

**Frontier of Leadership: The Leadership Journey of
The Previous Start-Up Project Manager**

by

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Content

Introduction	1
Lesson 1: Before Being the Leader, First Be a Proactive Learner	1
Lesson 2: Storytelling as a Key to Inspire the Team and Align the Vision	4
Lesson 3: Maintaining Tension while Mitigating Conflict: Cultivating an Innovative and Creative Team.....	6
Lesson 4: Transformative Leadership versus Directive Leadership: The Pros and Cons and What should We be Mindful.....	錯誤! 尚未定義書籤。
Discussion	8
Why Taiwan is Good at Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) but Not Innovation?.....	11
Is there the best leadership style or the golden formula for the successful leader?	11
Conclusion.....	12
Reference.....	15

Introduction

As a project manager in a startup company, without formal management training, I built my leadership style through online courses and on-the-job experience training. Affected by Taiwan's hierarchical and efficiency-focused culture, I developed a more directive leadership style, for instance, planning every project task for my team. Despite the highly on-time project completion rate, I realised this approach led to conflicts and demotivation and hindered innovation, hurting the organisation's long-term growth. Additionally, as the organisation grew, the projects I needed to manage increased in number, complexity, and scope. The directive and individualistic leadership approach also pressured me significantly and frustrated me.

Aware of the limitations of my leadership style, I enrolled on the "Frontiers of Leadership: A Global Perspective" course. I aimed to explore diverse leadership approaches while embracing the potential of transformative leadership to create a sustainable and empowered organisational culture.

Activities in the lectures offered a platform for me to explore transformative leadership. The highlight of diversity and innovation in the workplace and the opportunity to collaborate with individuals from various backgrounds created a value initiative condition to make me aware of my weakness, prompting my personal growth. Throughout this essay, I will share the four most impressive moments from the course, reflect on them to my previous experiences and analyse the leadership implications hidden at the moment through theoretical tools. I will also provide critiques and highlight areas for improvement to apply in my future career.

Lesson 1: Before Being the Leader, First Be a Proactive Learner

The most inspirational moment during the course was Professor Sudhanshu's case sharing about introducing cold breakfast brands to the Indian market. The project team, consisting of professional consultants, planned the market entrance based on thorough research conducted by a well-known marketing company. However, despite their efforts and the enormous marketing resources support, the introduction of cold breakfast failed to meet expectations, leaving the team puzzled about the reasons behind the failure.

Surprisingly, the solution to this problem came from an unexpected source - a normal food stand operator in India. The operator revealed a simple, humble, but crucial fact: generally, there is no cold breakfast in India. Therefore, it is not surprising that creating brand awareness cannot appeal to customers to do the consumption. This revelation led the project team to rethink their target audience and strategies, eventually paving the way to success and also saving the team from being fired.

By analyse with the academic literature, the project team planned the market entry strategies based on the extensive market research conducted by the renowned marketing is a vivid example of exploitation strategies discussed by March (1991). Despite the considerable efforts and substantial resources invested, their venture failed to meet expectations, verifying the importance of the balance between exploration and exploitation strategies argued by Levinthal & March (1993). Additionally, the food stand operators reveal valuable insights that justify Huff (1973)'s argument: the breakthrough inside might reveal by the unassuming individuals. Reconsidering their assumptions of the market and adapting their target audience and strategies accordingly, the project team demonstrates how the exploration and exploitation (March, 1991) and absorptive capacity(Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) concepts can help the project avoid learning traps and myopia. (Levinthal & March, 1993).

This scenario strongly resonates with me in the Taiwanese cultural context, which includes two main points. Firstly, leaders should be perfect. They are expected to know every project detail and perform at the highest level of expertise. Secondly, there is a significant tendency to rely on pre-assumptions, which we call labels in Taiwan, based on a person's background, experience, position, or academic credentials. Often, the opinions of individuals without an "expert" status, such as the food stand operator in Professor Sudhanshu's case, are ignored. This tendency shows the hiring possibility of confusion of experience, therefore causing the risk of myopia. (Levinthal & March, 1993) As a project manager, I also found myself more inclined to trust my own judgment rather than considering the input of teammates who may not have demonstrated extraordinary performance in previous projects.

