



Take it easy: Examining how leaders quicken their growth, we realised the best leaders were able to slow down, engage in deep reflection, and plan for their longer-term development. While almost everyone we speak with recognises the importance of slowing down, many struggle to find the time to engage in deep reflection. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

How top Asian firms develop good leaders

They are adept at harmonising paradoxes and correcting imbalances in the organisation

By **MANO RAMAKRISHNAN**

WHEN we ask CEOs in Asia what their key challenges are, many tell us the speed of business growth continues to outpace their ability to develop leaders. Hence, a strategic priority for many companies in the region is to accelerate the development of their leadership talent. In 2011, the Human Capital Leadership Institute (HCLI) teamed up with the Centre for Creative Leadership to study how leading companies in Asia build leaders faster than the competition. We uncovered five paradoxical insights (listed below) that are crucial for developing top leaders in Asia.

The good news is that many business leaders we speak to understand these insights conceptually; the bad news is that they struggle to implement these insights in practice. Earlier this year, HCLI conducted further research to understand the challenges in implementing these insights as well as specific action steps to overcome these challenges. We summarise our findings below.

◆ **Paradox 1: To foster learning, emphasise doing**

When we asked business leaders what accelerated their own development the most, many mentioned real-life experiences, such as turning a business around or overseeing a complex merger and acquisition. Yet, too many companies today still invest disproportionate time and money in classroom-based initiatives (for example, execu-

tive education courses or eMBA programmes). Why does this happen? One reason is that individuals often do not know which experiences are most important for their development, and how to identify and secure such experience. Our research suggests that leaders need to do two things: First, develop a firm vision of what you would like to achieve in your career. Second, create flexible plans that allow you to identify the experiences needed to achieve your career vision. Start by asking yourself a simple question: "What career accomplishments would make me and my loved ones most proud?"

◆ **Paradox 2: To accelerate development, slow down**

As we sought to understand how leaders accelerate their growth, we realised that the best leaders were able to slow down, engage in deep reflection, and plan for their longer-term development. While almost everyone we speak with recognises the importance of slowing down, many struggle to find the time to engage in deep reflection. We discovered that deep reflection need not be a time-consuming affair; we simply need to be smarter in when and where we engage in reflection. For example, it may help to take a few minutes to walk to a cafe rather than try to reflect in the office. Likewise, it helps to find an optimum time for reflection. Ask yourself: "What times of the day am I at my most alert and when there are least distractions?"

◆ **Paradox 3: To excel at the task, harness relationships**

In the first phase of our research, we dis-

covered that the leaders who were most consistent in achieving task success were those who took the time and effort to build personal relationships. In the second phase of our research, we learnt to build strong relationships to help achieve task success together. Many Asian cultures appreciate the importance of relationships, and yet in today's fast-paced work culture, too many leaders adopt a transactional approach to leadership and do not take the time to build personal relationships with their colleagues. The best time to build relationships is before you need to. Think about a colleague whose help you need the least. Now find an opportunity to help this individual. Helping others – with no strings attached – can help you rediscover the joy of helping others, as well as forge strong relationships.

◆ **Paradox 4: To achieve success, learn from failure**

Failure is not the opposite of success; failing to learn is. Good companies encourage individuals to openly recognise and learn from their failures. Great companies encourage individuals to share their failures and learnings with others. Many leaders we speak to in Asia confide that they struggle with this paradox as failures can be very painful. The pain of failure prevents many leaders from acknowledging them, but yet also ensures that the lessons from the failures are deeply entrenched and not forgotten. What can you do to create a culture that is open to learning from failure? Craft and share a failure story with your colleagues. Be sure that your story covers the pain of failure, what you learnt, and how you applied those learnings to suc-

ceed in future endeavours.

◆ **Paradox 5: To develop greatness, practise humility**

Remarkably, the greatest leaders are often the most humble. These leaders genuinely appreciate the strengths of others, while demonstrating openness about their own limitations. They constantly seek to learn and better themselves, and never rest on their laurels. While many Asian cultures have traditionally emphasised the importance of humility, a challenge is that many corporations seem to reward those who are best at self-promotion. Another challenge is that many leaders struggle to maintain humility as they achieve greater career success. How can you stay humble? Think about your greatest success as a leader. Now, list down all the ways by which others – and serendipitous factors – have contributed to this success. This simple exercise can remind you that your greatest successes are not yours alone.

To conclude, we believe that what underlies these insights is the concept of "harmonising paradoxes". Implicit is the notion that each paradox contains two seemingly opposing polarities. In today's world, there is often an imbalance that needs to be corrected. However, what we have learnt is that both polarities are important. Just as a guitar produces a melodious chord by combining notes on the different strings, the potential of each paradox is fully realised when both polarities are embraced.

The writer is head, research & solutions development, Human Capital Leadership Institute