



Tomorrow's Leadership Will Be Different

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John O. Burdett





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*“Resilience means not only weathering the storm ...
but being strengthened by it.”*

The Irish elk thrived for over 7,000 years. Its range extended from China to, as the name suggests, Ireland.¹ Standing more than a meter and a half (6.9 feet) at the shoulder and weighing up to 700 kilograms (1,543 pounds), it was, by far, the largest elk around – before or since. What made it truly spectacular though were its antlers at 3.65 metres (12 feet) across. In sexual conquest and in battle, antler size was everything.

And then, 11,000 years ago, this magnificent animal went into sharp decline. There are a number of theories to explain its extinction. Climate change is one: a warmer climate



¹ Its name hails from the fact that the best-preserved specimens were found in the highly preservative Irish peat bogs.



stimulated forest growth, which, in turn, meant its extraordinary antlers severely limited its manoeuvrability. A second explanation holds that the continued evolution of its huge antlers eventually made them so heavy that the poor animal could no longer hold up its head. Paradoxically, its very success led to its own downfall.

The Irish elk offers several lessons in survival. Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. Size isn't a guarantee of continued success. That you have no rivals doesn't mean your future is assured. When the environment changes dramatically, it changes for everyone. If you don't adapt, extinction is inevitable.² Yesterday's success may well sow the seeds of tomorrow's demise. And agility really is a make-or-break issue.

It's a pretty good bet that, as you read this, somewhere in your competitor's camp there is an ongoing conversation about the qualities that describe tomorrow's leadership. Be it talent acquisition, succession, identifying high potential talent and/or shaping the investment in leadership, one thing is assured ... tomorrow will not be a continuation of today.

We commonly see references to “the shortage of talent.” Paradoxically, there is no shortage of talent. The growing number of business schools around the world, combined with the billions of dollars spent globally on leadership development means that there is actually a surfeit of candidates. The problem? The vast majority of those candidates are a great fit for a business environment that served us well in the past.

A more integrated, faster and, by a quantum step, more complex business environment demands not just a new way to think and act but a new definition of “leadership success.” Exponential change fuelled by ongoing leaps in technology ... exacerbated by unprecedented disruption on a global scale ... is, indelibly, redefining what is meant by the term “TOP Talent.”

As we move into uncharted territory – where only those organizations that are fast, flat, flexible, focused and fertile (to new ideas) will survive – TOP (Transforming, Outstanding, Performance tested) Talent refers to those fully equipped to excel in a, hitherto unknown, level of business and societal uncertainty.

Other than know-how in technology, which is a given, leadership competencies differ depending upon the role.³ That understood, five TOP leadership competencies are emerging as having future primacy.⁴

2 Since 2000 more than half of the companies that were, at that time, on the Fortune 500 list have disappeared.

3 This emphasizes the need to develop “role-specific” leadership competencies. Generic competencies have value, e.g., the broad leadership development agenda, but they are less than useful, however, when making hiring and succession decisions.

4 A competency limited to improving the status quo amounts to a mandate for mediocrity. A competency should always be future looking.



1. A Passion to Learn

Those who *don't* read are no better off than those who *can't* read. Indeed, now more than ever, leaders are readers. And they go out of their way to share the learning involved with those around them. We are also talking about a special kind of learning – challenging oneself, pushing forward, reflecting on what works, embracing risk and kicking performance up to the next level.

Traditional learning is all about gaining knowledge and/or skills. Expertise is essential but continuously learning how to learn is even more important. This speaks to moving to the edge of one's comfort zone. It captures a leadership approach where stepping into new space is obligatory. It's about letting go of the past and coming to terms with taking emotional risk. Curiosity is the start of it, acquiring new skills is part of it, but learning how to learn is the heart of it.

Without truly challenging the status quo, things are destined to stay the way they are. Without reflection, there is no learning. And without constantly exploring new ways to learn, there is little hope of learning faster than the competition.

Tomorrow's organization will be a team of teams. And forget the notion that the team is made up of people you meet with regularly. A boundary-less mindset, connect-ability, collaboration at a distance and enabling people with ideas to bump into each other is the only game in town. As for consensus ... we don't have time! Ensure that team members get their fingerprints all over the issue. Encourage candour. Draw out disagreement, but once the decision has been made – full agreement or not – commitment is assumed. Learning how to learn.

Even when hiring people like you, the “interview” is an inadequate tool. Throw millennials, iGen and gig employees into the mix and its reliability goes down. Think short-term projects, reviewing past work, tracking down past colleagues, temporary assignments, meaningful reference checks and having the candidate deliver a presentation to the team. Learning how to learn.

