

# Leader\$hip

an insider guide

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## INTRODUCTION

What is leadership? How do you define a leader? Are leaders born or do they develop into leading roles? Do you need to be in a position of power to lead?

These are some of the questions that always fascinated me.

From a very early age, I've always been intrigued by larger than life historical figures, and eagerly read all the biographies I could find about them and their lives. As I matured over the years, I came to realise that most of those characters showed traits that could actually be distilled into attitudes, behaviours and actions that any of us could develop, nurture and perform.

Courage, determination, collaboration, honesty, values, vision, respect, trust, unselfishness are all signs of a good leader.

Although not everybody may want to be a leader, the potential is there for anybody to become one. Maybe not a leader with a capital "L" but certainly someone who can lead others by example, in public service as in private enterprises, and be the vehicle for them to

develop into better professionals and ultimately better individuals.

Luckily, my professional life of over thirty years working for multi-national companies has provided plenty of opportunities for me to observe, learn, critique, shape, practice and codify practices and processes about the craft of leading people.

Having acquired a wealth of experience in areas like sales, marketing, business management and technology services, I found myself in the ideal position to analyse and interpret real-life leadership situations strongly connected to the world of business, and how to relate them back to an ideal blueprint.

The rich cultural diversity and variety of human relationship provided by working in multicultural environments, having lived in places as diverse as Europe, Latin America, Middle East and the United States, finally shaped my thoughts and findings.

This book is about those lessons learned. Here you will find reflections, examples and reference frameworks that will hopefully help you become a better leader, or will at least provide you with a number of lenses through which you can observe and better understand leadership.

I sincerely hope that you will enjoy my book.

## 1. THE BUSINESS OF BEING IN BUSINESS

**Easy always beats hard. (M. Crichton)**

**B**usiness is tough. You need to come up with products and services that are fulfilling a need. You have to figure out a way to build them. Then somehow you need to establish the best way to price, market and sell those products and services. You need to make sure anybody can and will buy them. You have to make sure you get the money. And finally you need to come up with more products and services.

The process can actually be fun, but somehow - especially for large established companies - most of the time it actually isn't.

**SIZE.** The process of starting and running a business doesn't really change that much with size. Two college dropouts working out of a two-car garage have to deal with the same problems of a multi-national enterprise with glass-enclosed offices in Manhattan. Small companies are nimbler, have a shorter line of command, can

pivot quickly and can afford to fail fast (which is good in business). Large companies have established - and often cumbersome - processes that entail lots of checkpoints, reviews and approvals.

They are usually more resilient to failure - if they are well run - but when they do fail they fail big and hurt a larger proportion of employees, shareholders and clients. The headaches of both small and large are largely the same. How to develop products that fit the market. How to get clients to like them, buy them and then buy them again.

**MARKETS.** The definition of target market is mostly intriguing.

After so many years, I'm more and more convinced that all it is really is educated guesswork. The point is that market figures like market-share, share-of-wallet, growth and the likes are by definition projections. That means that someone by looking at the past behaviour of, let's say consumers, tries to map future ones.

Sure, big data and improved data analytics can help the accuracy of such exercise, but in the end the proportion of guesswork is even the most diligent market research is probably in the region of 50%. That obviously means that you have the same odds of being right than of being wrong.

**PEOPLE.** A third most interesting area impacting the life of a business venture is people. How many times have you heard statements like "our company values its employees as the most important and differentiating assets"? Well, guess what? They are right.

Employees should be the most important asset of any company. Truth is however that they are not really. When business is soft and the shareholders start to complain, the first motion is always to cut people. I've seen it happen so many times. The process is on average ruthless, although in some parts of the world where employees rely on stronger unions and better work contracts, it usually is kind of an acceptable way to go. Still, it never is painless. I still have to find a business leader who has the courage not to cut people when things are tough.

So how can anybody expect employees to be motivated when, no matter the role, experience or performance, they are always the first ones to get sacked? On the contrary, I believe that motivation is a driver that should come from within. I don't believe that a manager can motivate workers. He can certainly provide clear direction, chart the course and, most importantly purpose. The rest is up to you.

### **SO YOU WANT TO BE IN BUSINESS HUH?**

You are determined that the next step in your professional life is to run a business. But do you have what it takes?

Here's a quick and dirty checklist that you can use to self-assess your readiness:

1. I know how my company makes money.
2. I know which clients are good (more profitable, less troublesome) for my business.
3. I know which clients are actually hurting my business.

4. I know how we build, market, sell, deliver our products and services.
5. I understand how to look for the best market opportunities.
6. I understand the dynamics of my selling costs.
7. I know how to articulate the innovation aspects of my products/services.
8. I have an engine in place to innovate my products/services.
9. I know which metrics are the right ones for my business
10. I measure the right metrics with the right tools at the right time.

