer-focus, they do not waste time or targeting customers who aren't going to buy.

Implications and Insights: In times of unemployment and job cuts, leaders need to show compassion and assist their fellow workers as much as possible. There are enough troubles; they need to reduce their people's hardships as much as possible.

Besides, the company leaders should focus on their customers. CEOs should also talk to their customers. In a downturn or for that matter, in most times, if they are not talking to their customers, they are not doing their jobs. They should also be out to sell.

A downturn is also, in fact, a good opportunity to focus and invest on sales. Any company that cuts down its sales training or let alone any type of training is shooting itself in the foot. Customer-focus sales can bring returns to the company. Besides, training in a downturn can bring high dividends to the company in good times.

Key Quality/ Skill #2: Having the Necessary Competencies, Abilities and Emphasizing Meritocracy

Second, leaders must have the necessary competencies and abilities. Here, it should be noted that in a global economy, meritocracy is emphasized.

There is a Malay saying that goes, "Jika pandai menggunting, pandailah menjahitnya". Translated, it means "If you know how to cut the cloth with a pair of scissors, you know how to sew and finish it". Likewise, talent will rise to the top – regardless of where it is found and/ or whether it is local or foreigners as well as male or female. It is no longer men alone who lead, but rather women are also leading organizations and nations.

The most productive societies are those in which women are given opportunities to join the workforce. Indeed, tapping "women's work", "the female entrepreneurial spirit can pay big dividends" (Walt 2008). To promote economic growth and prosperity, ASEAN can encourage and take in more women leaders and have a diversity of human resources stressing on meritocracy.

Implications and Insights: Tapping the human potential and making full use of organization's resources can help the organization to pull through the tough time. The capable leaders know how to make full use or capitalize on the organization's existing assets or human capital.

Key Quality/ Skill #3: Having the Character or Ballast

Third, to be successful, leaders must have the character or ballast. They should be honest [meaning not bogus, non-deception and truthfulness] and also of the highest integrity. Integrity means the leader's words match with his actions. Ethical leadership must be held; ethics must be subscribed. Ethics is the basis of character; and "character is the essence of leadership" (Zenger and Folkman 2004). If there is no character or ethics, there can be no trust.

Why? Basically, the people's or the followers' trust needs to be (re)established and nurtured. Ethics is also becoming critical because of these other reasons and circumstances.

i. There is a growing emphasis on ethical reasoning and actions in which the public expects business to be ethical and wants corporate managers to apply ethical principles. The scandals, bribes, corruption, arrests, lawsuits and untold events must drop, if not, be eliminated. Events of recent years have certainly brought the issue of protecting the people and trust into the media headlines; examples include WorldCom, it faked nearly USD \$4 million in operating cash flow. Enron executives manipulated their financial statements (Robbins 2005). Before the Bank of America's 2008 takeover, Merrill Lynch paid USD \$100 million in fines for misleading investors.

ii. The people too increasingly expect business to be more responsible. Societal expectations of businesses' responsibilities are growing. People's Republic of China milk scare is serious, melamine is added to milk powder and animal feed to boost the protein content. Even eggs were affected and said to contain melamine (The Brunei Times 2008). Several brands of biscuits including Malaysia-made Julie and Khong Guan Assorted Biscuits, chocolates, non-dairy creamers, confectionery and other products that contain China dairy are found tainted with melamine (Wong 2008). As a result, dozens of places including Hong Kong, Canada, France and India have removed China dairy products from the shelf. Sad though, businesses should not be thinking of mere profit-making. Also, in the present tough economic time, companies are also expected to ensure that employees are not laid off just to fulfil the companies' needs. Employees' needs should be taken care of. Leaders, before they lay off employees, must ensure any retrenchment is done responsibly (Yong 2008).

iii. The defining challenge of the 21st century will be to face the reality that humanity shares a common fate on a crowded planet (Sachs 2008). Some of our natural resources such as oil, coal and gas; once used are gone forever. Human beings share a single planet and we need to ensure supplies and resources for our future generations; and the current state of our natural environment such as global warming, erratic climatic conditions powerfully impacts business-society relationship, and what more, business should do something or more with the natural environment. Corporate leaders and managers are thus increasingly challenged to integrate ecological considerations into their decisions.

iv. New technologies create ethical considerations. New technologies bring new equipment or gadgets, the Internet and even genetically modified, high yielding food, yet there are also threats including scams, online frauds, invasion of privacy, and internet pornography. Indeed, today's leaders must face many tough situations and handle ethical concerns.

