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# The new leadership ethos for the 21st century

Great leadership is more important than it has ever been, but the concept of leadership is changing. Sunita Malhotra, professor and Managing Director, People Insights, makes a case for the leadership model of the future.

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Successfully mastering the art of leadership in any organisation is more complicated than ever before, but is still a necessity in today's uncertain, globally interconnected business world.

However recent research from CEMS – The Global Alliance in Management Education – found that for young professionals 'inspirational leadership' has slipped down the list of criteria, behind areas such as work/life balance, opportunities for quick career progression and the chance make an impact, when looking for new roles. This is in contrast to professionals who graduated several years earlier, who regard leadership as one of the main influences when looking for a new job. So does this mean young professionals no longer regard leadership as important?

The answer is of course not. Great leadership is crucial as it has always been, and from my regular conversations with business school students, I'm certain that they agree. However I believe that there has been a significant shift in what millennials believe 21st century leadership looks like:

## **Leadership is collective**

Firstly, inspirational leadership does not mean big ego. It never did. However over the past few decades history has changed the face of leadership: it used to be about one person at the top, then charismatic leadership, then leading vs managing. Over the past few years leadership has evolved yet again, due to

the rapid pace of change in the VUCA world, combined with the ambitions of new generations, who no longer work in a linear way.

Experience is not as important as it was in the past, when leaders were expected to have years of hard graft behind them, combined with an encyclopaedia of knowledge. Successful leaders no longer have to have all the answers, but they do need to know how to ask the right questions. Rather than coming up with a step-by-step plan, they need to provide a framework and boundaries, to give talented people (who are often better than them at what they do) space to flourish.

21<sup>st</sup> century leaders must also dig ever more deeply, to understand who individuals are, so that they appreciate what each team member brings to the table. Leadership is becoming increasingly virtual, due to flexible work practices (in fact in the future there may no longer be offices at all), so they must use networks and coach people, sometimes without having direct relationships with them, which adds an element of complexity.

### **Leadership is responsible**

Successful modern-day leadership is responsible and sustainable; about doing business within that context of the wider world, rather than seeing CSR as an “add-on”. If I care about more about myself or my own corporation than society, as a leader, it no longer carries weight. The two are inextricable – society impacts business and business impacts society.

Desiring to have a positive societal and environmental impact is innate within the CEMS students I teach (as well as the wider generation of young professionals I speak to) which is one of the reasons they singled out ‘making an impact’ as one of their main criteria when seeking a new role.

### **Leadership is self-disruptive**

Self-disruptive leadership is important at *any level* if your company is going to change as the world is changing. In this context *anyone* can be a leader. Self-disruptive leaders ADAPT – Anticipate, Drive, Accelerate, Partner and Trust. If you don’t have skills of self-disruption, even if you are at an entry level job, then develop them fast!

Of course not everyone can lead someone else physically – that may not be logistically possible – but everyone in an organisation should be accountable and responsible for their own career acceleration and contributing to the growth of the company. It is exactly why young people join start-ups: they gain liberty, excitement, challenge and freedom. Larger companies need to model these start-up qualities internally if they want to harness the ideas of talented young professionals.

### **Leaders must be vulnerable.**

Finally, it is important for modern-day leaders to be vulnerable. In fact vulnerability is one of the most important skills in this new leadership ethos, as it means leaders are deeply self-aware and know their fundamental purpose.

In my work with ‘inspiring’ leaders I often see the amazing, transformative effect vulnerability can have on the culture of companies. Being vulnerable doesn’t mean being weak – it actually means exhibiting strength, because it shows you are human, self-aware and not afraid to say, “I don’t know the answer.” As soon as leaders are able to demonstrate a degree of vulnerability, employees will do anything for them.

Whatever I teach my students (future leaders), first I ask them to think about who they are and what they bring to the party. If they can do that and have the ability to be vulnerable – even laugh at themselves – the rest will fall into place. People will remember the leadership qualities of self-awareness and vulnerability for years to come, far more than just knowledge and experience!

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