If your answer is positive for each of the questions above, congratulations! You can now look confidently forward to running a simple business.

But what about a more complex one? How about a business unit in a company? Let's look at one of my favorite examples: the newly appointed Vice President.

How many times have you met executives holding important positions and carrying great responsibilities yet lacking the right skills for the job? That's right - quite often actually.

We are told that companies should "hire for fit, and train for skills", but actually it doesn't really happen that often, even less so for executive level hires or appointments.

In the current business environment, executives have to be fast and thorough at the same time, strategic and tactical, visionary and practical. I believe that, independently from the gravity of a given situation, any executive should and can set the mood early on in their

management assignment. Yet it seems that a lot of them just act out the part, pay lip service or bide their time until they get the right opportunity and leave.

It's always hard to tell a VP what to do, I know.

Nevertheless, we can certainly tell them what we would do if we were one. As it often happens, good plans come in threes.

1. The first important piece to contribute is an aggressive 30-60-90 days change plan. Careful, not a shopping list! Rather, three to five key areas for each stage, to be reviewed, assessed and revamped.
2. The second important piece is to challenge everything you are told. Layers of middle managers are always ready to suck up to the new boss and fight for the privilege to whisper in his ear from selfish and often distorted perspectives. Even more so if the VP joins from outside the company ranks. Challenging is actually a very interesting and definitely underrated technique, I believe. For example, I'm deeply convinced that most clients, especially enterprise-class clients, know what they want, but not necessarily what they need. If you challenge your clients, and do your homework, you will be able to sell them what they need for the good of their business. And make a real difference. This very same approach of challenging the norm pays off quite well when dealing with internal "clients" too. And the reason is that if you challenge people, projects, activities often enough, you will make them

more effective. In turn, bright professionals never shy away from a good challenge, because they know that it's always, in itself, a learning experience. Checkout Eric Ries' "The Lean Startup" for an overview of the 5 why's technique of challenging assumptions.

3. The third and final piece a new VP should concentrate on is innovation. Over-innovation even. As Steve Jobs famously said "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower".

Don't be afraid to introduce radical innovations in how things get done. Don't just setoff to modify a process, aim at simplifying it and re-writing it completely. Assess which parties are involved, focus their responsibilities and make sure everyone contributes to the final result. Make them clearly accountable. Give them a chance to make a real difference, don't treat them like gears in a bigger mechanism.

Streamline, simplify, ask your team to do less stuff, but to concentrate on the meaningful things. Don't make them work harder, set them up to work smarter. Be bold. Now that the three main rules have been applied, you are in a much better position to look at the most important element of your success - your team - and concentrate on your real job: to lead them.

Foster diversity: focus not on what is different, but rather harness the peculiarities of each team member to boost the team's creativity. Nurture passion: passion is how we engage, how we grow, how we move forward, how we keep going when everybody else in the race has

given up. Passion is easy to spot in people, but it can just as easily be squashed if you, as a leader, don't show it too.

Understand what motivates people: what works for some team members might not work for others, so make sure you understand which is which. Give people purpose, and enough space to innovate and create, and they will feel motivated to perform great things.

There you go. Self-assess your business acumen and readiness. Make sure you have an aggressive change plan, challenge the norm and out-innovate your peers.

### **A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO BOOST GROWTH**

I believe that more of the same never drives change. And without change, in most businesses and industries, you simply cannot achieve breakthrough growth.

A while ago, I was chosen as part of a selected group of people. The message we received requested us to make urgent arrangements for traveling to the south of France and plan to be away for a couple of days. The heading on the invitation only quoted the project name: "growth boosters".

The briefing that the small team was given was a simple one: to come up with ideas and a plan on how to drive breakthrough business growth. So we basically camped for two days in a medium sized meeting room, located in a remote off-site building, fully equipped with a couple of white boards, three flip charts, our laptops, plenty of food and soft drinks.

It's obviously difficult, and potentially tedious, to try and reconstruct that monster



brainstorming session. However, I think there is value to share some of the outcomes: after all, the problem of driving business growth is still pretty high in priority for many of us!

First step was to look at dependencies for the success of our plan: who or what would be the biggest potential help to successfully implement it? We definitely needed to identify friends and foes early on, and secure sponsorship plus endorsement from the top.

Second step was to identify the key desired milestones:

- build a community focused on growth:
  - provide a strong sense of "why" we were embarking on growth boosting initiative ('what's in it for me?").
  - identify what was the passion behind it
  - articulate why we needed everybody on board
  - define the role that each of us would play
- share and celebrate progress and success:
  - tell the "good" stories and provide better visibility to key wins.
  - go beyond the congratulatory email or card and give "social" visibility to winners, at personal and team level.
- recognize excellence:
  - reward best deal of the month.
  - shoot promo videos.
  - give free vacation days.
  - reward individual and collective contribution with technology gadgets.
  - donate cash to favourite charity organization.