Learning is drawn out of the experience ... but it starts with a question. The better the question, the richer the experience that explores that question ... the more impactful the learning.⁵ Marshall Goldsmith, the legendary executive coach, pays someone to call him every day. She listens while he reads through and answers the same 32 questions that he responds to ... every day. Tomorrow his digital assistant will, no doubt, do the same thing. With a bonus: changing “her” tone, intonation, pace of delivery and, if warranted, language to reflect the mood.

⁵ The question that frames truly impactful learning isn't always apparent to the learner. Drawing it out is the art of facilitation.



What does a passion to learn look like? It starts with a great question. It implies constantly challenging the way things are. It demands reflection. It becomes a habit through self-discipline. Listening, meanwhile, is nothing less than the, all essential, lubricant of learning. As for follow-up, without it, what we are describing is little more than “a nice conversation.” Follow-up means not only following through ... but sharing the learning with the team and beyond.

And the difference that makes a difference: Pass both the process and the learning content to those whose behaviour you seek to change. It’s a matter of more “power to” and less PowerPoint ... especially when seeking to draw the best out of recent generational cohorts to the workforce. Nurture the assumption that, ultimately, how we learn is more important than what we learn.

2. Leadership Reach

The Japanese have invented stick-on nails that light up when you are on the phone. The Women’s Cricket World Cup in 2017 had 180 million viewers. That’s 70 million more than the Super Bowl in the same year. Quantum computing – the ultimate game changer – will make even machines like IBM’s Watson look positively pedestrian. Yuri van Geest⁶ – one of the world’s foremost authorities on the future of computing – goes as far as to suggest that before the decade is out a quantum computer will be built that exceeds all of the cumulative computing power available in the world today. Look forward to edible robots that can heal or provide nutrients. Dubai has launched flying cars (drone taxis). At least 60 critical parts on an F1 McLaren can be produced track-side by a 3D printer. India is committed to be the first country that allows only electric cars. Google Translate can converse in and/or translate any one of 40 languages in real time.

The only thing visible from space, the Great Barrier Reef, is already 80% destroyed by “bleaching.” By 2050 we will need twice the food product from the land currently available. If you live in a coastal city, ask for water wings for your next birthday. When Steve Jobs joined the board of Disney he told them to “Dream bigger dreams.” He might have added, “Learn to reach further.”

There are basically four formative conversations that take place at work: (1) tell and listen; (2) tell and sell; (3) shared problem solving; and (4) coaching (where the way forward lies with the coachee). Leadership reach embraces mastery in each of these situations. It also describes a leader who approaches each new challenge with a beginner’s mind ... equipped with a rich toolbox of processes, models, ideas and innovative ways forward.

Leadership reach means having a global mindset. It also implies interpreting how local political and social norms/policies shape the business options. Finland doesn’t really

⁶ Founder of SingularityU in the Netherlands. The term “singularity” was coined by John von Neumann to capture the belief that artificial superintelligence will, inevitably, like a runaway train, upgrade itself at an explosive rate. In doing so, it will signal the end of human life as we know it. Elon Musk is another proponent of singularity.



have a word for collaboration. Teamwork in South Korea is a very different proposition from teamwork in South Wales. If you don't appreciate the humour in Australia, you will always be on the outside looking in. Roads in Iceland are designed not to upset the elves. To a visitor they look somewhat the same but Canadian business is way more collegiate than its big cousin to the south. Candour in Holland has an openness and edge to it that shocks those used to a less confrontational culture. And don't, whatever you do, create a situation where people in Asia lose face.

A leader who displays leadership reach enters the prevailing context with elegant ease. Be it turning around a very traditional, hierarchical business, moving a highly engaged team to the next level, working with gig employees, and/or successfully collaborating with a business that operates in virtual space ... leadership reach is to quickly understand how to make a difference.

In a similar vein, a start-up in Singapore, an overly aggressive trade union in Australia, a turnaround in Turkey and/or an innovation challenge in India ... all sit comfortably on this leader's shoulders.

And the difference that makes a difference: Provide international experience early, make “customer-centric” a way of life, don't trap high performers within functional silos and don't come to the rescue too quickly when testing the character, commitment and performance ethos of those you deem “high potential.”

3. Comfort with Ambiguity

When your office space is provided by WeWork; when your software is rented by the month, when your computers are leased, when yesterday's meeting was uploaded and transformed into a presentation overnight by an independent team in India that you have never met, when 50% plus of those who do the work don't actually work for the company ... the term “temporary” seems inadequate. Transient, dynamic, partnering, gig workforce, virtual employment doesn't really cover it either. Things are happening so fast that our language hasn't caught up. Things are evolving so quickly that our emerging concept of what it means to be a leader hasn't caught up either.

