

DUBAI GLOBAL CONVENTION 2016
26th World Congress on
LEADERSHIP FOR BUSINESS EXCELLENCE & INNOVATION
&
Presentation of Golden Peacock Awards
19 - 21 April 2016, The Meydan Hotel, Dubai (UAE)

Theme:

Empowering Boards to become Instruments of Innovation & Excellence

Over half a century ago Peter Drucker (1969) wrote about the age of discontinuity and put the case for innovation and entrepreneurship. Many of today's organisations - and mankind generally - face such a combination of challenges that survival cannot be taken for granted (Harari, 2014). Greater creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship are required. Corporate leadership has to become more challenging, creative, open and transformational. New business and lifestyle models are required.

There is an extensive and growing literature on the qualities one needs to be an effective leader, but isn't effectiveness in the role more about what leaders do, how they cope with challenges and address opportunities and the impact they have, rather than the sort of people they are? Isn't it possible for individuals with a wide range of personal qualities and personality types to be successful leaders if they do the right things in the situation they are in? Do we need to empower boards or encourage directors to involve, engage, empower, enable and support others?

Is a focus upon the personal qualities of leaders actually dangerous when more people need to be involved in addressing problems and seizing opportunities and particular qualities may or may not be relevant, appropriate or desirable depending upon the situation and context? When inappropriate they can alienate people, divide people and create rivalries between people. Is too much emphasis also sometimes put upon leadership potential? Without motivation it may remain latent. Without the engagement, involvement and support of others it may be ineffective or even irrelevant. Potential also needs to relate to opportunity which may be in a state of flux.

Invariably the focus is upon leaders rather than followers or the led. Courses and books on how to be a good follower do not draw the crowds. Few young and ambitious people dream of becoming followers. While lateral thinking skills might contribute to more imaginative solutions (Sloane, 2003), should the focus of leaders be upon ensuring such skills are deployed by people for whom they are responsible, rather than upon acquiring them for their own use? Should potential leaders focus more upon developing others? Courses and coaching emphasise how to motivate, monitor and inspire others rather than how to listen, help and support or engage, share and build relationships.

Excellence and the Board

What sort of leadership should the board provide in relation to business excellence and areas such as innovation, quality and sustainability? What does excellence mean in the contemporary business environment and in relation to the board's own performance? Should boards be more externally focused and concerned with relevance, sustainability and value or learning, flexibility and rapid responses as opposed to obsessing over short-term profit? How should we assess and judge excellence, for example against a standard model produced in the past, or against issues, challenges and opportunities currently facing our organizations and how we are responding or should respond?

Do we need to excel at everything as some business excellence enthusiasts suggest, or should we just aim to excel at remaining relevant and vital, renewal and the critical success factors for building key relationships and landing strategically significant contracts, while being “good enough” elsewhere? Will customers be prepared to pay for us to be excellent in areas that do not directly affect them? In relation to areas such as change, knowledge and talent management are considerations such as relevance, speed and affordability more important than “excellence”?

Can “excellence” as it is widely adopted in terms of documented and enforced corporate-wide standard models and approaches be an obstacle to diversity, the creative exploration of alternatives and innovation? There are questions directors can ask to help people challenge norms, break free of dull uniformity, transcend traditional limitations and create new options and choices (Coulson-Thomas, 2001). Are we casting the net widely enough in our search for solutions when so many breakthroughs are caused by relative outsiders who challenge complacent orthodoxy (Kuhn, 1962)?

Reviewing Excellence

Is it time we reviewed what we and others mean by “excellence” and the areas covered by models relating to the excellence journey? For example, what about sustainability or considerations relating to disability, inclusion and the environment? Are existing discussions, approaches and models too preoccupied with getting it right for particular organisations as opposed to a value or supply chain? What about relationships between people, groups and organisation, partnering and partnerships, and cooperation, co-creation and collaboration?