Pretty soon we realised that we needed to somehow package the whole effort into a sort of company-wide container, a powerful message or communication push to catch people's attention. We devised an internal marketing campaign across some low cost actions:

- PING - Personal Impact of Non-Growth: a semi-serious tool to assess the impact on one's career, development and earnings of non-growing the business.
- fit for growth boot camps: hands-on focus days for small teams, geographically or vertical industry oriented.
- music jingles and ringtones: branding exercise to distinguish top performers and create competitive tension.
- customized laptop sleeves: another branding exercise, to identify tech rewards to best achievers.
- T-shirts and promotional materials: fun stuff for the whole community to repeat and amplify through word of mouth.

Next we zoomed in on the specific working tools that we would need to develop to empower the growth teams:

- dedicated personal and team websites (i.e. mygrowth.com), wikis and forums.
- top management MBWA program (Management By Walking Around), to effectively turn our leaders into our stronger advocates.
- roadshow to be taken to the key European offices. This was developed as a play, complete with actors impersonating both clients and sales teams, going through

examples of sales situations and typical business engagements. The roadshow was also filmed and relayed on the intranet in instalments.

- a video game to simulate desired behaviour and interactions.

Finally, we toyed with funky ideas about how to motivate our large sales force, like putting up huge countdown (sales) quota indicators in the reception hall of our campus, setting up a phone hotline for depressed sales reps ("My client hates me, help!!!") or building a client's fan-zine.

We also concentrated our efforts on how to improve our storytelling capabilities, something we didn't usually do very well. Coaching sessions with actors and comedians were taken into consideration, as well as the establishment of an internal TV channel for employees to practice one-to-many storytelling.

All in all, an incredibly fun project! In retrospect, with today's social media tools, we could have implemented some of the ideas above in a radically different way, certainly reaching out faster and better to our desired audience, and through a richer experience too. But I still believe that some of the things we developed and built were cool and are very much applicable today.

### **THE REAL MEANING OF GO-TO-MARKET**

A lot of people misunderstand the real meaning of go-to-market. So here's a simple is/isn't list to remind us:

### **IT'S NOT**

1. It's not about your product features.
2. It's not about your price.
3. It's not about your competitors.
4. It's not about your marketing plan.
5. It's not even about the so called "differentiators" of your offering.

### **IS**

1. It's all about your clients and the best way to reach out for them.
2. It's about empowering your sales force to select the right clients and make the right recommendation about what works for them.
3. It's devising the best tactics to showcase "why you".
4. It's about understanding where the market will be, not only where it is.
5. It's about choosing the best places to hang out at (hint: where your clients are).

Now that I think of it, route-to-market makes a lot more sense, as a broad definition, than go-to-market. Think about the classic definition of a market. A place where manufacturers and sellers go to show and sell their stuff. And of course a place where people go to look at what's available (e.g. window shopping through the stalls) and possibly buy something.

So the common wisdom is that, assuming there is a market, people will go there. That's the easy part right? As a seller, you show up, hence you've gone to market. To do that doesn't require you understand it, size it or truly know it in any details. You trust the market: if you build

something, somebody will buy it. Of course this is an oversimplification of market dynamics, and of course it doesn't really work like that anymore.

But what if you have to decide a route to the market? Then something different may happen. You will have to choose a path to get there. Short and quick will ensure you are first, maybe before your competitors but possibly even before the market is mature enough for your offerings. So, little or no buyers.

Long and arduous, may mean you will be second or third, potentially having to fight off an incumbent player, but also that you will have had a chance to learn from other's mistakes and maybe just think longer of the problems you are endeavouring to solve. And buyers might have more choices but be more self-aware of what they need.

Now, here's the big decision that you as a seller need to make: which route do you want to take?

Is your company targeting established, experienced and shrewd buyers/clients, or fairly new - and potentially unclear in requirements - ones? Let me tell you why I think this is important.

If you go for the experienced clients, your value proposition will need to stress areas like cost saving, efficiency improvement, risk aversion and in general status-quo protection.

If you choose the newcomers, than you will need to leverage the market disruptive elements of your offering. The bleeding-edge - but potentially unproven and risky - technical proposition that will empower the client to change the rules of the game and dislodge the incumbents from the playing field.

The decision about your route-to-market will make your offering more relevant to the market, and will enable you to articulate it in a way that resonates with your chosen audience. It will even make you look at the components of your offering in a different way, and feed back to your design team to adjust and align them to the chosen path.

