

# Leadership

To survive and thrive an organisation needs to be resilient and agile and leadership is key to this. *Mark Wright* explains why

**I**n 1891, William Wrigley Jr realised that his customers were less impressed by the soap he was selling than by the chewing gum he was giving away. Just two years later, he had redefined an otherwise niche product into a mass-market phenomenon.

Forty-five years later and half a world away, Lee Byung-Chull was selling noodles through his small trading company, Samsung Sanghoe. By 1969 it was transforming itself into the mighty Samsung Electronics.

Even Nokia, which began in 1865 when Fredrik Idestam opened a paper mill and evolved into one of the world's most successful mobile phone companies (via tyres and Wellingtons), is now carving out a new future in mapping and location services, while its handset manufacture gets steadily subsumed into Microsoft.

The common thread is a not-entirely-pain-free story of resilience, agility and realising where the inherent value of the company lies.

It is ironic that, in most of our organisations, we strive to establish the very thing that can bring about our demise. Predictability – manifest in systems that reward consistency, in strategic plans that promise clarity, reinforced in daily routines and weekly meetings – is Valium for the organisational brain.

In a sense, this should be no surprise – we are mostly complicit in creating it. A need to feel secure is in our psyche and we inevitably project our personal needs into the culture of our organisations. And this is fine until our attachment constrains us:

when remaining in the irrelevant or damaging present seems safer than moving to a future unknown. You only need to ask Kodak, HMV and Blockbuster about that.

The pace of change, the expansion of competition and the ravenous expectations of our customers is only going in one direction, while leaders in too many organisations employ patterns of thinking and behaviour that are prehistoric in comparison to what is needed. This might seem like unreasonable criticism, but it isn't intended to be; it is just what we tend to do when faced with the unfamiliar. We fall back on experiences that have worked in the past to solve our dilemmas of the present – a neurological safety net that was great in slower times but is pretty much redundant now.

Going forward, successful leaders are creating a fresh context to equip those around them for a bold future: balancing competition with collaboration, being agile, moving before being certain, adjusting on the go and understanding that competitive advantage is transient.

This requires a very conscious application of new leadership behaviours: flattening hierarchies, emboldening teams, focusing on intrinsic value to the end user and, perhaps most difficult of all, being prepared to radically rethink what they need to do in order to survive and thrive.

In their own ways, I think William Wrigley, Lee Byung-Chull and Fredrik Idestam would understand. ■



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