The value and potential of partnering has been identified from both a sales and purchasing perspective (Hurcomb, 1998; FitzGerald, 2000). Why are so many business leaders defensive, closed and reluctant to trust and empower, even when they and their people deal with those who have shared interests? Far too often front-line sales and purchasing staff engage in a battle of wits, each trying to gain advantage in what is perceived as a zero-sum game when by working together they might be able to co-create a solution that is more advantageous to both parties.

Do people considerations within business excellence models need to change? For example, are managers preoccupied with getting more out of people for the benefit of an employing organisation rather than with recruiting, retaining and working with talented people? When recruiting, should they put more emphasis upon what joining the organisation might do for those they are targeting? In the UK, a survey by High Fliers Research (2016) has found that university graduates are increasingly choosy when it comes to employment and are leaving larger numbers of top jobs unfilled. Are companies repelling the very people their futures depend upon?

Innovation, Business Models and the Board

Should the focus be upon creating a culture of excellence and innovation and/or providing the conditions and performance support for people from a diversity of backgrounds and cultures to excel where it matters? How does one encourage, unleash and support innovation across an organisation and its value chain, and ensure there are synergies between strategy, entrepreneurship and innovation? Do board agendas, corporate priorities and approaches to management, leadership and governance need to make more explicit reference to creativity and the stimulation, enabling and harnessing of creativity? Innovation is the result of creativity that leads to something that is adopted and which can hopefully be monetized. It is a result and creativity is the cause.

A board should pay particular attention to a company's business model. How should directors and corporate leaders set about building more innovative, entrepreneurial and sustainable business models? What are the governance implications? How might one achieve more innovation and

entrepreneurship in governance itself, including in terms of relating it to the situation, requirements and stage of development of particular enterprises? What might approaches to corporate governance better reflect the changing nature of organizations and the contemporary business environment?

The UK's Companies Act (2006) requires a description of a company's business model and strategy as part of the Strategic Report within its Annual Report. The Financial Reporting Council's UK corporate governance code describes the required business model as “an explanation of the basis on which the company generates or preserves value over the longer term” (FRC, 2014). To report on a company's business model directors need to understand it and should be prepared to question and discuss whether an existing model is appropriate and adequate and whether better models exist.

Having just invested heavily in an existing way of operating a board may find itself presented with an alternative business model which offers significant advantages for the customer. Where the suggestion originates from within a board might be tempted to delay, but this course of action might result in a competitor or new player acting more quickly to secure first mover advantage. Sometimes directors need to be courageous and proactive when engaging in the creative destruction economist Joseph Schumpeter (1942) describes in his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

Leadership and Human Capital

Human capital has topped the list of issues of concern to CEOs (Conference Board, 2015). A priority for many boards is to ensure their companies have the human, financial and technological resources to achieve their corporate visions and goals. Many boards also face human capital challenges such as achieving greater diversity and raising productivity, while teamwork and group dynamics can be an issue at all levels across an organisation.

Leaders are expected to maximise the value of an organisation's human capital and to get more and as much as they can from the team of people for whom they are responsible. Selection committees look for whether candidates for leadership roles have “people skills” and a “people orientation”. However, can a company be over invested in human capital as opposed to expenditure on technology or moving activities on-line? Can one be too people oriented? What is the role of human capital in the face of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic revolutions (Ford, 2015; Kaplan, 2015)?

We all assume human capital is a good thing, but humans can be expensive, variable in their performance and not always reliable and motivated. Are there better alternatives? How many HR professionals are so preoccupied upon recruitment, employment and disciplinary issues that they have little time to consider the interface of people and technology and trade-offs between them? Is the combination of people and technology the key to increasing productivity and operational excellence? Artists are very focused on engagement and impact. They want to be noticed and to reach people and encourage them to question. They are often both ruthless and insightful in critiquing their own and each others work, trashing what they have done and starting again. Should companies be recruiting MFAs rather than MBAs as Daniel Pink (2004) suggests?