Although I have not experienced project failures due to ignoring others' opinions and being a director during my two-year tenure, it is evident that this approach shut up the team member and may have deprived the team of valuable opportunities to improve projects more efficiently and the potential revolution idea and hindered their growth potential. The growth of the organisation will also be limited by the leader's competency. By overlooking diverse perspectives, we may have missed out on exploring new possibilities for both the member of the project teams and the organisation. (Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991)

The cases of the cold breakfast introduction to the Indian market demonstrate the importance of the absorptive capacity for the organisation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) and the significance of being open to learning from everyone irrespective of their background or status Huff (1973). Moreover, the organisation also needs to be mindful of the balance between the exploration strategies and the exploitation strategy. (Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991) As a leader, I must foster an inclusive environment that values diverse opinions and encourages team members to freely express their thoughts. Embracing this approach will not only enhance project outcomes but also empower the team to thrive and innovate collectively.

The analysis highlights the critical role of the balance between exploration and exploitation and the importance of external information absorption in the organisation's learning. However, several questions remain open-ended.

Firstly, what constitutes meaningful learning to prevent myopia when the team conduct the exploration? Although absorbing external information and considering different perspectives are vital, the constraint of boundary rationality should also be considered. Since we live in an information explosion generation, selecting and filtering the information needed is critical. Although Cohen & Levinthal (1990) argue that the more prior knowledge the team has, the better the team can absorb external information, a deeper investigation into effective information-filtering strategies that align with an organisation's goals and context is still necessary. In my personal opinion, creating the safe space and empowering the teammate who present the

sufficient prior knowledge on the discussion and research section might increase the organisation's absorption capacity.

Additionally, when should the team transition from exploration to exploitation? Even though exploration and exploitation are interdependent, a transition point is still unclear. Theoretically, whether exploration sparks new ideas, or the discussion reaches a stalemate can be considered as a possible timing to transit from exploration to exploitation. However, finding a set of more concrete indicators that prompt the shift from exploration to exploitation could provide valuable insights for leaders.

Finally, both cases enlighten that leaders should provide a safe space for peers to share their vision and express their idea. The strategies to cultivate the initiative condition for the team to raise self-awareness and self-transformation haven't been discussed. How can leaders effectively foster self-awareness among team members and encourage alignment with the organisation's vision? Moreover, what strategies can be implemented to establish a safe space that encourages open expression of diverse opinions, enhancing innovative thinking?

Lesson 2: Storytelling as a Key to Inspire the Team and Align the Vision

The second stop of my journey is finding the tools to awaken my teammates to their abilities and align them with the organization's vision. Fortunately, I have found this tool in the course- storytelling. The second eye-open moment I wish to share emerged during the exercise in lecture seven.

Tasked with sharing an inspiring story which should have some leadership implications and a meaningless story, our diverse group included me as the only Asian member and others from the Western world. In the first round of the discussion, we narrowed down our choice of stories to encapsulate the life of Princess Diana and the journey of Buddha. When discussing Princess Diana's narrative, my Canadian and English teammates resonated deeply, forming emotional connections and reflecting on the leadership style of Princess Diana in their personal lives. Yet, cultural differences made Queen Diana a distant figure for me, a symbol confined to

pages. This stark contrast hindered my grasp of her immense popularity and cultural significance.

Conversely, Buddha's tale resonated more with Taiwanese culture. As a prince who embraced humility, I understood the societal expectations imposed upon Buddha and the difficulty for him to hear and learn from impoverished people, relating their lives to his own.

The emotional resonance to the story of Princess Diana experienced by the Canadian and English teammates demonstrates that storytelling can build connections among teammates by sharing value and augmenting the impact of the message delivered by the leader. (Tjan ,2014) The reflection of the story into their personal life reveals the effectiveness of storytelling in vision conveyance and inspiring people to create the initiative condition for self-transformation.(Julien et al., 2010; Tjan, 2014) On the other hand, my personal challenge in relating the story and the converse reaction to the Buddha's story underscores the significant influence of cultural familiarity and relatability proposed by Julien et al.(2010)

This strong comparison mirrored my experiences from my previous job. At project kick-off meetings, we shared stories about project backgrounds and the project's vision, striving to unite the team. However, I learned that even if a story touched me and our stakeholders, team members might not share the connection. For instance, a backend developer confessed indifference to overarching visions, focusing solely on task specifics and deadlines.

The difference in the ability of my peer to connect with the story showcases the importance of being aware of the diverse perspective of the team and crafting the stories to bridge the culture and values gaps. (Tjan ,2014) The backend developer's feedback underscores the insights of Tjan (2014). The leader should cater to different peers' priorities and convey the implication message meaningfully.

The cases and the literature highlight the significance of cultural context in storytelling. In a diverse team, crafting a story that contains the cultural context every audience can fully engage might be difficult. Even

though the leader and most of the audience can relate to the story, it might inadvertently alienate some of the team members. On the other hand, the culture might be the double-blade regarding the inappropriate context utilising. As the storyteller, the leader should be mindful of the ethical implications and potential misinterpretations when embedding the culture into the story.

