

Reflections on Leadership

Redefining Leadership in the Asian Century

My first business trip to Asia was in 1993. At the time, 'Asian Tigers' such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea were fueling the economic growth of the region, if not the world, and hardly anyone spoke about China and India except to point out how difficult and backward they were when it came to doing business there!

Then almost ten years went-by before I were to head back to Asia six years ago, and have since been working there on a regular basis to my delight! Singapore is still a very attractive place to be when on business but, these days, working in Mumbai or Shanghai is far more rewarding when it comes to witnessing the new challenges and trends in leadership development and their impact on organisations.

In this short article, I aim to share my insights in the trends and changes in leadership development practices I have witnessed over the last few years in Asia.

Stephen Roach, the Chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia, in his recently published book 'The Next Asia - Opportunities & Challenges for a New Globalization', argues that 'the Asian Century is one where Asia produces to its home markets rather than just markets around the world'. As a result, the prospects for greater consumer participation and closer cooperation among the Asian economies have increased significantly.

In such a context, I have witnessed the need for organisations to trade old leadership practices for leaner, faster, more flexible and regionally collaborative ones e.g. from the leader as controller to the leader as inspirer; from product-led change to consumer-led innovation; from face-to-face to virtual and so on. Also, never before has the need to attract, develop and retain leadership talent been so pressing.

In response, many Asian organisations have developed imaginative leadership development practices. For example, Lenovo, who bought IBM's personal computer operations in 2005, has methodically developed career maps and talent pipelines for everyone in its pool of high potentials. These career maps link directly to key slots across the globe and accountability for the entire process rests with line leadership and not with HR.

At an individual level, leaders are increasingly faced with the challenge of building networks and creating a sense of community to get things done fast in a complex organisation. Key objectives need to be identified, stakeholders mapped out as well as their relative importance and the strength of existing relationships and information flows between them; and priorities identified including providing time and space for community building. Even for countries such as China, where probably the single most important concept in business is 'Guanxiwang' (which means network of contacts), the challenge is increasingly to do so virtually.

Another key challenge at the individual leadership level is how to leverage national, corporate or functional cultural differences at work. When I first went to Asia, I made the mistake of assuming that all Asians had a similar frame of reference when it comes to concepts such as time, priorities and status, but soon realized that major differences exist. With increased regional cooperation, leaders need to be made aware of the differences, learn how to respect and reconcile them.

These leadership development challenges at an organisational or personal level have prompted the Learning & Development function in organisations in Asia to reassess the provision of development opportunities for their leaders. There is the growing realisation that senior leaders in Asia, now more than ever, need to network, brainstorm, share knowledge and build relationships with their peers who have similar challenges; hence the trend away from traditional classroom, teacher-led to multi-place, real life, real time opportunities such as the learning expedition, which includes visits to individually selected organisations and peer-to-peer exchanges that provide an inspiring and renewing experience.

Going forward, I would argue that the constant integration and distillation of Western and Asian leadership development practices will become a continuous part of staying competitive in the Asian Century.