

# Essence of Leadership

## EXPLORATORY STUDY

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*Thanks to my grandparents, Clorinda, Fausto, Maria and Oreste, for teaching me the essence of leadership.*

## Abstract

The study discusses several leadership topics such as historical models, the relationships between leadership and culture, innovation, and change. Different management models are explored, highlighting the differences of management-centric versus employee-centric leadership styles and evolutions. New leadership skills such as social intelligence and emotional intelligence seems to be required in successful organizations, while continuous learning and mental openness seems to be a trend topic in innovative ways of improving organizations productivity. Leadership responsibilities are moving towards building professionally happy teams, where people can be authentic and themselves in the working environment. Leaders capabilities of managing critical operational events seems also to have an increasingly relevance to build organizations resiliency and competitiveness, therefore leaders capable of providing solution to operational challenges, seems to be more effective than leaders detached from operations. The study provides also a mapping of the discussed models to a leader that made a remarkable impact in my career, highlighting also tangible issues that in some cases were not resolved, even when the leader applied models and principles. Based on self-awareness, the study provides a self-assessment of my skillsets, highlighting domains where I need to fill competences gaps or where I should keep fortifying my strengths in certain areas.

**Keywords:** Kotter Accelerators, Appreciative Enquiry, self-assessment, Emotional Intelligence, Level 5 leadership, leaders evaluation, situational leadership, adaptive leadership

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## 1. Leadership definition, models, and historical context

Leadership definitions, radically evolved over time, starting from the concept of natural born leaders from the historian *Carlyle (1841)*, where leaders were more associated to heroes, characterized by a gender-centric view, and with leadership effectiveness criterion associated to specific people traits. As explained in the next chapters, time demonstrated that Carlyle and similar leadership views had several flaws, as leadership seems to expand more than individual charismatic characteristics or gender-specific or limited only to certain human contexts. Over time, researches demonstrated that leadership can be studied and taught to anyone. Although Carlyle seems to be right on the fact that people who made remarkable differences in human history, had strong and defined leadership traits, however the weak point of those models seems to be that they associate leadership effectiveness to specific aspects that are intrinsic of people since born.

Later in 1950s, were arising leadership theories focused on the analysis of people traits, with researchers like *Likert (1961)*, *Stogdill & Coons (1957)*, defining leadership as something more related to traits than specific people personalities; these studies argues that leaders are required to build trust and mutual respect with subordinates, showing appreciation for the ideas and wellbeing of the people part of the organization; clearly these studies seems to be the origins of modern team building and employee centric views of leadership. The studies also highlight the importance of how leaders structure the organization to achieve commons goals, which seems one of the foundational concepts behind modern management, in line with *Ansoff (1965)* view of strategic management. Stogdill and Coons' view seems to go in the direction of leaders needing to have skills to balance the concern of people and the concern of results, while starting from the 1960s, researches were going in the direction of leadership as a set of skills that can be learned and taught, therefore leaders are made; yet it seems from *Zaccaro et al. (2004)* and *Zaccaro (2007)* that models from 1950s based on *Trait Theories* were still associating traits with specific individual differences, rather the characteristics required by anyone to be an effective leader.

1960s were the years where finally researches were sustaining that leadership is detached from individual differences, introducing theories like behavioral style, contingency and situational leadership, where the focus was more on evaluating the outcome of leader's actions. *Blake & Mouton (1964)* developed a model mostly based on behavioral leadership, arguing that the most effective management model is both people-centric and results-oriented; on the same direction *Blake & McCanse (1991)* developed the "Leadership Grid" model, sustaining that the best leadership style is not related to the situations. A possible weak point of behavioral leadership seems that it does not take in consideration the context and environmental factors like organizational culture or local market conditions which might influence customer choices or different stakeholder's perspectives, especially in the strategy definition phase. Situational leadership models aim to address these concerns, by arguing that effective leaders can select the appropriate style according the situation and circumstances, as proposed by *Tannenbaum & Schmidt (1973)*, arguing that leaders should follow a course of actions ("continuum") and capable of adapting to change; interestingly, the continuum model places emphasis on leaders skills, values and personality, which seems to overlap in some aspects with the leadership traits models. Tannenbaum and Schmidt model seems to be effective in organizations with more dynamic conditions, for instance in cases of leaders managing organizations distributed across multiple geographic locations, with different cultural values, or cases of multinational companies that would need to adapt their core competencies to multiple markets with different characteristics; in this case adaptive leadership styles seems to be more suitable, as different competitive strategies could be required. As a possible weak aspect, situational leadership seems to require certain leadership skills, seniority and mental flexibility to apply the right leadership style to the changing environments; it could be challenging to build the skills and establish an