Implications and Insights: Being ethical is a strategic move, it is more long-term. Being ethical builds honesty, integrity and trust. And as trust grows, indeed people, suppliers and customers would want to do business with such leaders and organizations; such leaders and organizations stand tall.

Key Quality/ Skill #4: Having Creative, Innovative and Refreshing Approaches to Solve Problems

Fourth, resilient leaders have to be creative, innovative, out-of-the-box and refreshing in their approaches to resolve today's problems. Leaders need to seek to improve things. In the recent G20 finance ministers meeting, they vowed to take "whatever actions is necessary" to pull the world out of recession (The Straits Times 2009).

Leaders can help to improve things through a number of ways such as raising revenues through capitalizing revolving credits or through factoring. To succeed as a global civilization in the 21st century, human ways of thinking about options and solutions need to be expanded to more prominently and explicitly include many things (for example, benchmarking, looking at best practices, private sector practices to be included in the public sector and vice versa).

Look at the recent layoffs, retrenchments and unemployment. In February 2009, Nissan announced its move to downsize after announcing a net loss after tax of USD \$860 million. The downsizing plan includes the retrenchment of 20,000 employees, eliminating bonuses for the board of directors and reducing their salaries by 10 percent and cutting down production by 20 percent (Kyung 2009). In these times as such, good corporate leaders can better the employees' jobs, ensuring that their employees still have their jobs, and/or working together with the unions for the employees' benefits. A further example is that of Toyota. This world car producer recently decided to shut down its plant for 14 days due to the slowdown in sales revenue. Instead of downsizing, this shutdown for 14 days was taken because Toyota wanted to avoid cutting jobs and to keep output in line with demand, in case it would rise again (Kyung 2009). Corporate leaders can do lateral thinking, also thinking of job sharing, shorter working week, flexible working hours, temporary layoff schemes, creative cost cutting and many other solutions rather than just axing the jobs or layoff employees. Indeed, they can also devise or come up with cheap and cheerful rewards to keep employees motivated and their morale high. For example, it was mentioned in Singapore newspaper that a confectionery chain, Polar has added more recreational activities such as watching motivational videos as well as having relay events and treasure hunts for its staff (Chew and Long 2008).

Good leaders are also open to new ideas (Zenger and Folkman 2004). They shower ideas with excitement and enthusiasm. The leaders should improve on everything and sell. During a downturn, the leaders have to simply improve on people, process, sales and technology. Improved sales revenue can put the company back on its feet.

When leaders also allow their people to think aloud and good ideas get implemented and the organization grows. Conversely, when good ideas and solutions fail to get implemented and ideas are squashed, people feel ignored and their contribution undervalued. They stop thinking about doing better things. The organization stagnates.

Implications and Insights: You can't sell the way you sell three months ago. Improvement on everything and sales can help the company in a down economy.

Thinking laterally can also help to resolve today's tough issues. Job sharing and other ways of cost cutting are adopted while gainfully employing and deploying the employees. While cutting costs, airline companies, for example, can adopt creative marketing strategies and different pricing (ranging from zero dollars to high end pricing) for different target audiences to survive and move ahead. The employees, motivated and productive, are still able to keep their jobs while the company becomes lean but not mean. The organization still looks after welfare and wellbeing of the employees.

Key Quality/ Skill #5: Being Positive

Fifth, being positive helps people to weather the storm, building resilience in both leadership and organization. In spite of the economic downturn, ASEAN alphas need to be positive; they seek to create a positive future ("tough times will come to an end"), and in fact, a positive future must exist. The rainbow appears after the rain. Our leaders should be thinking and working along that line.

The leaders also see the employees as capable of self-direction and willing to take responsibility; McGregor's theory Y is applied. Being positive helps the organization to resolve conflicts and soothe out frictions while creating harmonious relationships. It also helps to drive fear out of the work place.