For the first time in man's history, intelligence – self-organizing, learning systems – sits outside of the human brain. When computers write science fiction scripts, when companies like JD in China open warehouse and distribution systems without any employees, when your new car drives itself home, we are describing not just a new way for society to create wealth but an entirely new way to think about work.

The printing press moved knowledge from the few to the many. The steam engine moved whole populations from the land to the factory. The combustion engine allowed common folk, previously unheard of, mobility. The computer brought connect-ability that turned the



world into a global village. Artificial intelligence and self-learning machines offer a disruptive future that, by far, transcends anything experienced in the past.

It is generally assumed that science is entirely fact-based. And yet what is known about the universe is no more than 5%-7% of what is out there. The rest is thought to be dark matter (25%) and dark energy (68%+). Both are invisible and, to date, there is little evidence that they even exist.

There are points in history when the more we know, the more we realise how little we know. We are in such a time. The future role of robotics/cobotics, the nature and design of tomorrow's corporation, the potential impact of medical breakthroughs and how tomorrow's technology, generally, is going to shape the endeavour – arguably, the most innovative creation our species has ever achieved – that we call “the organization” remain, at best, “uncertain.” If you think you “know,” take an aspirin, lie down and hopefully the feeling will pass.

“Anticipation” is to identify that which can be expected. We don't really know what tomorrow holds other than ... to expect the unexpected. Furthermore, the scope and nature of change that lies ahead isn't like passing through bad weather. It's akin to being engulfed by a hurricane that is merely a harbinger of the even bigger storm front that lies ahead.

Comfort with ambiguity is being comfortable with being uncomfortable. It's the art of not knowing but, when necessary, making the right decision anyway. It's far less about being right than it is doing the right things. It's about interpreting the organization's values as a springboard for action, as providing the freedom to move beyond what has been – not as a restrictive set of rules.

There is a well-established relationship between entrepreneurship and comfort with ambiguity. It's called risk. Recognising a great idea, relentless focus, a results-driven mentality and real-time awareness are the mark of the entrepreneur. As is avoiding, what Jeff Bezos calls, “day 2 stasis.” Day 1 leaders keep the customer at the centre of everything they do, are quick to embrace meaningful trends, are paranoid about the bottom line and fail fast and move on. Most leaders see rejection as a setback. Entrepreneurs view it as just one more step on the road to success. Above all, successful entrepreneurs know how and when to say no. Corporate executives manage risk ... entrepreneurs live it every day.

There is also an important team dimension to comfort with ambiguity. As a long-suffering child of the perceived need for rigid hierarchy, it has long been assumed that the team worked for the team leader. “Fast,” “flat,” “flexible,” “focused” and “fertile” changes all that. Moving forward, the leader will work for the team. This implies a far subtler relationship; a bond where formal authority gives way to trust, mutual respect and the quest for authenticity. Instruction and “telling” were relatively straightforward. Followership rooted in influence moves the leader into far murkier waters. Not that there is much of a choice when technical know-how and customer insight are shared across the team. If you can't coach, you can't lead!



And the difference that makes a difference: Recognise that only those who can see what others cannot see ... can do what others say cannot be done. Differentiate between those who deliver based on what is asked of them and those who show true initiative. Support the former ... invest in the latter.

4. Resilience

Tomorrow will be different. If it can be digitalised it will be digitalised. If it represents a strategic assumption that everyone agrees with, it probably won't happen. More information doesn't mean better information. No matter what "protectionist" politicians may preach, globalisation isn't going to slow down any time soon. Tomorrow's competition will emanate from a city you have never heard of or business sector you rarely think of. And where organizational capability is widely held, "speed" becomes the basis of competitive advantage. Be bold or become irrelevant. Be tough-minded or tackle a new line of work. Be fast or be last.

In a steady state world, "bouncing back" is an apt way to describe resilience. Unfortunately, we don't live in a steady, consistent, unchanging world. Today's environment is marked by disorder, uncertainty and, where technology is involved, a pattern of change where each step is greater than the step that went before. What was frustrating is about to become even more so.

In any conversation around change, language isn't important ... it's everything. With the scope and nature of change likely to become even more turbulent, resilience seen as a way to reinforce/retain the status quo isn't very helpful. Indeed, it's misleading.

A more relevant approach presents resilience as adapting to the new state, reflecting on the experience and developing new ways to behave. It's a dynamic rather than a static process. It's about leading and learning ... not absorbing and then acting as before. Resilience means not only weathering the storm ... but being strengthened by it.