organizational culture where situational leadership could be effectively implemented, such as large organizational environments; therefore, this approach seems not to be scalable in several circumstances. Similar concerns are discussed also by *Fiedler (1967)*, arguing that contingency leadership could complement situational leadership, by identifying the right leader for a certain environment or to recognize and modify situational elements to better fit the leadership style of the available leaders; with this approach, not every leader require to have all the skills needed to adapt to new changing scenarios, as the skills are available across multiple leaders. Fiedler's approach seems more scalable than situational models, however it still requires having strong senior leadership skills capable of identifying the leaders with best fitting skills for a certain changing environment, which seems to require a strong collaboration between executives and operational environments conditions, otherwise seems to be challenging the identification of fitting leadership skills, without knowing the operational challenges to be addressed. Fiedler's view seems to be the foundation of contemporary consulting business models.

During late 1970s and onwards, the relational and social theories seems to gain traction amongst companies and researchers, where the focus seemed to shift towards ethics, people-centric, shared leadership, and bottom-up decision-driven models. On this regard, *Burns (1978)* introduce transformational leadership, describing it as a leadership style that focus on ideals and emotions to inspire and motivate people; Burns provide a clear distinction between transformational and transactional leadership, arguing that transactional leadership mostly build appealing by leveraging people self-interest as main motivator. *Yukl (2020)*, argue that new studies on transactional leadership focus on how to achieve tasks and goals, with reduced focus on the "moral elevation" of followers. Yukl researches argue also that effective leaders use a combination of both transactional and transformational leadership, accordingly, therefore having an approach in line with situational leadership.

From the analyzed literatures, it seems that creativity and innovation are linked to motivation, cognitive and psychological aspects of people; leaders seem to be responsible regarding how to build creative and innovative Teams and working environments. *Amabile et al (1996)* provide a definition of creativity and innovation based on successful implementation of new and useful ideas within an organization. Amabile seems to focus on how important is for leaders to set the scene for creativity and innovative organizations. From Neuroscience perspective, *Heilman, Nadeau & Beversdorf (2003)* considers creativity enablers mainly stress-less environments, REM sleep and Calming or relaxing the mind for a period. *Bronowski (1972)*, defines creativity as an intuition that connects and unifies points from different topics, mostly unrelated between them. In accordance, *Heilman et al. (2003)* argue that discoveries frequently happen by accidental occurrences, but leaders must be prepared to understand and related the importance of those accidents. On the same line, "The Medici Effect" from *Johansson (2004)* provides modern studies and theories regarding intersecting different disciplines as foundation of the creativity process, while *Amabile & Khaire (2008)* research, provides insight to leaders to increase creativity, like be mentally open to other ideas, enable collaboration, enhance diversity, accept the inevitability and utility of failure, and motivate with intellectual challenge. According to this study, leaders are required to increase the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors; *Amabile (2011)* provides a method to support leaders boosting organizations creativity, by building a culture of small wins, praises, and celebrations, called "Progress Principle". By other side, it seems that Amabile's model require additional methodologies like Agile to effectively split tasks complexities and implement the progress principle.

On the line of achieving professional happiness, how people feel in the professional environment, seems to be a topic of intense study since decades, including the researches focusing on the emotional side of leadership. The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI), proposed by *Goleman*

