

# Sustainable Leadership and Work Environment: Improving Human Potentials

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**Abstract:** Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is shared responsibility, that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. In fact, sustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future. Sustainable leadership is one of the most valued characteristics that employers and stakeholders are looking for, especially in this new fast changing market. Having a good Leadership sense is essential for the success of a company and for its collaborative working environment. Leadership is usually linked with sustained learning, success, diversity, capacity and maintaining a continuous development of other team members and coworkers. However, various authors are debating and discussing how we define good and sustainable leadership and what we expect from a leader to do, but few of them are raising the question how we can build and create leaders?. We present in this paper an overview of leadership definition and the challenges set by this important and complex concept. We propose a vision based on four pillars to create an adequate environment to build leaders. We present and describe our perspective on what we need to provide and establish as a company or a community in order to create an effective team of leaders in the perspective of the new requirements of the market and the expectations of companies.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Workspace; Work Environment; Collaboration; Innovation; Creativity

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## 1. Introduction

A leader is a complex word that could be defined differently according to various factors such as cultural environment and background. We expect from leaders to have various characteristics to drive change and continuous improvement. Usually, we links leadership with education and "life/work" experience but are a high education level and a well known university degrees enough to make someone a leader?

Every leader is expected to manage followers and create an efficient team to build and execute successful projects. However, a leader should have some characteristics and qualities that enable him or her to achieve the required objectives and develop the team straight. There is a difference between a leader and a good leader, so to be qualified as a good one requires a long road of self awareness and development. Among the characteristics that a good leader should have and be: *Honest, Delegates, communicates, have confidence, have a sense of commitment, adapt a positive attitude, Creative, Inspires people, Have Empathy, Focus and Driven ...etc.*

Various authors and international leaders were asked to define good leadership; there answers are divided into two categories:

- A good decision making, management and analysis  
*"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." – John C. Maxwell*  
*"Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." – Peter Drucker*
- A high sense of human approach, inclusion, and sacrifice.  
*"It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership." – Nelson Mandela*

Good Leadership is considered a factor X. Something that could not be mentored or learned in schools. It is mysterious ingredient that is developed by experience or existing by nature in the essence of a human being. It is usually linked with the human potentials that enable him to be successful and make a difference but is there a way to build leaders and what are the methods to implement to create a sense of leadership in an employee? Is it a process that could be implemented in the company or should it be a philosophy implemented since the childhood?

When we consider and treat a leader as a follower, we are turning them into individuals with no sense of development of the necessary independence, strength, and personal accountability for them to lead others.

According to Tom Searcy, "There is a difference between leading people through someone and leading someone who is leading others".

## 2. The adequate environment

In my opinion, the leadership "sense" should be a philosophy and included in the cultural environment of a person since his childhood. However, it is not too late to build a leader and develop the potentials of a human being in his adult life to become a good leader. The first step for a person to become a leader is to be aware of his strength, flaws and hidden potentials that need improvement. Moreover, in order to create leaders, we should create an adequate environment for them to enhance their potentials. We can define the optimal environment in four pillars:

- **Clear guidance, rules and territory (borders):** Rules and Borders are an effective way to create a safe environment of exchange and command. Leaders need to work in clarity concerning their responsibilities, borders of command and interference. A clear defined territory is useful to create a respectful workspace, however it is difficult to implement and usually borders of responsibilities get mixed and it is one of the good leader qualities to find a solution and move toward a well structured environment.
- **Objectives vs. performance:** One of the well known and expected characteristics of a leader is to find creative and effective solutions to difficult problems. Leaders need to have big challenges that exceed their potentials and performance in order to put them under the scope and correct their weaknesses. Moreover, setting objectives bigger than the performance level of a leader or a group of leaders represents a motivation starter and encourage engagement and commitment. According to Searcy: If the goal is the size of their own talent and personal effort, you are treating them like as followers and you risk them shrinking to that size.
- **A permanent development:** Continuous Improvement and a dynamic development is a requirement for companies in order to achieve their goals and become a strong competitor, especially in this difficult changing market. So in order to create leaders, we should permanently increase their performance and knowledge through challenges, training and coaching. However, leaders do not need permanent coaching, they should have the ability to coach themselves and find their own solutions.
- **Time management:** Building strong leaders requires having the capability to achieve goals faster than what others believe is possible. This strategy of creating due dates that are challenging the reasonable is a source of harnessing creativity, diligence, perseverance and leadership.

## 3. Collaboration, creativity and moderation as leadership pioneers

Collaboration is one of the main ingredients for success. Business owners' value collaboration, in fact, it is one of

the characteristics that managers want in an employee. According to the Economist, a recent study by the Financial Times shows a high impact of collaboration quality in the recruitment decision.

"Employers want from MBA graduates found that the ability to work in a team, to work with a wide variety of people and to build, sustain and expand a network of people were three of the top five skills that managers are looking for"

However, it should be a careful approach since it could be viewed as double edge weapon. Leaders should have to balance the merits of collaboration and teamwork to have a protection from the danger of a "groupthink". Nowadays, Modern technology did make collaboration easier and more frequent. Team members are constantly in touch via e-mail, group messengers or mobile calls. This new way of collaboration can be the start point of common thinking which is resulting in the death of the creative spirit of the team and its members. Leaders should work toward creating a collaborating environment that encourages creativity and individualism.