In assuming that resilience defines an individual's personal resources – as is invariably the case – we miss an important piece of the puzzle. Context matters and the right network, a support system and being around positive people make a difference. Tomorrow's successful leaders will surround themselves with people who are resilient.

Accepting the plasticity of the brain, we can learn to become more resilient. There is a link, for example, between resilience and the research on positive psychology. Conversely, for leaders who are overly anxious, risk-averse, trapped by yesterday's success, have difficulty facing adversity or are simply overwhelmed by life, resilience is spelt "resistance."

And the difference that makes a difference: Surround yourself with resilient people, provide an opportunity to assess personal resilience, make resilience a central plank in ongoing coaching and help high performers connect with and shape their own story. There is nothing more tragic than those not living their own story ... because they are living someone else's.

5. Culture Savvy

Three disabling pitfalls capture the nature of the emerging leadership challenge.

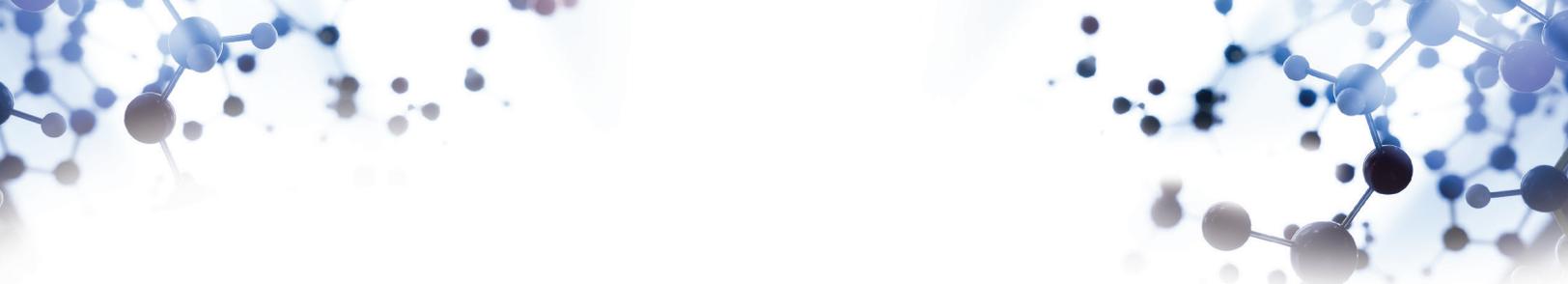
- i. Failure to recognise the scope and scale of the storm we are heading into. A failure to fully understand that exponential change ushers in an era of unprecedented change; a level of turbulence that will be unceasing, unpredictable and unyielding; a business environment where there is no steady state ... no safe harbour to head for.
- ii. Attempting to force breakthrough technology into an organization that, by way of structure and design, was created for the mechanical world of the last century. Think starting anew, not “fixing up.” Think “drones,” not a multibillion, 3,000-kilometre wall.
- iii. Being wedded to “culture drift” ... the assumption that if we don’t manage culture⁷ we will, somehow, “magically,” end up where we need to be. Good luck with that one by the way. A version of culture drift is “incrementalism” – addressing culture one element at a time. Not only does this ignore the unintended consequences of standalone actions but time isn’t on your side.

Culture is a complex system that is only as strong as its weakest parts. Moreover, if a piece is missing it doesn’t work. An engaged workforce doesn’t mean you are heading in the right direction. Organization values are essential but on their own they are not enough. Where employees are less than fully committed to the brand promise, basically, you have no brand. It matters not what your unique strengths are ... if you are not truly customer-centric your core competencies are largely irrelevant. No less important ... addressing culture isn’t simply “change management” in a new guise. Symbolism, myth, habits, story, language, metaphor and measurement rarely find their way onto the change management stage. And if you think working on culture is a project ... give up now, it will save time later.

Conventional wisdom suggests that culture **follows** strategy. The dilemma is that in a world where strategy is persistently under attack, “the plan” has to be constantly revisited. The new dictum is culture **enables** strategy. What endures, what provides the platform for growth, what shapes future performance, what enables different strategic scenarios to unfold ... is the organization’s culture.

The work that supports the link between culture and performance goes back over two decades. Research, in particular by Kotter and Heskett, found a strong correlation between

⁷ If you are not measuring culture ... you are not managing it. If culture has been delegated to HR ... you are not managing it. If you are spending less time on culture than you are on strategy ... you are not managing it. If you confuse an assessment of “employee engagement” with a measure of culture ... you are not managing it. If the hiring process, the leadership development agenda and coaching at the top of the organization aren’t objectively focused on the culture needed to succeed tomorrow ... you are not managing it.



performance and the right culture.⁸ The relationship between culture and performance is further endorsed when you consider issues such as attraction and retention. Your best people don't stay because they think you have a great strategy. Conversely, if you have a big enough "Why" you can change the world.