(1995) and according to the latest studies in *Goleman et al. (2019)*, is described as an aggregate of mindfulness, resilience, authentic leadership, focus, self-awareness, confidence, listening and other disciplines. EI is a broad topic, which seems to focus on what happens to people within, and how leaders deal with those feelings. EI provides a framework to build skills and prepare people emotionally for challenges, as argued by *Goleman et al. (2019)*. It seems that the EI Leadership style finds its best match with *Authentic Leadership (AL)*, as discussed by *Ilies et al. (2005)*, arguing about the efficacy of not having roles distinction between entrepreneur, manager, employee and to consider everybody as leaders. This is consistent with *Wilding (1999)* argument that modern organizations seem to look for employees with entrepreneurship attitude, in favor of new set of skills that are not always limited or related to technical knowledge or intelligence. AL is described by *Senior & Swailes (2016)*, as leaders that are true to themselves, without imitating or emulating other people or models, and being fully conscient of their values and beliefs. AL encloses the concept of truthiness to our-self, as explained by *Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgana (2005)*, providing better skills to resolve unforeseen challenges and deal with unexpected problems. A possible weak point of EI, could be that for leaders and teams, seems to be exhausting to keep enduring empathy, listening, emotional intelligence, continuously improving and so forth. Sustaining the pace of continuous changes and innovations, without being authentic as a person in the professional environment, seems to be unsustainable over time. The research for authenticity and finding the way to be him/her-self seems to be a key factor to make EI effective and reduce risks of people emotional and mental burnout.

EI seems to be a reasonable emotional approach for leaders during operational problem solving; *Yukl (2020)* summarizes his own and other researches on this topic, arguing that a common factor of effective leaders is that operational issues are approached timely and appropriately. Yukl research seems to prove that effective leaders are very much connected with organization operations and have a degree of understanding of the issues that affect the organization at all levels; therefore this approach suggests that traditional assumptions of leadership and management, where leaders have less involvement in daily operations, seems to be less effective than in organizations where leaders have exposure to technical aspects of the operational environment. The approach seems to facilitate innovation to improve operational problem solving, as it could improve the executives' understanding of the organization's operational challenges, as also sustained by *Peters & Waterman (1982)*. By other side, *Greenleaf (1970, 1977)* introduces the "Servant Leadership" model, which is more focused on facilitating and empowering people to reach their goals, rather having management involvement in operational challenges; Servant Leadership seems to be effective in times where organizations are not affected by financials or in non-profit organizations, but it could be challenging to keep the balance of employee wellness and organizational financials during crisis or during difficult business times; this view, seems to promote situational leadership style, where leaders could rely on servant leadership during solid financial times, while relying on different models like situational and contingent leadership, when financial performances assume high priority during organizational lifecycles.

Theorists like *Boal and Hooijberg (2001)* argue that new leaders are required to have skills such as charisma, flexibility, and the ability to deal with behavioral and cognitive complexities present in organizations. The study considers the essence of leadership as combination of three sets of skills such as absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and managerial wisdom. These three sets of skills mainly focus on the ability to learn, to be flexible, to be able to change and the ability to deal with complex emotional situations. A possible weak point of Boal and Hooijberg, could be that only executives are considered leaders, as in medium large corporations where distributed management models are used, also the middle management plays a critical role in strategies executions. Boal and Hooijberg have a view of leadership mainly from large corporations perspectives, while a view of

how leadership would change, in respect of the company size and leaders roles, are discussed by *Elliot Jaques (1978)*, who differentiate the complexities of leadership according to different management levels, where these levels require different skills. Jaques also differentiate the leadership role, according to the company size, where in small organizations or startups a more visionary leadership style is needed, while in large corporations, leaders need to balance internal versus external needs. Further challenges to traditional leadership-centric theories are provided by *Hitt & Ireland (2002)*, where the focus of leadership moves on the side of organization's human and social capital, therefore an employee-centric view, where building and managing great Teams is the new required skill and high priority for leaders. This view seems to be followed by companies where strong innovation and change is required, to stay ahead of competition. It seems a reasonable assumption, that to be capable of building great Teams, leaders must have some degree of knowledge of what the Teams are expected to produce. Therefore, Hitt and Ireland perspective seems to place the leader as part of the operations. This view opposes theories where the leaders are more detached from operations, such as the visionary leader view from *Collins & Porras (1996)*, where there's a clear distinction between the vision and the execution. This is in line with Jaques' view that different leadership roles require different skills, however, it seems that the vision definition of Colling and Porras could exclude the inputs provided by middle management involved in the execution, whose inputs could be helpful when a strategic vision adjustment is needed. Collins and Porras also point out the clear identification of what needs to be changed and what's not, which seems to be a critical leadership skill during prioritization and budget allocation, during strategy and vision adjustment times. In large organizations, strategic management seems to be more oriented on implementing recurrent successful best practices rather than applying leadership on individual critical events. *Collins (2001)* provide an empirical study, introducing the Level 5 Leadership model. Based on research data, the study analyzes organizations with proven successful turnarounds, like Kimberly-Clark. The study supports distributed leadership, with little specific CEO or employees centric view, and place greater importance on people and skills before strategies. The study also outlines, how great companies relying on technology accelerators and its technologies were carefully selected; the study highlight that establishing a culture of balanced discipline, with reduced level of bureaucracy, hierarchy and controls, improved considerably productivity, remarking the importance of investing on people and placing them in the right positions. Collins identifies the common traits of successful management in the analyzed companies, as eccentric, but shy, calm and avoid self-centric adulation. Level 5 Leadership seems to be helpful for leaders building and improving organizational culture. Collins' study, seem effective, but it doesn't necessarily mean that other leadership traits wouldn't be successful. Another possible weak point of Level 5 seems to be that it applies only to large corporations and it barely considers smaller organizations, startups or even the state of the organization life cycle. *Pfeffer & Sutton (2006)*, argues the importance for leaders to adopt evidence-based management, but also the study stresses on how leaders could generate more damages than benefits by using benchmarks in a wrong way. It also states the inefficiency of using a strategy which worked in the past but doesn't apply to the current organization scenario. Pfeffer and Sutton provide a view on continuous improvements, by considering the organization as an unfinished prototype; this seems to be in line with tech giants management models that tend to adopt Agile methodologies to deliver results, based on small incremental improvements and fast changes.