The Digital Economy

Just as some stars of silent films failed to survive the introduction of sound, so not all leaders may adapt to the requirements for excellence, innovation and success in the digital economy. Are these requirements sufficiently stressed in leadership development courses? Are business excellence and other models and approaches also too preoccupied with people considerations? Boards need to ensure relevant people within their companies are equipped and supported to adopt, integrate and benefit from greater connectivity, and big data, knowledge and information management systems and provided with the 24/7 performance support they need to stay current and address new

challenges and opportunities wherever and whenever they arise (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & 2013).

Available and affordable digital technologies and capabilities are rapidly evolving and many of their applications have the potential to be disruptive and terminal for unaware or disinterested laggards. Developments in information and communication technologies in areas ranging from design tools to gamification have implications for the innovation process, the design, development, communication and support of new products and services and relationships with customers, partners and users. They can transform public services (Coulson-Thomas, 2012b; Dunne, 2016) What will the implications of the digital economy be for leadership, organization and governance?

What can leaders do to create more honest organisations and to ensure that the right people are given credit for their individual and collective contributions? Digital checks be used to uncover cases of plagiarism. Integrity and honesty need to be recognised and rewarded and practices such as cheating need to be outlawed. This can be a challenge where it is widespread and people may have come to view cheating as a way of getting ahead and they might consider themselves to be disadvantaged without it (Craig, 2014).

Addressing Sectoral Issues and Learning from other Sectors and Markets

Business leaders and boards should be aware of any sectoral issues. In some sectors, the implications of various challenges and opportunities are uncertain. For example, in relation to financial services will traditional banks and their branch networks continue to be relevant? In an era of crowd sourcing, AI and automated and on-line transactions do we actually need banks as we know them today? Are regulatory and licensing practices preventing a revolution in banking?

Applications of technology to enhance agility, improve productivity, drive performance, support innovation and mitigate and manage operational, strategic and governance risks can vary by sector. So can aspirations, requirements and expectations. Continuing awareness is needed as to what customers and users might consider to be excellent and innovative. Could the business community learn from the approaches and practices of creative artists? For example, in the performing arts in the place of rigid rules and standard and prescribed responses, there may be scope for interpretation. In the case of Jazz, improvisation and creativity may be actively encouraged (Barrett, 1998).

Some business leaders and boards could do more to learn from applications, developments and innovations in other sectors and markets. Are there approaches in other sectors or more cost-effective, adaptable and flexible business models that could be adopted? Listening to the case study presentations by award winners such as the winners of Golden Peacock awards for Business Excellence and Innovation is one way of learning from other sectors.

Practices from different contexts may or may not be relevant and/or easy to adopt. How relevant are developments in Europe, North America and the Middle East for other parts of the world such as Asia and Africa? Outcomes can be very dependant upon the context. For example, Dubai has made great strides in certain areas, such as with its hub airport and e-Government services, but in terms of population and size it is a small Emirate. Billions of people in Asia and Africa are in a very different place, both physically and metaphorically.

The Context of Leadership

Early investigations of leadership explored what it meant in particular contexts, whether the leadership of military units or the leadership of business organisations, and looked for common elements (Adair, 1973). However, there are other arenas in which leadership issues might arise. For example, what form of leadership is required and from whom in relation to educational institutions,

vocational bodies and professional associations and firms? What different forms of leadership might be exercised within an operating theatre? What does leadership mean within the creative arts?

Aspects of leadership can be handled differently, depending upon the context. In the world of higher education, while a Vice-Chancellor and his or her team may be influential in business decisions, key academic decisions are likely to be taken by an academic board. Are there lessons here for companies, particularly those operating in knowledge dependent arenas? What can boards and the governing bodies of universities learn from how directors and leaders of professional firms and/or knowledge-based businesses operate and vice versa?

Who is leadership for? A university board might feel responsible for the interests of alumni as well as those of staff, students and the institution itself. Within company boardrooms directors have various duties and responsibilities. They need to balance the contending interests of multiple stakeholders, in addition to those of the shareholders who appoint them. As well as operating in a markets context, businesses also exist within a community and social context. How might a responsible business make innovation and excellence work for society? Is CSR dead, as Lord Browne suggests, because it has not helped companies to “embed their connection with Society into everything they do” (Browne, 2016).

