

The Bottom Up Leader

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Through my career, I had opportunities to experience different types of leadership from “military style” to very charismatic, different types of Organizations (*hierarchical, by silos, by projects*) and different Company cultures.

I am not judging here whether a very “top down” culture and organization is less efficient than a more “bottom up” organization ... because it might depend on the context and the stage of development they are. But the fact is that more top down organization will often reach some limits, in terms of their capability to manage complexity and build agility.

We now live in a world where Complexity is the norm, change is accelerating ... and in order to cope and survive, organizations are changing ... and so does the role of the Leader.

Leadership, organizations and Cultures are three dimensions that are also extremely linked in my opinion. They can be in symbiosis ... or be incompatible (*which are unfortunate situations I also experienced*). A leader can change the organization ... but changing a Company culture can take much more time.

The various experiences in my career have been great learnings and shaped me.

I define myself as a “Bottom Up Leader” (*in opposition to “Top down”*), and a strong advocate of the principles behind “bottom Up” type of Companies.

I also believe that the last Pandemic crisis will accelerate this trend, pushing Companies toward more agile and entrepreneurial approaches.

In this article, I would like to share my experience and provide some insights for my own learnings.

The “Virtuous Cycle”

I believe there is a “virtuous cycle” around Five key dimensions. And every cycle is a learning and an opportunity to improve.



1. Show the direction

Every good Leader need to have a compelling vision, with a clear sense of purpose; a Direction that must be communicated very clearly to the teams.

The roadmap to get there might not be clear yet (*it can be part of the work to be done, and projects being launched*) ... but WHERE the Company want to go must be crystal clear.

And the **Leader must embark and engage everyone in this challenge.**

If the direction is not clear, or ambiguous, or if there is still a lot of internal debates about the direction ... it will be very hard to engage the teams and therefore to succeed.

A compelling Vision will carry a **sense of purpose** that will be motivating and exciting for ALL stakeholders. It is not about "let's make twice more profit" (*which might be exciting for the shareholder ... but not giving much sense of purpose*).

Why, as an employee, I am proud to work for this Company?

Why, as a customer, your offer is compelling?

Nowadays, many companies will define missions with a sense of purpose that will go beyond the product, integrating strong commitments linked to CSR.

The vision also needs to be very **specific**. It has to be **unique**, and carry a strong and clear meaning (*better avoid "buzzwords" with too general meaning*).

It is important to build a strong ownership and engagement inside the Company. And my recommendation is that even if it requires more time for the Management to clarify Directions and Priorities ... this time will not be wasted.

A "bottom Up Company" will encourage initiatives, ask their teams to think out of the box, try new ways ... and therefore the "WHY" and "WHERE we want to go" must really be crystal clear in order to channel all these efforts and energy in the right direction.

The vision is acting like a "**compass**" for all the teams.

2. Create the conditions of success

This is in my opinion one of the most important role of the Leader.

The Direction being set, the Company knows that there will be a lot of challenges ahead, unexpected issues ... and many solutions to be found. Most of these solutions will not come from Top Leaders ... but from the teams. The Leader is an Enabler.

And this is why many organizations are moving away from "silo" type of organization to more multidisciplinary teams, removing internal barriers and recognizing that cooperation is the key of success.

High engagement and motivation of the teams are critical ... and it is the Leader role to create the conditions of success. The Team can then focus all its energy and creativity on real issues ... rather than having to fight frustrating "internal battles" to get things done!

Among all the factors that can contribute to creating condition of success, there are in my opinion three key factors that are more critical:

➤ Empowerment

How much empowerment do your team have? What level of decision can they make by themselves? How do they have to report? What level of Control?

The definition of these rules is important. The team needs to be clear about the “do and don’t”. Of course, empowerment is not a “blank cheque” and also comes with accountability and some control. But I believe that higher is the empowerment, higher are the chances of success ... and this is what the Leader should aim at.

I have seen here many different situations ... which ultimately led to success or failure of the project, as for example:

- Teams empowered on the paper ... but where the strong level of control and bureaucracy from the rest of the organization was generating high frustration, paralysis and ultimately disengagement. It failed not because the team was not competent ... but because the organization was not able to support them efficiently.
- Teams with a very unclear level of empowerment ... leading to confusion, a lot of wasted energy ... and ultimately disengagement and failure.
- And in much more positive example, I have seen teams able to free energy, moving so fast, getting things done above expectations ... and even having fun doing it, fully supported by an organization that was quick in removing any internal bottlenecks.

➤ Information System

Information is a **key asset** for the Company. But it is often a great challenge to collect and manage this mass of information.

Who in the Company needs what information at what time? The most relevant information that would not reach the right people at the right time would become useless.

The Leader role is to ensure that information flow in the Company is efficient.

However, Information flow is not only an IT issue. The Company can have the best CRM or ERP in the world ... the Management of Information will ultimately rely on **HOW people use it**.

