

LESSONS OF TOP LEADERS

5 paradoxes to unlocking leadership

COMMENTARY BY
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In high-growth Asia, a company's ability to grow its business is closely linked to its ability to grow its leadership pool.

It is no wonder then, that many Chief Executive Officers in this region have asked us: "How can we fast-track the development of our leaders?"

To answer this question, the Human Capital Leadership Institute embarked on a research collaboration with the Centre for Creative Leadership.

We interviewed leaders from five award-winning organisations in Singapore, namely Olam International, Unilever, CapitaLand, the Singapore Prison Service and British American Tobacco.

We distilled five key findings from this research:

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TO FOSTER LEARNING, EMPHASISE DOING

When we asked the leaders what contributed most to their own development, no one mentioned management books or executive education programmes. Instead, the majority said that dealing with adversity and crises were key factors. Such challenging circumstances stretched their leadership abilities, and helped foster resilience.

The finding is clear: Leaders learn most from undertaking challenging experiences.

TO ACCELERATE DEVELOPMENT, SLOW DOWN

When we explained our objective of identifying accelerators of leadership development, many interviewees pointed out the importance of slowing down.

In particular, they advocated building in reflection time in order to

crystallise learnings from their experiences.

In Asia, there is no shortage of challenging experiences. However, our participants tell us that it was often difficult to carve out time for deep reflection.

Another key finding was that a number of high-potential talents told us that they had turned down promotions to spend more time in their current role. They did this because they believed it was important to not just develop strategic initiatives, but to also see through their execution. They had the foresight to see the risks of over-promotion, which can ironically stunt one's long-term growth.

TO EXCEL AT THE TASK, HARNESS RELATIONSHIPS

It has been said that relationships are important everywhere, but they are especially important in Asia.

The interviewees told us that the main differentiator between top leaders and others is not intellectual ability, but interpersonal ability. The impact of a top leader increasingly rests on their ability to get things done through and with other people.

One leader shared a memorable story. He was a Singaporean posted to lead an Indonesian subsidiary. One day, a group of employees organised a labour strike, which grew increasingly heated. Labour strikes are uncommon in Singapore hence this individual was taken aback.

As a leader, he felt it was his obligation to address this situation himself. He asked his staff to return home, for their own safety. The reaction of his team astounded him: They all insisted on staying on to help.

The smallest member of his team offered to reach out directly to the employees on strike. Using a mix of humour and empathy, this team member managed to defuse tensions and help initiate negotiations to end the strike. The strike was called off and amicable compromises were reached.

This leader learnt a profound lesson: A leader is only as effective as his team.

TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS, LEARN TO FAIL

There is growing awareness that failures can be a powerful source of learning and growth. However, in Asia, there is often a norm of preserving

"face" and avoiding failure at all cost. This mindset can stifle experimentation, innovation and personal development.

The top companies in Asia are aware of this, and work hard to create a culture that encourages not just learning from failure, but also the sharing of these learnings to the broader organisation.

Top leaders recognise that this culture can only take root if they role-model openness, speak candidly about their own mistakes and share publicly the learnings from those mistakes.

A few caveats should be emphasised. While these companies are very tolerant of employees making mistakes, they also expect that these mistakes will not be repeated, especially as individuals rise through the ranks. The message is clear: Fail young, fail cheap and never fail to learn.

TO DEVELOP GREATNESS, PRACTISE HUMILITY

Perhaps the most startling finding we uncovered in our study was the importance placed on humility. The leaders we spoke to were all accomplished and successful individuals, and yet, they were clear about having room for improvement, and were constantly seeking to learn from others.

We asked a top leader what he did to help develop his subordinates. He told us he felt he learnt as much from them as they did from him. He provided examples of what he had learnt from his subordinates — ranging from their mastery of new technologies to more facilitative leadership styles.

However, one thing they undoubtedly learnt from him is this: If our boss has the humility to actively learn from us, we too can learn something from anyone.

UNCOMPROMISING COMMITMENT

While our participants were all highly articulate, they invariably stumbled when asked to answer a simple question: How did they measure and track their investments in building leadership?

In these organisations, building leadership was an article of faith. They had never been asked by their CEOs to justify a return on investment for their efforts. In the final analysis, it is this uncompromising commitment to leadership development that set these five organisations apart.