The example of the backend developer indicates the field that technical expertise and precision information are paramount. The power of storytelling might not be as significant as the other environment. While Tjan (2014) proposed storytelling as an indispensable leadership tool, its effectiveness across industries and roles can be further explored.

While storytelling, as a powerful leadership tool, can foster connection, communicate value and enhance leadership impacts in most of the environment, it should be complemented by a sufficient understanding of audience dynamics, potential limitations and the ethical consideration.

Additionally, while the analysis underscores the power of storytelling in conveying the complex leadership implication into an accessible format and creating the initiative condition to foster self-engineering, storytelling, as an effective communication tool, does not create a safe space to let team members express their ideas. Therefore, as leaders, we should create a safe space to let the team members share their transformative journey.

Lesson 3: Maintaining Tension while Mitigating Conflict: Cultivating an Innovative and Creative Team

Armed with inspirational storytelling techniques to facilitate reflective self-awareness, I will focus on creating a safe space for open dialogue in the subsequent phase.

Initially, my understanding of safe space is a utopia without disagreement. The diversity of the value and the perspective should be persuaded to align with the majority. To mitigate the disagreement, my organisation implements two strategies: Firstly, the congruence in the personality and values of the majority in the

organisation played an important role in the talent acquisition process, reducing the disparities. Secondly, the hierarchical organisation structure was enacted. When the dissent occurred, the manager obtained the absolute right to decision-making. These strategies ensured a semblance of unity in the organisation.

During the last class, the debate on conflict and tension management reshapes my perspective entirely. The paradoxical concept introduced by Professor Sudhanshu highlighted that effective leadership involves mitigating conflict while nurturing healthy tension. This concept initially confounded me: Is conflict not synonymous with tension? Shouldn't unanimity and shared values be prerequisites for successful teamwork? Would not tension disrupt harmony in the organisation?

The class discourse illuminated the distinction between conflict and tension. Tension embraces diversity of thoughts and perspectives, fosters an environment where different viewpoints coexist harmoniously, and each opinion is valued and weighed impartially. (Cullen-Lester et al., 2017) Conflict, in comparison, exhibits a dominance of certain perspectives, quashing others arbitrarily. The former creates multifaceted considerations and nurtures an environment rich in creativity. Conversely, uniformity breeds groupthink which causes the organisation to focus on a singular path while disregarding essential market signals. (Sato & Makabe, 2021)

Reflecting on my past experiences, I realized that the “harmony” cultivated within my startup masked deeper issues. Pursuing the facade of unity inadvertently plunged us into the abyss of groupthink. Mitigating tension hindered the organisation’s ability to adapt the market changes and perform innovation activities. This rendered my company vulnerable in the dynamic market. (Park, 2019; Sato & Makabe, 2021)

True innovation thrives in an environment that embraces diverse perspectives and enables tension to coexist harmoniously. (Sato & Makabe, 2021) And a safe space, opposite to my initial imagination, is not a realm without disagreement; it is a realm where differences are celebrated, and tensions foster vibrant discourse. As leaders, we should create a space that allows tensions to flourish while curbing the stifling grip of unproductive conflict.

However, another intricate facet arises in this approach: how do we transform tension into action without causing conflict? Maintaining diverse perspectives can stall progress and squander time. The class debate on nominating the two most perplexing topics demonstrated this challenge in which both groups were entrenched in their views. Then, a stalemate occurred.

In such instances, tension can evolve into conflict if left without action. The leader should step in when the exploration becomes unproductive, and a stalemate occurs. This intervention is necessary to prevent the transition of tension into conflict. The timing for leader to intervene recognizes when discussion stagnates, and one or more parties begin pushing for concessions. This signifies the impending transition from tension to conflict. The main goal of intervention is propelling progress while preserving tension. The leader can foster a symbiotic relationship between tension and harmony by choosing the path that ensures all team members feel their perspectives are considered. The effective leader should embrace diversity and transform tension into productive discourse and decisive action. By doing so, the leader can create an environment where innovation flourishes, conflicts are resolved, and the team remains focused on its collective vision.

Lesson 4: Transformative Leadership versus Directive Leadership: The Pros and Cons and What Should We Be Mindful.

During my six-week leadership journey, I learned the essence of knowledge sharing, the tools that can inspire team members to be mindful of their ability and form the shared vision, and the techniques to create the initiative conditions, fostering their self-transformation journey. In the end, I want to share the activity representing the milestone of my self-transformation journey.