So think of this next time you are building your business plan: do I need a go-to-market strategy, or should I chart the route-to-market for my offering and products?

### **MAKE SURE YOU ARE ALWAYS CREATING NEW IDEAS**

When is the best time for you to come up with your best ideas? For me, it's when I'm in meetings and events!

When somebody is presenting or pitching to an audience, I always try to pay attention. My mind, however, pretty soon starts thinking about a million possibilities, and goes on a lateral (but not disjointed, as you will see) quest.

Just like many of us, my daily routine is to sit through a lot of presentations and pitches. Some are in person, but most are through phone conference calls, IM and other collaboration tools. Lately, I've come to realise an interesting pattern that I go through pretty much consistently and almost unwillingly.

As the speaker illustrates her materials and point of view, a portion of my brain starts on a journey of its own. Suddenly, whilst still paying full attention to what is said and shown, my mind start bringing up ideas, perspectives and original observations on a number of topics. Sometimes these are related, or at least

tangential, to the ones discussed in the meeting; other times they are completely different, and apparently disconnected. The experience is interesting because connection and branching happens almost effortlessly, without any planning and certainly with no defined story boarding.

Especially at in-person presentations and events, this process can be very fulfilling if somewhat tiring, particularly because on top of listening and watching the speaker and his materials, I'm in the habit of scanning the audience for reactions, body signs, comments or remarks.

What I've found is that this practice fundamentally enhances the experience of the event and makes it more complete; by establishing a link between giver and receiver, one can take the whole exercise to a new level, where the two entities fulfil each other and at the same time keep each other in check.

A good and engaging presenter usually pushes your mind to expand on the things he says. In addition, if the material he uses is also good, you have a chance to imagine how a story could be crafted around it in a way that would bring its message even more relevantly to the audience without changing much of the content - a victory of form and context over content.

But, surprise surprise, for me the magic happens when the presenter and/or the materials are not particularly good.

Far from discrediting the effort of the speaker, when that happens my brain floods with tag-lines, words, visuals and a million ideas about how to improve the presentation, on a scale that is almost too big to take in. Often it's all about painting "what if" and "why not" scenarios,

other times it's about digging deeper into a certain aspect and sketching out a whole different outcome.

The best way to capture this is to start jotting down short notes and hints, hoping to be able to recall the thought process at a later date, and maybe share some of the ideas back with the presenter and the audience. Try to imagine how the content being shared could be brought to life from different angles and perspectives. How things not being said are actually more important than the ones that are. And how what is presented as a minor detail, or sometimes left out altogether, should actually be positioned as the core reason why we do what we do.

Let the visuals jump at you and completely rework the ones on the screen, trying to reflect the new sentences and underlying message that your brain has just put forward. In my case, I often end up not sharing much of my mind's flight with anybody else, although I do tend to incorporate some of my best ideas into new projects and plans, certainly never providing full explanation of the true genesis of my insights (for some reasons, I discovered you can actually offend, and even hurt, people if you do).

Another intriguing fact is that all of the above can happen on topics completely different from the ones being discussed at the moment. So for example, a presentation on the latest technology for migrating IT applications to the cloud can trigger thoughts about the education system and how schools are using 19th century techniques to try and teach 21st century's students.

Best of all, those little impromptu brainstorming sessions with yourself can provide endless topics and ideas for future blog posts, articles, business initiatives and activities.

### **YOUR COMPANY MIGHT BE TOO BIG TO MATTER**

Size is often mentioned as a key differentiator for enterprises. In boardrooms across the world, it is largely believed that size alone will make a company achieve economy of scale, and magically make it more competitive and hence successful. Whilst for certain specific industry segments this might technically be true - for example in mass production of consumer products - I think that for the large majority of companies size can actually be detrimental and play a key role against growth and success. Nimbleness, flexibility, adaptability are much better attributes, bigness is way overrated.

In my observations through the years, when a company becomes too big, a number of things happen:

1. decision making becomes cumbersome and slow: what happens is that there are simply too many reporting lines and approvals to be obtained, and processes to get those approvals usually suck. Back and forth endless threads of emails are usually a good indicator of this happening.
2. matrix organizations flourish: direct reports, dotted line reports, functional teams, local and global span of control. All effectively diluting and blurring the command line, and building a deadly fishing

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With studies in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing, Gianni's professional trajectory developed through jobs at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, mainly with international responsibilities and roles across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing. A curious reader, passionate writer and blogger, he's currently based in Italy near Milan. When not working, he plays guitar in a blues band, enjoys traveling with his family and loves reading, sports and photography.

**"Leadership - an insider guide"** is his first book.

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