



Adapting to adversity

How to evolve your leadership style and engage fit-for-purpose executives

by Carolyn Lutz and Nick Harris

Einstein famously said that “education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school”.

The requirements for success in today’s digital and disrupted business environment are increasingly different to those elements of success which many of the Baby Boomer and Generation X age groups took for granted. Reflecting on the dialogue with Frits van Paasschen, as well as the hundreds of conversations with business owners and leaders we have conducted over the past five years, we offer a collection of checklist ideas on how leaders can remain effective (and grounded) – as well as find their place – amid the apparent chaos.

Alleviate the negative influences and harness the positive effects

- Embrace the challenge: accept that being a leader will stretch and challenge you, and that you will grow as a result.
- Overcome your biases: question long-held assumptions, get the facts, seek out new information, get fresh perspectives.
- Look outside: reach beyond your normal circle of acquaintances, reach across borders and be a citizen of the world; this is a chance to build new partnerships (and perhaps even friendships).
- Change is natural: understand and accept that your behaviour and viewpoints may change, and that this behavioural shift is a natural response that does not have to be negative.



- Mindfulness not mindlessness: be mindful of your situation and the world around you, focus on the essentials and prioritise your actions. Don't succumb to analysis-paralysis; make a decision and move forward.
- Harness the "power of failure": recognise that mistakes are inevitable and, rather than regard them as failures, view them as necessary, evolutionary steps along the road to success. Learn and re-learn.
- "Don't waste a good crisis": recognise that challenges are also opportunities (for career steps, personal development, step changes in performance), and change management may be easier to initiate and drive through in bad times than in good.
- Agility, agility, agility: fast-moving and unpredictable times require different individual and organisational qualities such as the ability to generate new knowledge and codify that learning, to be flexible and adaptable.
- Mission critical: discover – and communicate – your own personal sense of mission; use it to foster not just a culture of performance but a culture of purpose in your team.
- Share the burden: "command-and-control" leadership is increasingly unfit for purpose. Consciously strive against a tendency to want to micro-manage; empower your team and practice collective decision-making instead.
- Complement one another: build teams which are complementary – in terms of diversity of thinking as well as background – not identikit. Break down silos and "not-made-here" thinking. Raise functional leaders (such as the CHRO) onto the ExCom and develop them as true business partners to the commercial managers.

Hire for new skill-sets (but old-school values)

When hiring or promoting, leaders need to assess candidates' skillsets, experiences and competencies, not just against existing requirements but also evolving trends and future goals. They also need to look deeper at the individual – gauge how they perceive and cope with change, understand their mind-set, uncover their inherent traits and drivers.

- Character: look for "strength of character"; a good work ethic, determination, grit, resilience (both physical and mental); emotional maturity; and (last but not least) a sense of humour.
- Values: what are their intrinsic values; from what do they derive purpose; what do they hold true to from their family and upbringing; how do they behave in moments of adversity.
- Intellectual curiosity: this is a critical determinant of future potential; look for a sincere belief in (lifelong) learning and sharing of knowledge, a willingness to make mistakes as part of an improvement process, an ability to see the big picture and connect the dots.



- **Agility:** probe for evidence of adaptability, flexibility, and comfort with ambiguity. Ask what they have done in their career that was truly new, ground-breaking or entrepreneurial.
- **Results orientation:** inner drive and a “restlessness for results”; individuals who challenge themselves to do more and do it better.
- **Breadth:** assess an individual’s range of experience and diversity of exposure: e.g. digital and traditional channels, mature and developing markets, existing and emerging product categories. Monochrome careers are a red flag.
- **Internationality:** interconnected businesses require well connected and networked ‘citizens of the world’ who bring internationality of experience, take a global perspective and can demonstrate the ability to leverage geographically dispersed teams.

Find your fit

For senior executives contemplating the next step on their career and development journey, it is also more important than ever to find the right corporate home. When assessing the merits and challenges of joining a new company or business, leaders should seek to understand not just where but also how they will fit into the organisation. Critical questions to pose include:

- Is there an alignment of mission and values between you and the Board / owner?
- What is the company ethos and the purpose beyond ‘just’ making money? If the company is a family business, does the next generation share the same sense of purpose?
- Do they have the necessary long-term thinking – and funding – to support new ventures?
- Entrepreneurial spirit: what is their appetite for risk? How quickly can they move? How much freedom and autonomy do they give to their managers?
- Perspectives on change: how are decisions made? How comfortable is the organisation when “sacred cows” are challenged, or existing business processes and models questioned? How have previous change management programmes fared?
- Will you be given the necessary time (and help) to integrate into, and learn about, the new organisation?
- What (realistically) are your chances to succeed?
- Last but not least, what will you learn with this organisation that you wouldn’t learn anywhere else?

And to quote Einstein again: “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.”



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