Within the public sector, there are different models for dividing leadership responsibilities between elected politicians who hold Ministerial office and permanent officials. Might some aspects of these be relevant to a company or a professional firm that is considering how to operate more democratically? What does leadership mean within an operating theatre or a voluntary association? Are there lessons that business leaders could learn from the memoirs of a successful manager of a football team such as Sir Alex Ferguson (2015)?

The Need for Leadership

Approaches to leadership sometimes appear to assume that the people of organisations are apathetic, disinterested and bored. It is as if they don't know what they are doing or why, and they are sitting around in a dormant state waiting for a leader to come along who will breath life, purpose and motivation into them. Is this an accurate portrayal of people in many organizations today? What do some approaches to leadership tell us about the respect we have for others?

Have boards failed to provide strategic direction? Are talented and motivated people just waiting for a leader to show them the light? Are they so empty or misguided that they need a corporation to provide them with a corporate culture and a set of values? In reality, while some individuals lack inward direction and not all corporate visions, missions and goals may have been properly communicated, many people are competent, responsible and know what they are about. They may work for or with a company because they support its endeavours and want it to succeed.

To what extent do confident, responsible and talented people who understand the purpose of an organisation and the situation they are in need direction? Do those who are prepared to take ownership of issues and have the competence to address them need to be led? Where highly qualified and engaged people are involved do we need leaders (Ingram & Emery, 2015)? Can self-managed work groups and trusted teams who are close to customers and best know their requirements be left to get on with it? At what point does management and leadership become unnecessary interference? Can the unwelcome and inappropriate involvement of higher layers of leadership, management and supervision become a distraction and counter-productive?

Leadership, Creativity and Innovation

Many of the most pressing challenges that face certain companies and mankind are unlikely to be addressed by incremental improvements to existing activities and excellence in the performance of them. More imaginative and innovative responses are required and a key function of leadership is to encourage and support the free enquiry and creativity that will enable them to occur. Leadership is often associated with activities such as giving a lead, judging and selecting, yet creative thinking may be best enabled by standing back, inviting challenge and encouraging diversity and debate. Tolerating risk, well intentioned failure and uncertainty, providing reassurance when imaginative exploration fails to bear fruit and avoiding a blame culture can also help (Klein & Knight, 2005).

In my book *The Future of the Organisation* I set out ten essential freedoms for removing constraints and liberating people by allowing them to work, learn and collaborate in ways, at times and places, and with support that best allow individuals and teams to give of their best and be at their most creative and productive (Coulson-Thomas, 1997). When the conditions are right, people and relationships can flourish. A succession of practical and desirable outcomes can address particular problems and/or meet the requirements of individual customers. The focus of the leader becomes to remove obstacles to the creative process rather than determine individual outcomes.

Boards are used to establishing systems of policies and norms within which the people of organisations are expected to operate. Yet pioneers often have to move into new areas in which rules have yet to be established. How should boards set people free to question past assumptions, embark on voyages of exploration and discovery and develop new ways of operating, cooperating and co-creating that are more appropriate to the new opportunities they are creating? Can directors “let go” while at the same time fulfilling their obligations to shareholders and other stakeholders in relation to prudence, internal control and the management of risk?

Individual Engagement and Diversity

Can a board's concern with areas such as efficiency and sustainability coexist with a desire for greater creativity and increasing engagement on an emotional level with individual customers? Does the functional focus of design need to be accompanied by more artistic approaches. Should a company's offerings be regarded as works of art and developed to engage at a more profound level and reflect the individual and local cultures and identities (Davis and McIntosh, 2005)? What would this involve in terms of how people are selected, supported and managed or self-managed?

Does greater diversity and inclusion encourage creativity, innovation and transformational thinking (Tyner, 2016)? For organisations whose people and customers embrace a variety of cultures, nationalities, religions, situations, requirements and aspirations, successful organic evolution, growth and development can depend upon a multitude of local decisions and interactions. Where central decisions have to be taken, these may be best addressed by a relevant committee or, where appropriate, a board rather than by a CEO or individual members of a senior management team.