At every level of the Company, the Manager will have to find the right balance between:

- Having enough information to make the right decisions
- ... and not wasting time to review tons of unnecessary data that would make him very busy ... but inefficient.

Even though teams are empowered and trusted, I have even seen Leaders who require to verify so many information themselves ... that they actually become bottlenecks and ultimately be very “controlling”, creating frustration ... and more important wasting time.

*“Time flies over us, but leaves its shadow behind.”
Nathaniel Hawthorne*

The reality is that it can be a fight against Human nature. Many people (*and Leaders*) will fear mistake, and have a tendency to ask more and more information. It is Human ... and the **Manager behavior will be a more critical factor** in the information flow efficiency than the system itself.

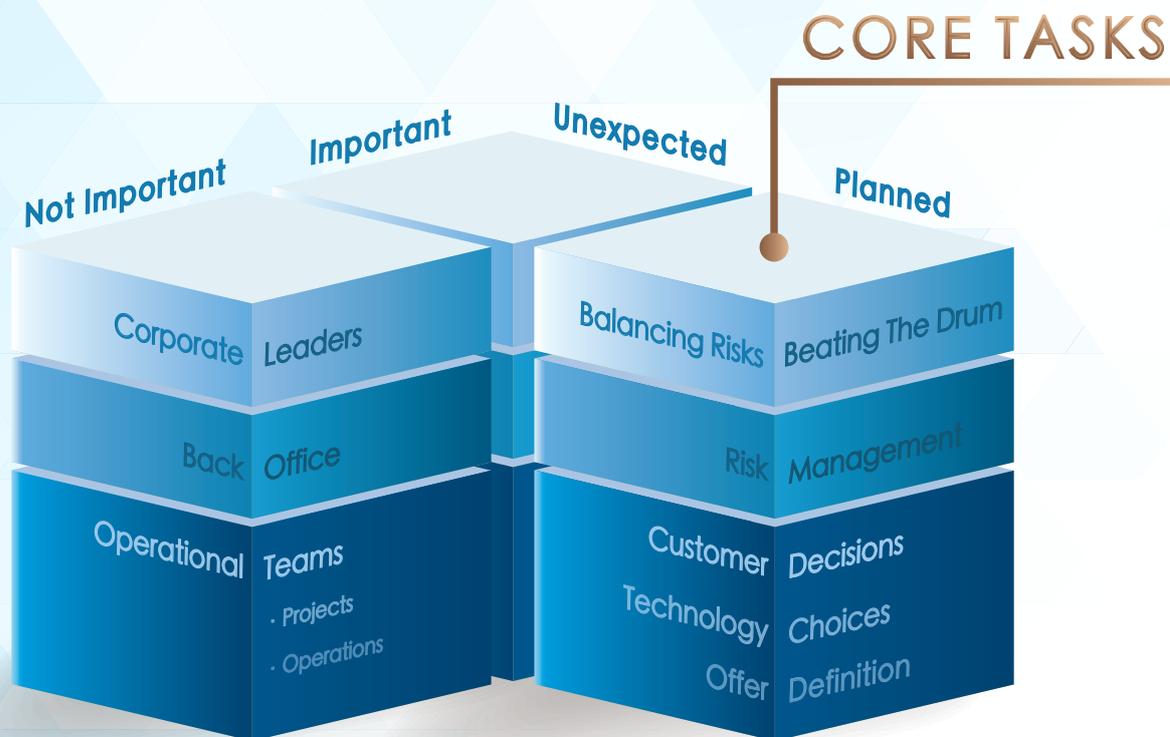
A key challenge of a leader is to ensure that **Information System and the User behavior** supports well the organization and the decision-making process at each level of the organization ... avoiding any **blind spot** on one hand, but also avoiding any **information overload** that would slow down the Company.

➤ Decision Processes

In my experience the decision-making process often reflects the “true culture” of the Company. There are three important dimensions:

- At what level in the organization is the decision made?
- What process?
- How fast is it made?

At which level a decision is made typically depends upon the decision impact and the organization architecture. It can be illustrated as follows, combining the famous “Important vs Urgent” matrix and the Company organization structure.



When Companies are more organized and structured through multidisciplinary teams and projects (*and less in traditional silos that are hindering cooperation*), key decisions will be taken at different levels and maybe not at the top. The teams in contacts with the customer are often in the best position to take the best decisions ... much more than Corporate Managers far from the field reality.

The Process will often involve at least two of the following layers: Operation/Project Leaders, Back Office Functions (*Finance, IT, Legal, ...*), and possibly the Corporate Leaders.

Decision always carry a certain amount of risks and are always made with **imperfect information**. Making a decision is taking a risk ... but delaying a decision also generates another risk!

In this “equation”, my experience is that **TIME is often a neglected critical factor**.

On one hand, Risk Management is important and some decisions need to be postponed to kill bad risks. However, on the other hand **Lost time is also lost opportunities** ... and every delay in good decision can cost a lot!