Regarding the relationship between leaders and change, *Paton & McCalman (2008)* see change leaders as profiles capable to extrapolate organizations issues, examine and diagnose the issues and how to overcome them; change leaders can support organizations looking for alternative solutions and transmit the learning process to customers and other stakeholders involved. This definition doesn't seem to help leaders solving change resistance or how to implement solutions from a change



perspective, like *Kotter (1996)* proposes, by introducing “accelerators” such as building guiding coalitions, get buy-in of more than 50% of people involved for the initiative, creating a sense of urgency and link the change to the a tangible opportunity. Kotter also supports the continuous learning process, with leaders driving changes as part of the organizational culture. Possible weak points seem that Kotter’s accelerators assume that change and triggers are already identified, also building a sense of urgency seems more challenging in consensus driven cultures, where the sense of urgency could generate opposition as it set emotional pressure. The model seems to require the change agents having certain skills and finding those matching skills in organizations can be time consuming. Regarding the change triggers definition, *Senior & Swailes (2016)* propose a model to identify triggers, linked to environmental circumstances, but this model seems to be applicable more to external factors. A simplistic view on how the process of change starts, is provided by *Schein (2016)*, as he suggests “Do people want to know where change is needed? Look at the pains”. Schein view would requires having tools to identify where are the pains, so leaders would need to define and get the pain related metrics from managers and employees. After triggers and change implementation, the next challenge for leaders could be how to measure the change effectiveness. As discussed by *Krstic, Skorup & Lapcevic (2018)*, Agile methodology provides several metrics, indicators, and goals to measure change, in line with *Narasimhalu (2011)* regarding innovation driven changes in organizations. A weak point of Agile and the mentioned studied, seems to be that the whole organization requires to use Agile, same metrics and tools, therefore it requires commitment from all organization layers to make it effective. During change management, leaders could face challenges based on cultural traits of certain groups, as *Nemeth (2018)* states the low performing effectiveness of consensus when delivering innovation and change. During the process of reducing resistances, leaders could rely on *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)*, a model proposed by *Cooperrider & Whitney (2005)*, that could help leaders influencing other stakeholders during the change management implementation and definition phase. AI seems to approach the communication by adding more to what is already good in the organizations, and then discuss how this good can help solving new problems and challenges. AI seems to be a good strategic management tool, but it requires to have already a good starting baseline of achievements made by the group. Other models provide tools on how to map change resistance and the reasons behind it, like *Balogun et al. (2016)* identify the change oppositions mostly related to peoples psychological reasons like self-interests, fear of unknown or failure, lack of energy or motivations, uncomfortable feelings due to lack of understanding or skills or cultural bias like consensus, politics or religion. *Elrod and Tippet (2002)* represent the reactions to change in a graphical curve, highlighting how the acceptance and level of self-esteem increases over time, during changes. On the same line *Oreg (2003)* extends the reasons with reluctance of losing controls, cognitive rigidity, and psychological lack of resilience. It seems that most of the study agrees that change resistance reasons are mostly driven by people emotional and psychological conditions and less related with tangible and rational facts, therefore leadership with developed emotional intelligence skills seems to be better equipped to deal with people mental and emotional resistances.