Father (parental) leadership (Low 2006) is also applied. Here, it is very much an Asian characteristic. In ASEAN, in such collectivistic societies and culture (Low 2008), the family is a valued institution and here, the leaders create families out of their work teams, producing both results as well as enjoying good relationships.

Implications and Insights: Being positive is helpful as it drives fear out of the workplace. You Can Work Your Own Miracles. The absence of fear, and not formal education or brilliance of mind, is the major cause of individual success (Hill 1971). The true key to success is the absence of fear. That's a state of mind that anyone can achieve – a culture that the winning organization needs to create.

Feeling positive also helps to minimize stress and work pressures among the employees. A positive organization creates a positive workforce, they own and are involved. Being motivated, they know that their destiny lies with the businesses.

Key Quality/ Skill #6: Co-operating and Collaborating

Sixth, to succeed, leaders must have high social intelligence. Here, they need to have necessary social skills and these include co-operating and collaborating. Excellent leaders “look to collaborate rather than compete” (Zenger and Folkman 2004). They are good in teams, working well with their people and others (Low 2003).

ASEAN in particular needs to send a clear message to the world that ASEAN is open for business. We are strengthening and deepening our regional integration (Lee 2009 cited in Bangkok Post 2009). The ASEAN-plus-three countries in Asia (China, Japan and South Korea) have made a regional self-help in case of any mishap, where we will rally together and save one another or at least render a helping hand to one another. By itself it will not be enough of course because our resources are limited. Beyond that there has to be international organizations (including) the International Monetary Fund.

All these underscore the fact that “National interests aren't what they used to be. Our survival requires global solutions” (Sachs 2008). Singapore and Malaysia foreign ministers, for a further example, have already affirmed the importance of working together to deal with global credit crunch (Suhaimi 2008). Besides, “at a time like this when we expect retrenchments on both sides (Malaysia and Singapore), it is especially important that we find ways to work together.” (Singapore Foreign Minister cited in Suhaimi, 2008).

An additional example is the Heart of Borneo (HOB) Project. Three (ASEAN) countries – Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia – are coming together and working to conserve the pristine tropical rainforests of the Borneo Island.

Successful leaders collaborate and develop strong teams while cultivating their team members' ability to work with diverse people. They also see others through the positive visor, and when it comes to negotiations, win-win solutions are sought. Strategic alliances are formed. Co-operation and synergies are

also tapped; for example, the synergy between countries, and also that between the public sector and private sector are harnessed.

Humankind should be determined to create a successful world. Interestingly, the then United Nations' Secretary General Kofi Annan when in office once urged business leaders to become co-creators of society's well-being. "Let us choose to write the power of markets with the strengths of universal ideals... let us choose to reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the requirements of future generations." (United Nations' Secretary General Kofi Annan cited in Alder and Gundersen 2008)

All of us want to create and maintain a peaceful, prosperous, equitable and sustainable society that succeeds. There is a need for greater cooperation to create a better world. There is a need to tap the synergy and strengths of the various people coming from various nations.

Implications and Insights: Cooperation, collaboration and synergy – together even achieve more in the face of hard times. The organization makes full use of its resources, especially of its human capital.

Team spirit along with a high-level of collaboration makes the organization flexible and adaptable, and hence, be able to meet the changes that it faces during the difficult time.

Quality/ Skill #7: Being Culturally Sensitive and Empathetic

Seventh, part of social intelligence mentioned earlier is being culturally sensitive and empathetic. Leading multicultural teams, our leaders have to be culturally sensitive while tapping the synergy, building much teamwork and cooperation among the diverse people they lead. Regional (global) diverse teams can present enormous problems but leaders have to bridge language, culture and distance gaps. Countries and cities are, in fact, becoming cosmopolitan and companies are becoming nationality-diverse. ASEAN leaders today really need to inspire and lead people from a range of very different cultures; their followers too can be diverse, of very different backgrounds and cultures. Being cultural sensitive also enables leaders to build a common ground, and they are able to close ranks to overcome the economic difficulties.

Implications and Insights: Being culturally sensitive enables the organization, mentally prepared and value geared, to undergo fewer shocks, and these shocks are, in fact, of lesser impact.