When it comes to idea generation, giving team members space to reflect and think in order to find a solution is an effective approach and a good idea. Keeping collaboration to a certain limit can have a positive impact on the project and create a good leadership environment. In fact, according to a paper by the Economist, most people have benefited from a colleague's brainwave or wise advice to avoid a particular course of action.

Leadership skills and collaboration are highly valued and can be defined in three factors. According to Thomas Malone of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Superminds\*, book), collective intelligence of collaboration can be the results of:

- Social intelligence: how good people were at rating the emotional states of others ;
- The extent to which members took part equally in conversation: the more equal, the better ;
- The proportion of women in the group: the higher, the better.

\* Groups ranked highly in these areas co-operated far better than others.

However, collaboration does not mean the absence of leadership and hierarchical responsibility in the team. Close teamwork may be vital for successful projects and a creative environment, but at the top someone has to make a decision. In this perspective, giving a sense of co-leadership creates uncertainty over who is really in charge. Collaboration and moderation is the key for a good leadership.

## 4. Shaping leaders: Innovation and disruption

Creativity and innovation are becoming a principle to live by for businessmen and businesswomen. Various companies and entrepreneurs want to be creative and innovative. The reason behind this creative force and mania is due to the need of change, development and differentiation from the competitors. Everybody wants to be different, invent new form of life and conquer the world with it. However creativity or innovation are difficult to achieve and cannot be reduced to a competition for originality. According to Scaltsas creativity is considered as an art, it should not be represented in a competitive or productive form<sup>[3]</sup>.

The motivating factor for creativity is the pursuit of a better life and the search of more harmonious, fulfilling, fun communities and societies. The process of innovation varies from one person to another, but it starts always with the problem and the way to see the natural law, extract the problematic and ask the right questions. Once the good problem is correctly formulated and the right questions are asked, the world is becoming a new place rich with blossoming opportunities. According to Albert Einstein, *"if I had one hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes"*<sup>[4]</sup>.

According to Mckinsey survey and research report, 70 percent of senior executives think that innovation will drive the growth of their companies. However, 65 percent are generally disappointed in the ability and competence to stimulate innovation and they lack confidence in making key-decisions in this area.

Businessmen, companies and organizations are facing today the quick changing digitized world. The challenges

have risen to consist on dual problem:

*Companies are under the pressure of functioning effectively and sustain a profitable business model while also incorporating the disruptive innovations that will to sustain their competitive force in the future.*

In fact, a creative process and an innovative thinking have to be considered in the strategy of the modern management and leadership. So in order to achieve this 'dualism', organizations have to manage the dynamics of innovation and leadership. The innovation process should be diversified and involves disruptive, sustaining innovation and a high leadership spirit.

In this perspective, leaders must be concerned with financial success and the long term strategies in order to keep up with future technical advancements. These concerns should be simultaneously analyzed and developed. The process of an innovative thinking and a futuristic vision is based on the creation of a structure and a culture that emphasize contradictory and inconsistent factors. The role of a leader is to encourage this process among the company and his team. It should be powered and fostered in order to create an efficient and reliable working climate. This new working method creates the perfect environment for experimenting and exploring the hidden factors and criteria of the present and the future sustainability.

It is not easy for leaders to achieve a combination between the sustaining and disruptive innovation. In general this dual objective generates an important disagreement when the company is operating in an extremely competitive environment. In fact, under the pressure of daily obligations and requirements, the leader must take into consideration different perspectives and factors involving resource allocations, strategy management and competitive projects.

In this tight working climate, the differentiation between the important project, technologies for immediate needs and those that might be in the future is difficult to make, especially under the strong financial and environmental pressure<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Leadership is complex concept that is changing through time and place. However, the leadership "sense" or "skill" [as many authors and thinkers are considering and defining it] is essential for the survival of a company or an organization. Nowadays, building leaders and creating a pro-leadership environment is important and vital. Senior executives, stakeholders and decision makers should actively encourage and model innovative behavior in the workspace in order to establish a supportive environment that encourages leadership and creativity. In my opinion, the characteristics of an environment that is surrounding a human being is the most important contributor in defining, stimulating and enhancing his potentials and behavior toward excellence and continuous improvement. A number of practical steps should be taken in order to create a sustainable workspace:

- Structuring and defining the kind of leadership and innovation that drives growth and helps meet strategic objectives (vision of a community, company or organization).
- Adding innovation to the formal agenda at regular leadership meetings to stimulate the creative behavior of the employees and operators.
- Evaluating and monitoring are essential keys. It is important to set performance metrics and targets for human potentials enhancement and driving innovative behavior.

In general, a network that respects diversity and encourages the "thinking out of the box" behavior is fundamental for the leadership spirit in the workspace. Believing in and improving human potentials is the Key to building sustainable leadership and creating a disruptive working environment.

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