



## In Praise of the Incomplete Leader (2)

Last time we wrote about the MIT Sloan School article in the Harvard Business Review telling us it was time to end the myth of the complete leader "the flawless person at the top who has got it all figured out" (HBR, February 2007). They sent a very clear warning to leaders who only promote and nurture people in their own image;

*Leaders who choose only people who mirror themselves are likely to find their organisations tilting in one direction, missing one or more essential capabilities to survive in a changing complex world.*

In this article we will build on the concept of the **Incomplete Leader** to develop the concept of **Whole Leadership**.

The Tricordant view of a productive and sustainable organisation is one where there is alignment between the 4 dimensions of;

- Identity (the reason the organisation exists and its enduring core purpose)
- Strategy (how to achieve the core purpose in current times and the current market)
- Systems (the processes to deliver the strategy, including governance, technology, work processes, equipment/plant, role design, rules and procedures)
- Culture (the energy and spirit of the people in the organisation)

We agree wholeheartedly with the MIT view that no single leader can embody all the necessary capabilities for survival in enterprise today. The self-confessed Incomplete Leader will liberate the necessary capabilities within the organisation or positively recruit them from outside if need be.

A problem with leaders however is that (whisper it!) they come and go. In other words, however long they stay, their influence is transient in the great scheme of things. Many top leaders shape organisation arrangements in their own image, around their own skill-set and what they understand. The danger is they devalue the roles they don't understand. Hence the endless and costly rounds of re-structuring whenever new leaders are appointed.

**Our question therefore is whether it is possible to combine the transient wisdom of the Incomplete Leader with the design of a durable Whole Leadership architecture to embody distributed leadership for the long term. Call them governance arrangements if you like.**

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting great leaders don't matter. They absolutely do matter. Nor are we saying new leaders can't change anything in the structures around them. But just as no single leader can embody the 4 MIT leadership capabilities, we believe no single leader can fulfil the **core** leadership roles for the enterprise to survive in an increasingly open and complex world.

In our model of **Whole Leadership** we postulate that each of the 4 dimensions of Identity, Strategy, Systems and Culture need to be led. We further postulate that our thinking may rejuvenate leadership in some time-honoured roles that have fallen out of fashion. In fact let's start with the most unfashionable bit first;

- **Identity.** The identity of an enterprise usually has its roots in the Founder. Where the Founder is still active, more often than not they act as the guardian of purpose. Where they are no longer active, the identity of an enterprise needs a Guardian if it is to remain true to its purpose while navigating turbulent market or environmental change. The plight of many banks who lost their way over the last decade, forgetting their core purpose, could have been avoided if the "conservative" voices who initially urged caution with now discredited strategies had not been quashed. We are not suggesting risk aversion should become the new black, but we are saying there is a vital role for Corporate Guardianship in enterprises who want a sustainable future. A Director of Corporate Governance might be a good proxy. Non-executive Directors should do it all the time. And yes these people will annoy the entrepreneurs and risk-takers among you, but get over it because long term they will keep you out of jail!



- **Strategy.** This is the space for the visionaries, the innovators, the strategists and the planners. These are the guys who take the core purpose and shape it for the contemporary environment. They create the compelling vision of the future and invent new ways to achieve it. They make sense of the market. The doers among you see these guys as the dreamers, the impractical heads in the clouds and blue sky thinkers. Get over it, they are the ones who shape your future and without them you won't have one! Call the role Director of Strategy and Planning if you like.
- **Systems.** This is the space for the doers, the practical guys who have to make the core purpose and vision deliverable on the ground. Often they are the no-nonsense Finance Directors who ask uncomfortable questions about how all this creative strategy stuff is going to pay the bills. Sometimes they are the Chief Operating Officers who ask equally uncomfortable questions about the staffing and infrastructure to deliver the strategy when it's already tough delivering today. These guys are the meat in the delivery sandwich, with reports who carry operational titles like Manager, Administrator, Coordinator, Monitor and Team Leader. The strategists among you hate these guys because they are always obstructing your visions by bringing practical considerations into play. Get over it. Unless these people are connected to the corporate decision-making your enterprise risks delivering systems and products that are completely unaligned to its core purpose. These are the guys who could have told you that out-sourced automated call-handling systems are not the way to deliver on your promise of a personalised customer service. If only you had listened!
- **Culture.** It's the soft stuff that gets stuck in the HR box because it's touchy-feely and we don't know how to measure or influence it. Yet everyone knows culture eats strategy for breakfast. It's the intangible spirit of the organisation that at best inspires, energises and motivates everyone to walk the talk. At worst it suppresses and disables, quashing people's spirits to the point that they just turn up for work (if that) and do as they are told. In our view culture is a leadership space that can and must be occupied **purposefully**. But it can't reside in a single individual. It's where leadership operates as Servant Leader, coach and mentor, facilitator and advocate. It's more a characteristic of generic leadership than a single role, **but** it also needs a role to lead and nurture the desired culture as well as holding the rest of the leadership to account. Make sure this role is also at the top table if you don't want today's vision to be tomorrow's corn flakes.

Our position is that each of the 4 dimensions needs talented and active leadership at the top table of the enterprise in order to keep the organisation sustainable and healthy for the long term. We are not saying they are the only roles at the top table, and nor are we into prescribing job titles. We are saying that the architecture (or governance) of the **Whole Leadership** organisation must ensure these roles are fulfilled in one way or another at the top table.

That way the MIT model of the Incomplete Leader can have a durability that goes way beyond the tenure of the individual leader and creates sustainable distributed leadership for the long term.

We are at risk of breaching the Think Piece 5 minute rule, so need to stop here. But if you would like to continue the conversation please get in touch. We'd love to get your feed-back.

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