And even though **TIME and the decision latency**, are such important factors in a environment with accelerating changes ... I have never seen any decision process taking into account the **real value of Time** ... even though **Time is such a valuable asset!**

“Time is free, but it’s priceless. You can’t own it, but you can use it. You can’t keep it, but you can spend it. Once you’ve lost it you can never get it back.”
Harvey Mackay

When a customer is having a problem, you cannot wait days or months for a decision at higher level. If you are managing transformation projects, every delay in decisions might lower the chances of success.

Very often, even an “unperfect decision” can be better than a “no decision”.. Imperfection will bring new learning and an unperfect solution can be improved. But lost time cannot be recovered ...

“Time is what we want most, but what we use worst.”
William Penn

And finally, **HOW is the decision taken?** By a Leader? An Expert? A Project Review meeting? An Executive Committee?

Most of us would also have experienced meetings where after a strong debate, decision is won by the Manager who talks the loudest ... decision that would then be reversed later because so other Manager would oppose it?

Or meetings with so many people around the table and no clear agenda? Making everybody so busy, preparing, analyzing, ... but at the end getting nothing done?

Or decisions that are more “power games” (*for example to get more resources*) ... and not really addressed at the right level?

Setting a decision-making process at the right level, with an adequate risk management and at the right speed ... is indeed a critical challenge for the Leader.

And in a world with higher uncertainty, the ability to make fast and efficient decision will become more and more critical.

3. Beat the drum and coach

The organization might be bottom-up, with teams working as entrepreneurs with a high degree of autonomy ... like an orchestra where every team is in charge of playing a specific instrument.

The Leader is the conductor of the orchestra. He is the one to ensure that there is harmony, direction and speed in what is done.

Again the value of Time ... the Leader is "beating the drum".

And if for any reason some teams are struggling or encountering difficulties ... he also needs to change his role to become a coach or a mentor. Because what really matters most at the end is the **collective performance**. And the team needs to support all its members.

4. Inspire and engage

Most of the leaders I met and worked with along my career were bright people highly intelligent. They were able to digest huge amount of data and had impressive analytical skills.

But only few of them were really **inspiring charismatic leaders**. And when they were, the team engagement was so much higher ... making you feel that you really want to give the best of yourself and walk the extra mile to succeed. You don't do it for yourself, you do it because you really believe in what you are doing, because you and your team get recognition, ... and also because you feel proud to be part of it.

The role of the Leader is to create an environment that will create high engagement.

Many factors can contribute to engagement (*leadership style, peer relationship, recognitions, etc ...*). However, it is not only coming from HR policies or words in a Company leaflet, but more importantly by the behaviors and attitudes of the Leaders.

The **Company culture** can be an important factor of engagement, but the Company Culture will become **alive** and a reality in the everyday life of the employees ... only through the **daily behavior and attitudes** of its Leader.

For example, a Company encouraging initiative must create the space for it, integrating it in its appraisal system and above all accepting mistakes. It should even discourage passive behaviors of employees not taking the risk to try something new and take initiative.

A Company emphasizing on high Ethics and growing its people ... it should really do it.

In my career, I spent a lot of time and energy to try to support some Managers who were struggling, trying to provide them training and coaching. It was very important to give them seconds chances, even if performance was too low, build an improvement plan and help them. But on the contrary, for any serious non-ethical behavior, there was no second chance.

The Company culture is really becoming alive through Management actions.

Let me take another “tricky” example ... is the Leader always right? Of course not, error is human, and everyone can make mistake including the best Leaders.

Life is a learning experience, and Leaders also constantly learning themselves as they always face new situations and new problems.

The key question here is more the attitude of the Leader. Will the leader defend his positions, blame others for the mistake ... and ultimately protect his ego?

Or will he react with humility, taking a more inclusive attitude with the teams and openly sharing the learnings?

“Mistakes are necessary. They make you move forward.”
Unknown

The Leader should “walk the talk” in terms of the values he is promoting in the Company. Recognizing its own limits is a strength! Having a humble and open attitude will earn the respect and the trust of the team ... and reinforce the Company culture. It will show people what kind of attitude is expected and encouraged in the Company.

It is critical that the **Leader walk the talk**. He needs to **lead by example**.

5. Boost the collective learning

The most agile Companies are the one able to learn and capitalize on their learning.

This is even more important in case of failures and mistakes. But even if the project is successful, what did we do well? What was not so good, and how can we do better next time ?

This learning should be done at both individual and collective level.

And such a **learning** will in turn influence the Direction of the Company. This is **true agility**.

Coming to the conclusion of this article, I would also wish to point out that the skills of a “Bottom-Up” leader are very **transversal**. The bottom-Up leader does not need to be a expert in the industry ... he needs to understand how to make a difference by **leveraging the “collective power”** of the teams, and **channel energies** to achieve superior performance.

The Bottom-Up Leader is a Visionary, a Conductor, an Enabler, a Coach, and a Mentor.