Concluding Remark

Leaders just have to grow their teams as companies. Organizations and nations have to look for various ways to harness knowledge and respond faster to overcome difficult times. The overall challenge here is not only to design fresh and innovative approaches, maintaining high output/ sales and high touch with both

employees and customers alike, but also creating or having successful work teams/ units, resilient companies, and successful societies.

Reference

Alder, Nancy J. and Gundersen, Allison, 2008, *International dimensions of organizational behavior*, Thomson South-Western, 5th edition, USA.

Bangkok Post 2009, "Exclusive Interview with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong", <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asian/136919/exclusive-interview-with-singapore-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong>. Accessed on March 10.

Bhasin, Balbir B. and Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2002, "The Fight for Global Talent: New Directions, New Competitors", *Career Development International*, The MCB University Press, U.K. in association with the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, Vol. 7 No. 2, May, p. 109 – 114. (www.emeraldinsight.com/1362-0436.htm)

Chew, Cassandra and Long, Susan, 2008, "How Good Firms Treat Workers in a Downturn", *The Straits Times*, November 22, p. A24.

Hill, Napoleon, 1971, *Think and grow rich*, Fawcett Publications, USA.

James, Geoffrey, 2008, "How to Sell in a Down Economy, Part 1", *BNET Insight*, Nov 20, <http://blogs.bnet.com/salesmachine/?p=616&tag=nl.e808>. Accessed November 21.

Kiviat, Barbara, 2008, "The End of Customer Service", *TIME*, March 24, p. 34.

Kyung, Lah, 2009, "Toyota Extends Plant Shutdown", CNN Website: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/BUSINESS/01/06/toyota/index.html>. Accessed March 4.

Lawrence, Anne T. and Weber, James, 2008, *Business & Society*, McGraw-Hill Irwin, USA.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2009, "How to Lead In Today's Context?", *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Management*, Issue 1, p. 48 -56.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2008, "Father Leadership – The Malaysian Perspective", *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Management*, Issue 1, p. 75 - 95.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2008, "Father Leadership with Special Reference to Negara Brunei Darussalam", E-Leader, Chinese American Scholars Association: CASA, Krakow, Poland. 9 – 11 June. Also, presented the same paper in Faculty of Economics, Business & Policy Studies (FBEPS), University Brunei Darussalam, August 9.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2006, 'Father Leadership – the Singapore Case Study', *Management Decision*, Emerald Insight, Vol. 44 Issue 2, March, p. 89 - 104.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2006, *Strategic Customer Management*, Caspian Publishing House, Kazakhstan.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2003, *Team Success*, BusinesscrAFT Consultancy & Humber Lincoln Resources: Singapore.

Low, Patrick Kim Cheng, 2000, *Strategic Customer Management*, BusinesscrAFT Consultancy: Singapore.

Robbins, Stephen P., 2005, *Organizational behavior*, Pearson Prentice Hall, 11th edition, USA.

Sachs, Jeffrey D., 2008, "Common Wealth: Ten Ideas That Are Changing in the World", *TIME*, March 24, p. 27 – 43.

Suhaimi, Nur Dianah, 2008, "Singapore and Malaysia Stress Ties", *The Sunday Times*, November 9, p. 14.

The Brunei Times, 2008, "Ministry Recalls Food Products of Three Brands", *The Brunei Times*, September 18, p.2

The Brunei Times, 2008, "Ban on China's Milk Products", *The Brunei Times*, September 21, pps. 9-10.

The Straits Times, 2009, "G20 Vows to Revive Growth", *The Straits Times*, March 14, p.1.

Walt, Vivienne, 2008, "Women's Work. Tapping The Female Entrepreneurial Spirit Can Pay Dividends", *TIME* March 24, p. 42.

Wong, Tessa, 2008, "Twenty More Products Found Tainted with Melamine", *The Straits Times*, October 25, p. B1.

Yong, Debbie, 2008, "Bosses, Before You Layoff Staff", *The Sunday Times*, November 16, p. 2.

Zenger, John H. and Folkman, Joseph, 2004, *The handbook for leaders*, USA: McGraw-Hill.