

Executive Coaching

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CULTURE CLASH

Becoming a crisis-proof Leader

- What has 2008-2009 economic crisis changed in Leadership requirements?
- Which Leadership features can help you thrive through the next crisis?
- What should you focus on, to lead even better? ... in a Thai context?

In this article, Executive Coach Jean-Francois draws from his interactions with CEOs confronted to the recent economic turmoil, recent research and books, to suggest concrete leadership features that can help you and your team succeed no-matter-what through the next unexpected challenges.

A 'perfect storm' at sea... It's pitch-dark, huge waves are rocking the ship, spindrifts are continuously blinding the navigation bridge windows, propellers have lost most of their power, water is leaking inside the store-room, crew members are running frantically around, feeling this might be the end of the World... Yesterday the boat was cruising swiftly on a calm ocean : overnight a typhoon unexpectedly changed route and unleashed its terrifying force on and around the ship.

Whether or not the boat and crew make it depends a lot on the Captain... and specifically what he or she did before... to get them effective at embracing unexpected turbulence. It's far from just a case of « survival of the fittest »... The planned itinerary is useless, usual quick-fixes are insufficient, the Captain is as clueless as the crew about how the typhoon evolves next, any too-slow decision or uncontrolled risk may cost lives...

Can you discern similarities between that typhoon-struck boat metaphor and some dinosaur-like Organizations who experienced a poignant feel of the Titanic's fate during 2008-2009 crisis? How about the limits and/or dangers of

- grand strategic plans
- usual short-term fixes (cost-cutting, tightened controls, restructuring plans...)
- authoritative certainty / top-down leadership
- long decision-processes
- ill-assessed risk-taking?

80 % of people having suffered a heart-attack fail to healthily amend their diet and life-style. Have you translated the 'lessons' you learnt from the crisis into « preventive actions » yet ?

Post-crisis research from Cambridge-Leadership Associates has suggested that Organizations need 'adaptative leadership' to yield more

- agility (adaptability from staff - in continuing uncertainty and uncontrollable changes- and speed in decision-making)
- leadership at all levels of the Organization
- trust amongst co-workers
- diversity
- robust anticipation / better calculated risk-taking

Hence, an over-arching challenge for you as an « adaptative » Leader is to enable your company and your people to continuously adapt to an ever-changing environment where (even) you don't always know the best-way ahead .

To get people comfortable at work in constant disequilibrium, you should probably stretch them continuously, to keep them willing to change,... but not so much that they fight, flee or freeze. Very much like coaching athletes in team-sports. A benchmark is speed in quality decision-making.

It is also critical to generate leadership at all levels of the Organization. It will help to

- empower and delegate as many decisions as relevant
- value and reward courage (in particular the courage to disagree with you),
- give opportunities to lead experiments without punishing failures ("here, people only get killed for not trying")
- encourage productive conflicts (depersonalized)

Productive conflicts require trust between parties, so ground-work for trust-building is obviously necessary. A tough challenge! Beyond competence, request that managers role-model integrity, reliability, fairness, caring, openness and loyalty.

Leveraging diversity –as done in successful football teams- is a no-brainer; yet is your company doing its best? For example, are women significantly represented in your

Executive Committee? A McKinsey study (dated October 2009) showed that companies with 3 or more women in top-management did significantly better than companies with no women in top-management, on all performance criteria - particularly leadership and motivation-.

Prompting more robust anticipation from your managers is another tough endeavor. We are all too familiar with challenging budget-drafts, market-forecasts or the "worst case scenario" in a business plan, only to find out they don't withstand even the first round of our probing questions. To facilitate more robust anticipation-work, the first step is a step-back... to confront reality and what can go wrong, with uncompromising objectivity. It will also help to educate staff about "calculated risk-taking" and empower them to experiment. A more enthusiasm activity is to encourage co-workers to develop breakthrough "next best practices"... to move from (very) good to great.

An "adaptative" Leader in a Thai context might like to pay particular attention to the improvement of a few common areas for development we highlighted in our previous articles:

- assertiveness
- straightforward problem-solving
- priorities management
- creativity
- anticipation

May I suggest you now take a deep breath and a few minutes to identify which Leadership features will help you in your specific context to prepare your Organization to thrive through the... next crisis?

The next step of the exercise is to draw a 2-column table, list those Leadership features you need in the left-column, and then assess yourself on scale from 1 (under-par) to 4 (world-class). Finally, decide which one of those leadership features you want to take to the next level, and plan actions to make this happen and stick.

Competencies	Self-assessment
<p>Resources captured for my team) involving it, worked through the next crisis</p>	
1. Anticipate resource demands and build "base" and "worst" cases	
2. Anticipate with department - needed - acts on-time	
3. Have confidence that we can act	
4. Develop strategic thinking team	
5. Develop strategic people & teams (focus: reliability & openness)	
6. Anticipate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying needs and resources • building capacity to generate solutions • monitoring outcomes & adjusting as needed 	
7. Develop and execute change	
8.	

SET THE STAGE

- 1. Create a Sense of Urgency**
Help others see the need for change and the importance of acting immediately
- 2. Pull Together the Guiding Team**
Make sure there is a powerful group guiding the change—one with leadership skills, bias for action, credibility, communications ability, authority, analytical skills

DECIDE WHAT TO DO

- 3. Develop the Change Vision and Strategy**
Clarify how the future will be different from the past, and how you can make that future a reality

MAKE IT HAPPEN

- 4. Communicate for Understanding and Buy-in**
Make sure as many others as possible understand and accept the vision and the strategy
- 5. Empower Others to Act**
Remove as many barriers as possible so that those who want to make the vision a reality can do so
- 6. Produce Short-Term Wins**
Create some visible, unambiguous successes as soon as possible
- 7. Don't Let Up**
Press harder and faster after the first successes. Be relentless with instituting change after change until the vision becomes a reality

MAKE IT STICK

- 8. Create a New Culture**
Hold on to the new ways of behaving, and make sure they succeed, until they become a part of the very culture of the group

How do you get your executive team in the same way?

The book offers creative insights and tips about how to do it. Both starts with a honesty table and an facts how much the managers with an average score of 4.5.

"The 8 reflections of a team", by Patrick Lencioni, shows the future of the new appointed CEO's company in the eyes of his boss, who discovers that the most flawed team is an internal: lack of collaboration and accountability of the executive team. The leveraged 8 principles to build up a fully functional team:

1. Build trust amongst members (leave out fear of vulnerability)
2. Encourage productive conflict (instead of artificial harmony)
3. Hold themselves accountable (without ambiguity)
4. Demand accountability (set low standards)
5. Pay attention to results (share company's interests vs. individual status and ego)

The key does though you are often how difficult it is to implement such a program, and provide useful tips to make it succeed anyway.

In "Our leaders is missing", John Kotter (world wide authority on change management) and Holger Patzelt tell the well-illustrated story of penguins who has to cope on an iceberg until the day when a warm atmosphere brings in a new, growing ice mass and the iceberg which could lead to a collapse. The Penguin Leadership Team grasps an old but "Proven to Successful Change":

Former US President Quincy S. Adams once said "If you can inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are a leader". Now days one would probably add "adapt more"...