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Adaptive Leaders for Perilous Times

Alan Morantz
Thought Leadership Consultant
IRC
Queen's University

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irc.queensu.ca

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Better than anyone, Canadians have cause to complain about living in a northern climate. And complain they do. You need look no further than our own Environment Canada, which speaks of “misery days” as it reports on our brutish winter times.

But if you want to talk about misery days, why not pick on summer? Pathogen-packing bugs. Ultraviolet rays. Smoggy cities. By contrast, winter is a season of clarity. Drained of moisture, the cold air makes for clear, crisp sounds and a pulsating night sky, featuring Orion, the hunter. In snow-covered fields and backyards, the prints of scurrying animals are a tracker's delight. In winter, the stars shine brighter and there is nowhere to hide.

Which brings us to the here and now: In the winter of our economic discontent, what do we see clearly? Given the rapid expansion and precipitous contraction of the world economy over the past decade, one dynamic seems very clear: our organizations, like the natural environment around us, are tethered to adaptive cycles. Biologists describe these four phases as: rapid growth by exploiting opportunities; conservation through increased specialization and efficiencies; release of resources as a result of external shock; and reorganization in which new groups appear and chaos rules.

As we live through the present wave of creative destruction, it is more important than ever for resilient organizations to have adaptive leaders, non-rigid and divergent thinkers who have a good sense of their surroundings and have learning as a core organizational value.

Where are these leaders coming from? Apparently not from within. Executives themselves say that leadership development is of paramount importance but admit it is not being done well. As part of its Global Leadership Forecast, DDI recently surveyed 1,493 HR professionals and 12,208 leaders from 76 countries. Seventy-five percent of the executives identified improving or leveraging leadership talent as a top business priority, citing it most often from a list of 14 challenges. But that is only half the story, the survey's authors say. “Despite recognition of its importance, leadership development is going nowhere fast. Confidence in leaders has declined steadily over the past eight years, and most leaders are not satisfied with their organization's development offerings.”

In fact, only 41 percent of leaders reported they were satisfied with their organizations' leadership development strategy, a decline of 12 percentage points from a similar survey two years earlier. DDI's research surfaces manifold issues: lack of on-the-job opportunities to learn; lack of monitoring and measurement of development programs; little effort to accelerate the development of high-potential managers or assist in the transition to a leadership position. Does this sound familiar?

If you are in a leadership position and dissatisfied with development opportunities, you will likely point to the HR professional and say they do not understand business needs. And if you are in HR, you will fire back that senior leaders lack commitment to the cause.

Getting these two solitudes aligned around a leadership development strategy may be the key factor in building the adaptive capacity of our organizations. By bridging this leadership gap, leaders will be better equipped to embed the ingredients of a resilient organization: leadership visibility, transparent decision-making, ready accessibility to staff; positive and opportunistic thinking; and decentralized power and accountability.

This is the one of the lessons that we can learn from our winter of discontent. Forget stability. And mind the leadership gap.