

A servant is often a true leader

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The beginning of the 21st century is rich in the events that are true game-changers to the already well-established management and leadership practices.

The new normal, as per a superb book of Belgian thinker Peter Hinnen, is a highly unstable world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) that renders some of our beliefs obsolete. By any means, it does not require business leaders anymore. We

do need them more than ever, but perhaps different species.

When we look back over the last few years, there are so many megatrends that were of pivotal importance to the global economy and the way people operate together. Just reflect on the terrorism, grave environmental threats, sudden outbreaks of pandemics or massive wave of digital disruptions. It all means that business models have to rapidly adapt fastchanging consumer behaviours or tectonic shifts into regulatory frameworks, while the end state is often undefined if not completely blurred.

The recent COVID-19 phenomenon only forces us to accelerate the digital transformation and shift from “brick and mortar” offerings to a fully online experience. It will not apply to all businesses, but a lion’s share of B2C industries are being significantly disrupted as we speak. According to McKinsey’s IT strategy survey, 79% of companies are in very initial stages of digital transformation, so there is a fear among senior leaders and a pressing need to revisit not only companies’ strategies but also their own leadership style. This creates a clear tension with a traditional “command and control” paradigm of leaders who are able to mastermind the strategy, lay down detailed actions plans and focus on flawless execution. It could be that none of the usual tactics will deliver results, and so the starting point should be the leader himself.

Who is a servant leader?

In recent years we have talked a lot about the notion of the servant leader and the trend only grew stronger with the advent of the IT-driven agile methodologies. It is there that the revolution of “people over process” is gaining traction and, if left unattended, could create a major gap between the employees’ expectations and corporate practices. For a leader to remain in control and continue bringing business value, the first logical move is to take a step back and tune in the VUCA world. Here is a set of logical steps to get there:

- 1. Accept that you cannot foresee the future.** The simple fact of admitting this openly creates a relief and obligation to change. It is worth communicating this clearly in the organisation since in many cases leaders are driven by fear of having to know all the answers and having to prove themselves constantly. It takes courage to take a lead in action and be decisive. But it requires even more energy to reflect and get out of the comfort zone. [tip: plan a town hall and/or a company blog to share this openly]
- 2. Search for data and inspirations.** The next step would be to look for help by gathering all data points possible, so reaching out to clients, employees, business ecosystem and any relevant sources. This could be via peer-to-peer conversations, but even better through collective processes like design thinking or brainstorming. Often inspiration comes under unexpected circumstances so a leader should ensure there is a quiet time to reflect and a clear process to gather and share insights. [tip: use facilitators like agile coaches or internal innovation labs]
- 3. Set viable hypotheses.** Then comes the synthesis phase, where a leader should group various ideas into several possible scenarios. The key is to prioritise expected benefits vs efforts/risks involved to limit the choices. [tip: use agile story points and MoSCow methodology to be empirical]
- 4. Set dot on the horizon.** In this step, a leader should set a vision that starts with the “why” problem. So, why do we exist as a business and what’s the unique value proposition? While it should be ambitious and relevant it’s wise to leave it relatively high level to allow for flexibility. That way we keep nose to the wind and make sure everybody is aligned with the objectives. [tip: visualise the idea on a one-pager and make it graphically inspiring]
- 5. Create safety and trust.** While it’s an overarching paradigm overall, it will be pivotal in the execution phase where we would like to have a “fail fast” environment. That way we reduce the fear and create an environment where employees will be working on hypotheses and towards the company’s vision. Instead of celebrating failures, a leader should make sure we learn from mistakes and never point fingers.
- 6. Involve your ecosystem.** Think beyond your own company’s resources and involve your suppliers, partners, stakeholders to co-create the solutions. It could be in a format of joint-ventures, loose tactical alliances or formal profit-sharing agreements. This way the leader should extend the resources and scale up fast and relatively risk-free. [tip: perhaps a hackathon helps to design and prototype future solutions]
- 7. Measure the value.** It’s imperative to have a common understanding of the value created. It will normally be a revenue increase or cost optimising or tackling risks. That will give the leadership oversight into the progress while the individual team could see its contribution. [tip: think about a simple yet holistic transformation dashboard to monitor all dimensions, including employee engagement]
- 8. Never give in.** There will be surely setbacks and depending on the industry a substantial number of ideas may go south. It’s important to keep the energy high and revisit step 1. Remember that this is a journey. A one that never ends. [tip: perform quarterly business review sessions to reflect on vision and delivery as well as team retrospective to spot the needs to adjustments as soon as they emerge]

The next servant leader is constantly on a quest and remains open to the world where principles are not cast in stone. It takes vast curiosity, courage and determination to remain on the course. So, the last tip could be on a more personal level. You could check what is your true north and type of interactions that generate energy for you. After all, as a leader, you are often alone and should create energy for others.