On the relationship between leadership and culture, according to *Schein (2016)*, leaders need to follow certain dimensions to build successful learning culture. Schein argues that skills like proactivity, strong commitment to “learning to learn”, positive assumptions about human nature, positive thinking about the future, commitment to cultural diversity and strategic thinking, are critical for leaders. Schein’s view is also in line with the concept of “*ambidextrous organizations*” from *O’Reilly & Tushman (2004)*, describing leaders capable of building cultures that keep balance between a classic way of doing things and innovations. It seems that Schein’s view does not take in consideration desirable leadership skills like, building great team view from *Hitt & Ireland (2002)*, or anything related to the risks-taking skills. The concept of “*Chemistry*” as a key factor to build

outstanding cultures is discussed by *Coleman (2018)*, arguing that organizations with leaders who build Teams with close physical proximity, eye contacts, energetic exchanges, few interruptions, humor and active listening, are proven to deliver better performance. A possible weak point of Coleman is the requirement to have physical proximity to other Team members, this can be challenging in virtual and distributed Teams or in cases where people are forced to work remotely. Leaders also need to measure culture improvements in organizations; on this regard, a study from MIT Human Dynamics Lab led by *Pentland (2012)*,<sup>12</sup> provide 5 factors to measure Team performance from a cultural perspective; the factors measure if the group members talk and listen equally, the length of interactions, eye contacts, direct one to one to point interactions, exploring external teams. The framework is helpful, but it would require that most of the members of an organizations are aligned on providing metrics on these factors, which could be hindering in large organizations. Also, the framework requires data-analysis from managers, which would require time and common processes. The 5 factors seem to be challenging to be implemented in distributed teams, where communication doesn't happen face to face, and it could be less scalable in large corporate environments. On the same line *Williams & Schultz (2019)*, provide a framework to leaders to identify organizational disfunctions from culture perspective, by identifying the level of people connection, self-interest, inability to prioritize, value placed on people, etc. It seems the framework could provide an evaluation tool to organizations middle managers where the culture mapping can be challenging, like virtual and distributed organizations, by their nature. It seems this framework requires significant alignment between managers, employees, and defined process to collect metrics and evaluate data, therefore the implementation and effectiveness could be challenging.

In line with models were people feelings, and skills improvements, assume the highest priority, *Senge (1990)* introduces the idea of learning organization, by describing five disciplines and seven learning disabilities, by arguing that effective leadership can be achieved by continuously learning and improving on self-discipline, by having a clear view of reality and objectives, while developing patience. Senge refer to teams communication from a perspective of continuous dialogs, which ultimately generate a shared vision, common goals, in an environment where learning and building knowledge are part of the teams normal lifecycle. Senge also disputes the recurrent usage of incumbent traditional mental, cultural models, are strong limiting factors to empowering organizations to grow, therefore it seems that establishing a culture based on empowering and on building a common force across Teams is a key factor for leadership and organizations solid growth. *Yukl (2020)* argue that leadership development is dependent on how much a leader is ready and open to skills improvement, therefore specific trainings on leadership self-awareness could have the outcome of setting the scene for better working conditions, where people can thrive. Senge and Yukl views, seems to be consistent with Emotional Intelligence theories of people development, placing importance on personal growths programs, where the growth is somewhat related to improving people life.

## 2 Use case analysis of my career leader

The analysis is done by evaluating a leader on critical points several points such as how was the feeling when working with the leader, how he contributed to organizations effectiveness and growth, what challenges the leader were facing and how he acted upon on those challenges, and more. The analysis also includes considerations about possible skills improvements for the leader and for the company environment. The leader analyzed, has been most probably the best leader and manager I had in my career.