The challenge, of course, is not merely to possess a strong culture but to build a business environment that shapes how people act and, at the same time, supports emerging strategic scenarios. This speaks to changing the patterns of play, measurement, the ability to shape the culture conversation, bringing middle managers on board and inspirational leadership. Even where all the building blocks of culture are in place, if the leader in question lacks the ability to take people places they otherwise would not go, you still ain't got much!

Jack Ma, Alibaba Founder and CEO, says, "If you want to be successful in business focus on culture." Our own research – and that of others – suggests that only 20% of organizations manage their culture. Power moves into a vacuum. If you are not managing your culture someone else is! And if those at the helm lack culture savvy take it as a given – the future of the business lies in the wrong hands.

Who is managing your organization's culture? The 60% or more of employees who are less than fully engaged? A cadre of executives who would rather things stay the same? The silo builders? Those at the centre who have forgotten that their role is to support the local businesses, not dominate them? Disaffected middle managers? A militant union? An owner whose *raison d'être* is to make money and not make a difference? A dominant competitor? A predatory supplier? A segment of customers who demand distinct value but who are only prepared to pay commodity prices?

And the difference that makes a difference: Recognise that culture is managed from the outside-in but demands leadership from the inside-out; provide structure and guidance into how to have the culture conversation; become a storyteller; measure culture⁹ and work diligently to uncover (global) best practice – then improve on it. Our species are, above all else, copying machines with an inherent desire to be better than all the rest.

8 Look at virtually any sector and you will find that those who lead the pack put a high priority on culture. Moreover, managing culture has a financial payoff. According to Harvard Professors, James L. Heskett and John P. Kotter, organizations that managed their culture had a stock price increase of 901% compared to just 74% for companies that were less focused on culture. *Corporate Culture and Corporate Performance* (1992) at pages 38-39.

9 Eschew approaches to culture measurement that use terms that sound as if they belong in a psychology course. To gain traction with the top team, access simple business language that captures both where the business is and where it needs to be. For a pragmatic measure of culture see *The A-Z of Organization Culture*, John O. Burdett (2017).



Conclusion

In a world dominated by ideas, a move from cooperation to collaboration is essential – and inevitable. The environment and a new generation dominating the workplace mean that tribal loyalty will, of necessity, give way to a stronger sense of community. A community mindset, meanwhile, ushers in the dominance of stakeholder capital. How does your team make a difference in people’s lives?

Although many are served by a more defused definition, “employee engagement” is about building a culture where opportunity and capability are aligned. To that end, any falloff in the fit between the speed of change in the business environment and a sense of personal growth – a perceived lack of currency in the job market – will quickly disillusion those the organization most wants to retain. Why do your best people stay?

Finally, the fallibility of strategy means that, rather than being the by-product of a singular, linear direction, the organization’s culture must enable a range of potential future options to unfold. Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable becomes the new norm.

What does all this mean? From a leadership perspective, a passion to learn, leadership reach and comfort with ambiguity are about to shape what’s possible. Moreover, in creating tomorrow’s leadership today ... culture savvy and resilience become not merely desired qualities but are at the very core of what it means to be an outstanding leader.

Yesterday’s success may well instil a sense of pride but, in all likelihood, it also contains the seeds of tomorrow’s demise. That you have few rivals doesn’t mean your future is assured. When the environment changes dramatically, if you don’t adapt, extinction is inevitable. Remember our friend the Irish elk.

Survival is, ultimately, not about having a great strategy but about how fast you implement it. It’s about momentum, not movement. A carousel moves but it isn’t going anywhere. Which of the five leadership competencies outlined do you excel in? If you worked for you, what would you want you to change? Tomorrow’s leadership WILL be different. Will you?





John Burdett has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He has worked on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

During the past 12 months, John's partnership with the Bedford Consulting Group and TRANSEARCH INTERNATIONAL, meant that his proprietary work on leadership competencies supported over 1,000 top leadership appointments on six continents.

John holds a doctorate in management development and since 2000 has published ten best-selling books on leadership, talent management, executive coaching and organization culture. He recently completed his highly lauded talent trilogy: *Talent* (2013), *Team* (2015), and *The Empty Suit* (2016). His latest book is *The A-Z of Organization Culture* (2017). John lives in Toronto.

For more on attraction, the four critical dimensions of fit, the evidence-based interview and all things to do with talent acquisition download *The Empty Suit* from Amazon.com, eBooks, Barnes and Noble and/or Kobo.
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