The impressive experience was the paper house construction activities held during lecture eight. There were two rounds of house construction in the activity, and the class was split into two groups. Both groups were asked to construct a prototype of the house and then guided the other group on its construction. Surprisingly, both groups gravitated towards a directive leadership style in the initial round, guiding the other groups step-by-step. When reflecting on my previous experience as a job manager, I realized that when confronted with

familiar projects, a directive approach often took precedence due to its time efficiency and stable outcome.

Catalysed by the teaching assistant's suggestions, both teams switched to the transformative leadership style in the subsequent round, creating the initiative condition for the other team to explore collaboratively and express their viewpoints on improving the prototype, encouraging innovation activities. As a result, the outcome of the transformative approach presented a high diversity and creative level, while some of the "houses" deviated significantly from the prototype.

The outcomes in each round highlighted the features of each leadership style. The first round, in which directive leadership was applied, yielded efficient results. With a hundred per cent of yield rate, the house constructed in the initial round used significantly less time, which included instruction and construction, than the subsequent round, and the house was closely resembling the prototype. On the other hand, the transformative leadership approach cultivated an environment in which the group members were empowered to explore and decide their own construction plans, resulting the diverse outcomes. However, the low yield rate (defined by the houses' capability of standing) revealed the challenges of deviating from the original vision, which in this case is building a stable house.

This activity presented the transformative leadership style that cultivates an environment that encourages exploration and creativity and fosters individual growth and novel perspectives, while the directive approach achieves efficient task completion and adherence to predefined standards. Both approaches have advantages and challenges, and the context, goals, and dynamics of the team and project decide which style should be employed.

In the initial round, the directive leadership style, focusing on the completion of tasks, yielded efficient results. (Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021) The transformative leadership approach, leveraged in the second round, fostered an environment that empower team members to explore innovative approaches and stimulates diverse prospects and innovative thinking, leading to creative breakthroughs. (Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021; Çekmecelioğlu & Özbağ,

2016)

On the other hand, the trade-offs between the leadership styles should also be aware. The directive approach ensured completion within a shorter timeframe and adherence to predefined standards. This underscores that direct leadership aligns better with its task-oriented nature (Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021). Moving on to the transformative approach, which fosters an innovative and exploratory atmosphere, showcases its advantage of nurturing creativity and providing a safe space for diverse perspectives. (Tjan, 2014; Çekmecelioğlu & Özbağ, 2016) However, the variation in yield rates between the rounds highlights the challenges of embracing creativity without sacrificing task outcomes. (Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021)

The activity also aligns with balancing exploration and exploitation mentioned in section one.(Levinthal & March, 1993) The directive approach corresponds to exploitation, where known methods are efficiently employed, leading to predictable outcomes, while the transformative approach aligns with exploration, encouraging experimentation and potential innovative breakthroughs. (Levinthal & March, 1993; Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021) The balance between these two approaches is critical for organizational success and innovation (Levinthal & March, 1993), as seen in the contrasting outcomes of the rounds.

The activity illustrated the dynamic of directive and transformative leadership. The trade-off between efficiency and innovation, task orientation and creativity, and known methods versus novel approaches showcases the complexity of leadership decisions in alignment with organizational vision while fostering a growth and innovation environment.

According to the analysis, when deciding which leadership style to apply to the projects or the task, the leader should be mindful of the trade-off between the low yield rate, which hurts the short-term interest, and the lack of innovation, which lead to the vulnerable in the dynamic market. However, some strategies, such as iterative testing and prototyping, can help innovative ideas transform into valuable outcomes without excessive investment compared with directly conducting the innovative idea on the main value-generating process.

On the other hand, the leader can leverage the hybrid approach to address the tasks with require in a timely manner while maintaining diversity in the organisation. The leader can integrate the elements from two different styles, capitalizing on the efficiency of the directive style and cultivating the innovative culture simultaneously. For instance, for a project that is required to complete by a tight deadline, directive leadership is preferred to ensure the project is completed on time. Conversely, brainstorming and idea generation is essential when a team needs to handle a complex project or conduct a research and development activity. The transformative leadership style can foster diverse insights and breakthroughs in these cases. Additionally, for a task with a precise objective, such as the quality requirement on large-scale production, the directive approach can prevent ambiguity and ensure adherence to established procedures, while when the organisation face complex problems, transformational leadership can unlock the innovative solution and infuse fresh perspectives.