In competitive and dynamic situations and where windows of opportunity may be limited, quick and front-line responses may be required. Those responsible need to be able to easily access the help they need and increasingly this needs to be available on a 24/7 basis. Support requirements and what might enable people to be more effective can sometimes be best determined by those in the front-line. Those who are allocating resources need to ensure that those directly involved are aware of available alternatives and that the most relevant and appropriate options are considered.

Chief Executive Officers and Leadership

The ultimate leadership prize for the ambitious is to be appointed a CEO. Why should anyone expect a new CEO who may need time to settle in and adjust to the role, while possibly being

worried about whether he or she has taken a step too far, to quickly provide “leadership” that adds value to that given by continuing members of a board and management team? An external appointee may also be unfamiliar with a company's situation and context and face the challenge of re-location. Are some expectations of so-called “leaders” unrealistic, undesirable and dangerous?

Employees with experience of organisation charts may visualise CEOs at the apex of a pyramid and masters or mistresses of all they survey from their lofty perches. In reality, a CEO sits at the interface of two sets of relationships, those involving the people of a company and also dealing with its board, including a board chair and independent directors, some of whom may have been involved in his or her appointment. There are also investor and other interests to accommodate.

Would it be in the best long-term interests of organisations for more people to ignore instructions from newly appointed CEOs and other leaders and ensure they share responsibility for important decisions until they have completed an induction process and demonstrated they fully understand the options, issues, constraints and other considerations involved? One often encounters companies who have been spared the negative consequences of bad board decisions and corporate initiatives because further down an organisation people have rolled their eyes and ignored or frustrated them.

Founder entrepreneurs can appoint themselves to head a new venture. They build organisations rather than climb them. When not taking over an existing enterprise, a start-up entrepreneur has to create a business rather than inherit one. Instead of steering a company, keeping it on track and ensuring its survival, entrepreneurs often challenge an existing order and create new choices (Coulson-Thomas, 2001). This might involve innovation and a new business model.

'New Leadership'

There may be many people in a company who care and who are competent, responsible and talented, committed to the vision and purpose of an organisation, project or venture and quietly working for it to succeed. For some, it might be irritating to find an opinionated person appointed above them who is paid a small fortune in comparison and who has just returned from a leadership programme eager to build their personal reputation and practice what they have learned about leading people. Effective leadership, like good film direction, may need to be light-touch and subtle.

How do traditional notions of top-down leadership apply to virtual and network organisations where key relationships can be with collaborating peers and partner organisations rather than junior subordinates? Do they assume a bureaucratic organisation with a leader at its apex? What if the priority is coordination and people are in roles that do not enable them to issue instructions, and where they cannot assume others will even listen to them, let alone automatically defer to them?

The nature of work and organisations continue to evolve. As technological developments, automation and expert systems replace people with intelligent apps, robots, drones and easy to use and low-cost 24/7 on-line services and on-demand solutions more leaders may find themselves presiding over options, systems and processes rather than people (Ford, 2015; Kaplan, 2015). What will this mean for their roles, how they should prepare for them and what are the qualities that those appointing them will seek?

In the past, has leadership attracted the abnormal and the ambitious, people who feel inadequate or unloved, or who have something to prove, or who want to dominate others? Has it appealed to those who want to be listened to rather than those who want to listen to others and serve and support them? To get ahead has one needed to be ruthless, self-interested and single minded rather than caring, open and devoted to a cause? Increasingly, 'new leadership' is required, which involves helping people to excel rather than telling them what to do (Coulson-Thomas, 2012b and 2013).

Leadership and Entrepreneurship

How do traditional views of leadership relate to start up entrepreneurs who may begin a business without anyone to lead? In many cases, the few people they start an enterprise journey with may be supportive family members, friends or business partners rather than dependent employees. Others who join them and risk their careers by putting their trust in an early stage venture may do so because they share a vision, see an opportunity or believe in a cause. These can also be among the reasons why people seek employment with larger and more established businesses.