## 2.1 LEADER 1

### 2.1.1 Models mapping

Leader 1 (L1) was a senior manager, very empathic, and intelligent in any kind of conversation; he didn't seem to reflect the heroic figure from *Carlyle* (1841), and yet, during meetings and normal business activities, it was crystal clear to anyone that he was there, present, actively listening and focusing on the moment and on the people. He seemed to have a well-developed emotional intelligence skill, especially on empathy, as people in the organization were feeling similarities with him, even when the team members were mentally, emotionally and culturally different amongst them. L1 management style seemed to be more a mix of *Collins* (2001) Level 5 leadership model and Authentic Leadership from *Ilies et al.* (2005), with a strong focus on strategy, very in line with *Ansoff* (1965) view of balancing satisfaction and needs of the different stakeholders. L1 had strong change management skills, in line with *Paton & McCalman* (2008) view of extrapolating organizational issues, specifically on establishing sense of urgency, in line with *Kotter* (2014) accelerators, and to identify pain points with the aim to apply and establishing cultural patterns improvements, in line with *Schein's* related views on organizational culture. L1 was not using a specific methodology or style to deal with issue or to manage the organization, as it seemed he was following more an adaptive and situational leadership style, inline with *Tannenbaum & Schmidt* (1973), and he did not seemed to match a behavioral leadership style as the focus was more on the results, rather on the traits or behavior used by the people to achieve the results. For L1 it was a priority how the people on the organization felt, but he did not use any model to improve people happiness like *Amabile et al.* (2011) progress principles, while he seemed more in line with *Senge's* (1990) five disciplines of systems thinking, on building a common force where people could communicate and rely on each other for any kind of support in the professional environment.

L1 did not seem to actively foster innovation and creativity within the organization, however he fully supported reasonable innovation proposal initiated by any team member. He did not actively used any model to build learning organizations or to improve team members skills, but he fully supported any learning path proposed by team members. Regarding building teams and involvement in operations, his leadership style seemed more in line with *Hitt & Ireland* (2002) views, as he emphasized on hiring and building teams with strong technical and operational skills, however, there was no structured approach nor guidelines or reference across the organization about how to make great hiring decisions, nor actively managed processes to build people skills. Besides empathy, L1 was a mentally resilient leader, capable of inspiring resiliency to any organization member, especially during critical situations where the customer was taking aggressive and inappropriate behaviors, or when other employees did not seem to act in line with business ethics principles. As a manager, he consistently seemed to show advanced emotional awareness, when managing difficult and complex conversations.

L1 mastered persuasion skills, motivating people by communicating from the perspective of what was personally, morally right and valuable for his interlocutor, but also leveraging what would have been convenient and of significant interest from the interlocutor perspective, therefore using a mix of transformational and transactional styles, in line with *Yukl* (2020) views of effective leadership. When managing people L1 was indeed a situational and adaptive leader, not really in line with Leadership Grid principles from *Blake & McCanse* (1991), as in his view the management style was very much dependent on the context. In line with *Yukl's* researches, L1 was reacting promptly when operational issues were happening, and as far as I experienced, he never let important issues unattended, especially never let minor issues become critical, therefore he had a strong insight of what was going on in the organization strategy execution, very much in line with *Peters & Waterman* (1982). For these involvements in operations, he did not seem to match the servant leadership style

from *Greenleaf* (1977), and at the same time, he did not give the impression to micro-manage or over controlling people.

L1 had a high opinion of people with developed entrepreneur traits and he was also looking for people with those authentic leadership profile, in line with *Wilding* (1999), specifically he always valued creative solutions, critical thinking and critical execution that was unconventional or not in line with existing course of actions, assuming the business ethics and legality were always respected. At least for these reasons, L1 did match the leadership characteristics from *Boal & Hooijberg* (2001), mostly combining the three set of skills such as absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity and managerial wisdom, mixed with a certain charisma, strong flexibility and capability to handle organizational complexities. Regarding strategy execution, L1 frequently made use of facts-based management to reduce the impacts of speculations or unfounded complains from the customer, and to defend employees when the customer was providing negative feedback not supported by tangible facts; this seemed to make L1 leadership style, consistent with *Pfeffer & Sutton* (2006) views on evidence-based management.

### 2.1.2 Critics and improvements

The following considerations and improvements are mostly specific, based on personal experience and on certain business contexts. Some of the considerations applies to the local organizations and L1 is not entirely accountable for them, but as he was part of the local leadership team and held one of the most strategic position, it seems to me that he was anyway co-responsible for several company performance degradations happened.