In summary, while transformative leadership stimulates creativity and diverse thinking, the challenge of converting innovative ideas into practical outcomes should also be considered. This can be addressed by the strategies such as prototyping. Additionally, depending on the organisation's demand, the leaders can adopt a hybrid approach incorporating directive and transformation approaches to navigate the complexities of leadership and foster an environment where efficiency and innovation coexist harmoniously.

Discussion

Why Taiwan is Good at Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) but Not Innovation?

With newfound techniques and insights from the course, I've re-examined not only my previous company but also my homeland, Taiwan.

The prevalent directive leadership and goal-oriented help Taiwan to be the leading country in the OEM field; however, the cost is a relative weakness in research and development (R&D). Taiwan's directive leadership style, focusing on efficient task accomplishment, propels Taiwan's excellence in OEM production, where

precision and timeliness are paramount. However, the hierarchy and adherence to plans, as demonstrated by the hierarchical power structure and reluctance to share knowledge across status lines, reflect the characteristics of directive leadership (Çekmecelioğlu & Özbağ, 2016).

The directive leadership approach may inadvertently hinder Taiwanese innovation and R&D competencies. Due to the fear of being replaced by a peer in a lower position, a lack of shared knowledge can limit an organization's innovation capability. (Cullen-Lester, Maupin, and Carter, 2017) Moreover, the dominance of personal interests over collective goals, as seen in employees withholding insights for personal gain, discourage collaborative and diverse thinking. (Lei, Gui, and Le, 2021) These factor limits the Taiwanese industry to the individuals' competencies and causes the potential risk of suffering from myopia.

To address this, transformative leadership techniques can be introduced to nurture innovation activity and cultivate more collaboration in R&D. Encouraging storytelling to align employees with the company's vision can foster shared purpose and direction. Tjan (2014) Embracing shared leadership and position rotations can break hierarchical barriers and stimulate fresh perspectives. Sato and Makabe (2021), The absorptive capacity discussed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990) also aligns with the need for Taiwan's organizations to develop the ability to absorb external knowledge and ideas.

In conclusion, Taiwan's strength in OEM fields and its challenges in R&D can be attributed to its directive leadership culture. By embracing transformative leadership techniques, encouraging knowledge sharing, and promoting collaboration, Taiwanese organizations can unlock their innovative potential, bridging the gap between efficiency and creativity. This transition can help Taiwan not only excel in production but also thrive in the realm of research and development.

Is there the best leadership style or the golden formula for the successful leader?

Reflecting on my leadership journey, I've encountered diverse techniques and concepts that can foster innovation and maintain diversity in the group, including peer learning, embracing diversity, meditation for

self-awareness, cultivating sustainable teamwork and so on. However, leadership is a content-wise study, and each approach has its context, advantage, and limitation. For instance, while transformative leadership can enhance group growth, leaders must be mindful of the balance between exploration and exploitation and the possible sacrifice of short-term efficiency. Although storytelling is a widely applicable communication technique, the leader should craft the story based on the given context, including the vision of the organisation, the background of the audience, and the ethical implication.

It's important to acknowledge that no leadership style or approach is universally applicable. Situations, teams, and organizational contexts differ greatly, and the most effective leaders are those who can adapt their techniques to fit these unique dynamics. There's no magic formula that can guarantee success in all scenarios. The art of leadership lies in understanding the underlying principles, tools, and concepts and then customizing and combining them to suit the specific needs of the moment.

Leadership effectiveness emerges from a blend of self-awareness, continuous learning, adaptability, and a willingness to experiment with various techniques. Rather than pursuing a single "golden formula," successful leaders embrace the complexity of the role and embrace an ongoing journey of growth and refinement.

Conclusion: The End of the Course does not Mean the Conclude of My Leadership Journey

The "Frontiers of Leadership: A Global Perspective" course is not only the course that teaches me theoretical knowledge of transformative leadership but the experience and journey that create the transformation initiative that makes me aware of my weakness and conducts the self-engineering.

While the course has concluded, my leadership journey will continue with the acquired toolkit of skills. In the next stage of the leadership journey, I will employ the techniques I have learned, such as storytelling and tension management, in future group-based assignments and projects to build a shared vision in the group, inspire personal growth and self-awareness among teammates and put my knowledge into practical use.

Recognizing leadership's context-based and dynamic nature, I will adapt my approach to environment dynamics and organizational vision, fostering a culture of continuous growth and being a leader that can evolve with the macroeconomy changes.

With the vital tools that I can use to overcome ongoing leadership challenges, my self-transformation journey will be lifelong as I utilize these skills to be mindful of my ability and adapt the leadership tools flexibly to help the organizations I engage with..

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