

FOLLOW THE LEADER'S STRENGTHS



AS ASIAN COMPANIES ENTER THE NEW ERA OF THIS REGION'S GROWING DOMINANCE, OLD MODELS OF LEADERSHIP THAT FOCUS ON IMPROVING WEAKNESSES ARE FAST SHOWING WEAKNESSES THEMSELVES. FINDING AND DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL LEADERS TO GIVE COMPANIES THE COMPETITIVE EDGE REQUIRES DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES' STRENGTHS, REPORTS **NICHOLAS HENLEY**

ASK ANY MANAGER IF LEADERS ARE BORN OR made and you are guaranteed conflicting answers. Then put 10 managers in a room and ask what traits great leaders have in common and the likelihood is that none will agree. Yet leadership skills remain an increasingly important issue in Thailand and everywhere else throughout the region as companies strive for that elusive competitive edge.

The days when companies could simply relocate their operations to Thailand and reap the cost advantages of doing so are long gone. Businesses are finding that they need to compete in areas other than just costs. Multinationals have in the last decade or so pioneered process improvements, yet these advantages are now largely marginalised as companies simply copy each other. They now find themselves chasing the last Holy Grail of strategic management: talented, dynamic people. Different companies are asking similar questions: What do we want of our staff that will give us the competitive edge? How can we build that into our business? Is there a DNA of leadership? The problem remains one of definition. Amid the confusion, fortunately, there is some order emerging.

Starting with Strengths

Separate studies on what makes a high-performing organisation by the Corporate Leadership Council and Gallup have reached the same conclusion: the number-one driver for performance at work occurs when an individual plays to his or her strengths. Strengths grow when a person discovers his or her talents and then practises them, building further skills in those areas, rather than fixing weak-

nesses, upon which most entrenched academic systems seem to be preoccupied. Further, these studies also suggest that talents are innate. Humans inherit approximately half of their talents from their parents through DNA. The other half they develop over the formative years of their youth.

These studies are major undertakings, incorporating over 150,000 participants in more than 40 countries. Conducted empirically (meaning there were no preconceptions, which is unusual with many studies of this kind), the findings are as statistically accurate and as meaningful as they can be. If, as the findings show, that over 80 percent of employees worldwide are not playing to their strengths at work, what does this mean for leadership?

In *The Effective Executive* Peter Drucker devotes two chapters to strengths and it's not difficult to understand why. "Most people think they know what they are good at," he observes. "They are usually wrong. And yet... people perform well only from strength. Unless an executive looks for strength and works at making strength productive, he will only get the impact of what a man cannot do, of his lacks, his weaknesses, his impediments to performance and effectiveness. To staff from what there is not and to focus on weakness is wasteful – a misuse, if not abuse, of the human resource."

In other words, it's impossible to talk about leadership without first having a clear understanding of one's strengths and those of others with whom he or she works.

How to Discover Strengths

Patcharin Chamnoot, a senior sales manager at Kimberly Clark Thailand, is young and well qualified, exactly the kind of person forward-looking companies need to attract and retain if they are to grow and continue to prosper. With a bright career path in front of her, she seems to be in a situation that many would envy. Yet a sense that there was a lack of efficiency in her job made her realise that perhaps there was a better way to perform her tasks. "I had a feeling that there were parts of my job I really didn't like. Yet I couldn't figure out why," she says. "They just didn't give me any sense of fulfilment." That feeling nagged her until she came across the Highlands Ability Battery programme through her company.

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LEFT Harnessing the team's strengths is the key to business success

BELOW Assessment tools can help decode an employee's hidden true value to the company



RIGHT Patcharin Chamnoot, a senior sales manager at Kimberly-Clark Thailand **BELOW** Understanding that leadership is a function of concept and context helps managers discover their and their employees' leadership skills

Highlands is an assessment process that uses tasks or work samples that decades of research have shown can help to hone in and target a person's inherent talents or abilities that make each individual unique. Following her Highlands assessment she was able to identify and target her natural abilities, which showed that she had talents in the areas of teaching, performing and coaching – all qualities that are much sought after by companies in Thailand as they work to groom future leaders.