Overall L1 leadership style was in line with most of the models described, and yet, during daily executions there were several situations where the strategies implemented were too general and not enough specific to significantly address the challenges faced by the local organization. Even though L1 placed high importance on skills, there was a lack of structured hiring process across the organization, and this frequently led to onboarding or keeping professional profile in the organizations that did not had the required skills that the company needed, to maintain the leadership position in the industry. As an improvement solution, it seems critical to implement structured hiring process with deep skills assessment for new hires and existing employees, with the aim to deliver highly competitive solutions.

There was some small initiative, to improve employees skills, but in general it was unmanaged, unstructured and did not seem to be enough to overall improve the workforce skillsets. There was a reduced number of people in the local organization following MBA or other advanced trainings, while the majority of other people did not follow trainings for years, having obsolete skills, which made the workforce lagging to provide competitive value proposition to the market, and by negatively affecting the quality of the content to be delivered. Ultimately the impact of the local workforce, was not enough to make the organization competitive. As possible solution, having a local program that would have implemented learning organizations models, with targeted focus on to the local market needs, would most probably have been highly beneficial for the local organization, while improving the skills gap across people.

The company context was a multinational organization, but the local branch worked very much as a local company, with most of the revenues generated by a single customer. This exposed the local company to several risks and challenges that eventually increased over time, generating a culture of complacency and accepting business conditions from the local customer that were totally unfavorable for the company. There were severe risks exposures due to a lack of customer base diversification, which led to losing negotiation leverage because of a disproportioned customer power. On this regard, implementing risks management models, with local company market positioning using for instance the *Porter's 5 Forces*, would have helped to understand the local

company exposures and competitive disadvantages following a business development strategy to diversify the customer base and reduce risks related from having most of the income generated by a single customer.

Regarding innovation and creativity, L1 supported self-driven initiatives, but there was no models or programs in place to build an environment where people could be creative and having innovation as part of the daily operations. Therefore, the company seemed to struggle to build competitive advantages on the service delivery and on managing customer operations. A conscious critical and system thinking exercise on how to build an environment where the employees can be creative and innovative, would have been very beneficial to improve the local organization market positioning and competitiveness, there were little differentiators that the company local branch could provide compared to other competitors.

The goal setting and the performance benchmark for each employee, did not seemed to be structured, transparent or actively managed; this made hard to execute strategies and, in several cases, the only impacts that people made was within a context of time & material consultancy model. This could have been done by any competitor, as there was no differentiator in the consultancy service, and the local workforce was no aligned to a common strategy execution. A possible solution could have been to better map the strategy definition and the strategy execution, by mapping the execution to the specific goals that the employees could deliver. Probably the use of a methodology like SAFe or balanced scorecards from *Venkatraman & Gering (2000)* could have helped defining goals, map them to a strategy and measure effectiveness.

The local management, including L1, frequently did not negotiate more aggressively the employees conditions for a basic level playing field with the customer. Unfortunately, this led to scenarios, where the local workforce was frequently not in condition to deliver. Achieving results did become harder and the customer made the local company branch accountable for lagging results, ending in a scenario of reduced negotiation leverage and extended stressful, tense working environment conditions, with reduced workforce motivation. Implementing actively and consistently over time Kotter's accelerators would have definitely helped improving the negotiation positioning, reducing change resistance and improving the frequency of changes required.

The local company business was progressively eroding and the local management, including L1, did not seem to have a clear strategy to revert that path, or tangible actions to increase the customers base, with aims to diversify the sources of revenues. A possible solution could have been to apply risk management models and provide projection scenarios like Discounted Cash Flows from *Grant (2008)*, to establish how business erosion would impact the local and global organization lifecycle and negotiate with the company executives extended budget for business development and diversification.

### 3 Self-assessment: how to be a better leader

The self-assessment is based on skillsets evaluation in the domains of emotional intelligence, appreciative enquiry, Kotter's accelerators, innovation and change agent capabilities, the use of strategic management methodologies, authentic leadership, critical thinking and negotiations. Each skills domain is also rated such as low, medium or high, with a description and possible improvements recommendation. The assessment is based purely on self-awareness.