In what areas and to what extent are entrepreneurial owner-leaders of start-up enterprises different from other people who have either advanced on merit or used guile, cunning and political skills to reach a leadership position at the top of a large and bureaucratic organisation? Does it make sense to call start-up entrepreneurs “leaders”? Is there a separate category of entrepreneurial leader?

According to the Peter Principle people rise to a level at which they may be viewed as incompetent and further advancement does not occur (Peter and Hull, 1969). Should one expect leaders at the top of organisations to be competent? Compared with founder entrepreneurs whose influence might be as visible as muddy finger prints all over an enterprise, how does one assess the contribution of others in leadership positions when corporate performance may be the aggregation of many other contributions. Paradoxically, the effective leader whose leadership style helps, builds and supports others and encourages them to take ownership may be less visible than headline grabbing peers.

Shared and Collective Leadership

Some leaders do not inspire people, support them or enable them to excel. They centralise, constrain and consolidate. How can boards prevent too much power accruing to an individual who may be incompetent, deluded, mistaken, naïve or out of his or her depth? What checks and balances can be introduced? How can one reallocate roles and responsibilities or reclaim power from a strong CEO? Governance arrangements should address these issues and in such a way as to achieve a balance between governance, risk and performance considerations (ACCA, 2014).

Some leaders struggle and certain leadership roles may be difficult to fill? Offering more money to possible candidates may not be the answer. If the demands of leadership roles become too onerous, how does one achieve some form of shared leadership in which complementary people collectively cover all the different aspects of what needs to be done? Might sharing a leadership role better accommodate those who have family responsibilities or are seeking a different work-life balance?

There is a tendency to focus upon the advantages of effective leadership rather than the risks and consequences of inadequate or destructive leadership? Perhaps this is because people like to be associated with positives and avoid association with negatives. If negative thoughts and bad news are unwelcome - and they do not win coaching assignments or sell books on leaderships - should it be for directors and boards to themselves peer into dark corners and address downsides and risks?

Entrepreneurship and the Role and Contribution of Boards

In addition to providing strategic leadership and good governance, directors and boards should investigate the nature and exercise of leadership across an organisation. They can play a vital role in ensuring that checks and balances are in place to prevent an excessive concentration of power and enabling a collective leadership. To avoid the dictatorship of a strong-willed and charismatic CEO one may need to strengthen the remits and powers of other executive directors, as well as ensuring that a board has a suitable and effective contingent of independent directors whose first duty is to

the best long-term interests of a company.

A programme I delivered for the European Union involved me in providing support to the entrepreneur owners of 50 SMEs. While an effective board can make a significant contribution to the growth and development of a company, many of these members of the SME community were not convinced the benefits of independent directors and formal board meetings would exceed their costs (Coulson-Thomas, 2007a and b). Some reported bad experiences of directors who had retired from head office roles with large companies and with little direct experience of serving customers or managing a cash flow. Potential director candidates sometimes seemed more interested in generating incremental income for themselves than they were in helping to build a business.

Some of these owner entrepreneurs were well advised to be wary. The wrong board appointments can introduce malign interests. A proportion of potential candidates will be primarily concerned with their own interests, especially if they encounter a start-up with potential. They may spend more time seeking an equity stake than enquiring about customers and offerings. Some may alert their friends and then seek to secure a controlling interest, replace a founding entrepreneur with one of their own nominees, and then make a short-term financial gain by floating or selling the company. Unwary entrepreneurs can be ejected from enterprises they start and denied their just rewards.

Smart entrepreneurs keep their feet on the ground, avoid distractions and focus on the basics. In relation to straight forward leadership and being a role model, Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, has become wealthy as his company has grown, yet he retains and embodies a frugal approach. In his late 80s he still travels widely to visit IKEA stores. He drives an elderly Volvo car, stays in cheaper hotels and flies economy class. He addresses IKEA employees as 'co-workers' and encourages people to dress informally, enjoy work, give excellent service and keep costs down. One does not need to be a bull with a sharp suit or to travel first class to be a leader, but it helps if one cares, is grounded and can help others to concentrate upon what is important and be fulfilled.

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