So what did she learn from the exercise? “The key lesson was that I was not fully playing to my strengths and in a role not entirely suited to my talents. So by changing some of the ways I was working, like being more strategic and big-picture oriented, and by delegating certain recurring tasks, I was able to hone my present role to those strengths.” Getting this right can have a big pay-off for companies as well as to the individuals themselves. Research has discovered that business units where constituents play to their strengths significantly outperform business units where team members don't get the same opportunity. This has been found to be true across a range of key business outcomes including sales, productivity and customer loyalty.

Using the Highlands Ability Battery is one way to discover an employee's talents and it gives a list of natural roles that are key to discovering the context in which one's leadership qualities can thrive. As research has also shown, individuals who don't get the opportunity to play to their strengths, either from their manager or the organisation they work for, are more likely to become disengaged or leave – hardly the recipe for leadership.

From Strengths to Leadership

Leadership can be divided into two parts: context and concept. Context is the surroundings, the situation and combination of people in which leadership can grow. Context often explains why,

Individuals who don't get to play to their strengths are more likely to leave





ABOVE
Leadership skill is not a magical gift, but can be developed through training, coaching and the will to practise leading

when one star manager is headhunted to work for another company, for some reason his star doesn't shine in the new position. In this case it's often the context that is not right. Context, as the above case illustrates, entails matching an individual's talents and natural roles to his or her daily tasks and responsibilities.

Concept is the concepts or behaviours one chooses to adapt to a set of circumstances. While many individuals may have little or no control over the organisational context, including culture and the impact external forces has on it, they can – and do – choose their individual concept. But what is the most desired characteristic of leaders in terms of these concepts? It's this question that causes the most debate.

In an attempt to answer the question, we travel half a world away to the university town of Santa Clara, California, in the heart of Silicon Valley and home to two management experts who have made it their own 40-year global quest to identify the core elements of leadership. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, best known for their leadership bestseller, *The Leadership Challenge*, believe they have the answer.

The Leadership Challenge

"The challenge of leadership," says Kouzes, "is, in essence, how to get extraordinary things done in an organisation; in fact that was the original subtitle of the book." Is there a DNA of leadership though? Are leaders born or are they made? "This is the first common assumption about leadership that hamstring people, that leadership is some kind of gift or talent," Kouzes continues. "The assumption that leadership is a gift holds us back from learning. Leadership is a set of skills and abilities. If you have the desire, which is really critical, and the proper training, coaching and the

Leadership is a mix of skills and abilities combined with the desire to apply them

personal will to work hard and practise, you can significantly improve your ability to lead over time." So leadership can be learnt? "Absolutely," the management guru asserts.

When one talks of leadership, how does Kouzes define it? What is it that people expect in their leaders? "Over the 20 or so years that we have been studying leadership, one thing stands out: the four expectations team constituents have of their leaders haven't changed. In 1982 people wanted leaders who were honest, forward-looking, competent and inspiring. In 2009 we find these same four qualities are at the top of the list worldwide."

Kouzes continues, "We have distilled these into five leadership practices. First, you've got to be clear about a set of values and beliefs that will guide you, and then you need to set a personal example. Second, you have to inspire a shared vision. This means thinking about the long term and then enlist others in that mutual vision of the future. The third is to challenge the process, search for opportunities to grow, innovate and improve and then experiment and take the risks necessary to bring about that change. Fourth, enable others to act by strengthening individual capacity and fostering collaboration. And last, encourage the heart by celebrating the values and the victories of the group, as well as recognising individual contributions to success." What is Kouzes' advice on how to become a better leader? "Two words," he says. "Deliberate practice. Leadership is above all about hard work and deliberate practice."

Leadership in a Nutshell

It's clear that effective leadership is a combination of context and concepts: it's essential to find ourselves a role that plays to our strengths. After that, the key is patiently practising the globally researched traits of leadership, as done by Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge*. While the concept of leadership may be daunting to grasp, with Asia's Century already begun companies that want to lead the way in their selected industries ignore the need to identify talent and grow leaders at their peril. Using the approaches featured above is one method to tackle this challenging but vital area.

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