On emotional intelligence, overall the rating is low, as I rarely practice mindful listening, mindfulness in general and self-awareness to monitor emotions. Most likely, I have a large margin of improvement for leadership presence as I tend to be too informal during situations where more

formality would be needed. The rating moves to medium for activities where is required to deal with difficult people, empathy, influence, persuasion and to organize the work in a way that improve people professional happiness. I feel to have a high rating, on resilience, confidence power and impacts, providing to people a purposeful meaning and passion. Possible improvements could be to read more books and take specific trainings on mindfulness, active listening, make use of mental health improvement applications like HeadSpace and Calm, meditate, slow down the pace, do not expect from other people to have my same level of commitment, take more holidays, let the other people talk first, mentalize myself to not interrupt others when they talk and in general, thinking few seconds more before start talking.

Regarding appreciative enquiry, I rate myself low, as I ask questions directly, getting straight to the issue and always focusing on the part that needs to be improved, rarely starting from the good and then moving progressively on how to solve the issues. As improvement, I need to mentalize myself on appreciative enquiry, read more books on this topic and exercise practice during working time.

On Kotter's accelerators I rate myself medium, as when building guiding coalitions, I tend to engage mostly with the management, rather involving all the organization ranks. Also, I should improve on promoting the act of leadership and communicate strategies more effectively, to all ranks. On the positive side, I feel to have solid skills on building momentum and sense of urgency, on formulating strategic vision, I never let people alone when they need help, and I can convince people by involving their heart consistently. As possible improvement, I should start the innovation bottom up, so people from more ranks would be involved and ultimately a bigger critical mass could be reached, with the aim of having a more impactful coalition when later facing change resistance. Probably would also help to improve the way of how I communicate the vision bottom-up. It would help, reading more books on this topic and plan more carefully how to implement the accelerators.

On innovation and change agent related skills, the rating is high, as I am continuously striving to improve existing solutions, way of working and solving challenges more efficiently than usual methods. I frequently rely on management methodologies like Agile SAFe to organize and structure the innovation activities, making sure the team have time and resources for the creativity process. It is critical that I continuously educate myself on these topics, as the methodologies and the challenges evolve rapidly.

On critical thinking, negotiations and authentic leadership the rating is high, as I apply consistently models like Amabile's progress principles, managing to find what the other stakeholder need and how they can be satisfied with the aim to move towards the solution. I'm mentally focused on critical thinking, and consistently trying to apply and institutionalize system thinking during our recurrent analysis and dive deep sessions. It is critical that I keep educating myself on these topics, reading books and taking more advanced trainings.

## 4 Conclusions

From reviewed literature and resources, it seems that gradually the leadership models and definitions moved away from heroic stereotypes, based on gender and personal people traits; the same path appears to apply to creativity and innovation models. Clearly studies demonstrated that leaders are made and not born, differently from what was thought early in history. Over time it also seems that leadership moved to a more dynamic approach, where leaders are required to find the right style and management skills according the context and environments changing conditions. Researches also shows that leaders are required to focus on how the workforce feel and to implement



models that ultimately improve people professional happiness. Motivation plays a big factor to improve creativity and foster innovation, where leaders needs to deal with their own and people complex emotions. Leaders seems in need to actively master change resistance and how the workforce can deliver value in a sustainable and consistent way; the management seems to be required to play an active supporting role, by providing frameworks to improve people's emotional and mental conditions during working time. Emotional Intelligence seems to be a fundamental leadership skill, along with authentic leadership and change management practices, such as appreciative inquiries and progress principles. Building great teams with strong culture seems also to be a critical part of organizations strategy, by requiring leaders to implement models such as learning organizations, where the leaders also needs to have operational skills and be involved and aware of operational issues, to be able to act and respond promptly. From the use case analysis, it is also evident that even when leaders apply models and theories, the outcome is not always positive nor predictable, therefore it is important that leaders enable themselves and organizations to build experience, to allow people making mistakes in a safe environment and develop adaptive skills that better fit specific market conditions and challenges. It seems to me that sometimes models and theories are detached from the working reality and most of them are too general and do not provide effective frameworks to solve real world problems. Most probably future researches will lead to providing more tangible problem-solving frameworks for leaders, an example of it is be the emotional intelligence framework, Agile, appreciative enquiry communication styles, and Kotter's accelerators, which all fo them provides tangible insight and tools to improve organizations and leaders performances.

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