Leading Creatively in Vietnam

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"Success is, first of all, an act of the imagination."

Warren G. Bennis & Robert J. Thomas

Businesses and/or executive recruitment firms in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have recently advertised for positions such as Managing Director, Controlling Financial Officer or Chief Executive Officer. These advertisements are seeking candidates who possess excellent leadership skills, results-oriented leadership, team leadership, natural leadership and strong leadership. None of these specific areas of leadership are defined so there is an expectation that either the candidate will self-select on these arbitrary attributes or the organization has an innate understanding of leadership ability and can identify a leader when they see one.

Should an organization seek out leaders for their ability to accomplish certain tasks or for their leadership traits? Is there a difference in the leadership attributes required of an international company or of a domestic company? What are the requirements for an international leader working for a domestic organization or a domestic leader working for an international organization? Are leadership skills interchangeable from industry to industry? And if there is a mutually acceptable listing of leadership attributes for all organizations in Vietnam are the institutions of higher education able to teach these attributes to future and current leaders? The list of questions qualifying the nature of the appropriate leader for a Vietnam-based company could conceivably never become completely exhausted. Defining the needs of organizational leadership in Vietnam is an issue that is ripe for continued discussion (and additional research).

Depending upon when you initiate the search (new leadership books are being published daily) a visit to Amazon.com will indicate that there are over 380,000 books on the subject of leadership available for purchase. This plethora of resources indicates that the study of leadership with its associated listing of leadership attributes is eminently popular as well as potentially confusing.

There are books tracing the historical leadership of generals, kings, religious leaders, business leaders, presidents and well-known villains. There are books which identify desired leadership traits and how to acquire them, books which introduce new leadership theories and books which examine leadership from the perspectives of followers.

Before the current economic crisis organizational leaders in Vietnam were perhaps selected on less-formal criteria and were sought out for their presumed ability to lead organizations through the foundational development stages associated with a growing economic environment. With the 2008-2010 world-wide economic recession slowly fading from the scene is the previous leadership selection process still appropriate? Is there an acceptable understanding as to what type of leader or leadership skills will be needed to move organizations in Vietnam to the next level of success? Rather than attempt to overwhelm this discussion by reviewing all of the possible answers to the previous question it may be a more worthy effort to focus upon one tangible leadership attribute and note its organizational value for 2010.

A recent Thanhniennews. com article interviewed Oscar Salemink an anthropology professor with expertise on Vietnam and Southeast Asia about the emerging workforce in Vietnam. Professor Salemink, from VU University Amsterdam in the Netherlands, indicated that "Vietnam will need a high-caliber and flexible workforce with creative intelligence" (Dien,

2010) in order to compete in the global marketplace. Producing a more creative and innovative workforce will require the Vietnamese educational system to modify its instructional approach and expand opportunities for active and independent learning. This may be more of a time-sensitive issue with Vietnamese universities and colleges as there is minimal lead time to change the educational curriculum to accommodate the advancement of a creative and innovative workforce. Universities and colleges throughout Vietnam are already keenly aware of their growing responsibilities in preparing the youth of the country for the demands of the 21st century marketplace of ideas. (In 2006 the Ministry of Education and Training established seven groups of solutions for educational development in higher education. In one subset of solutions the Ministry stated that universities and colleges must "carry out strong innovations of the higher education curricula in the direction of diversification, standardization, modernization, to create conditions for quick, selective adaptation of curricula of developed countries in the fields of science, technology, etc. closely satisfying country's requirements and practically serving the socio-economic development of country in general and different sectors and localities in particular".) Promoting the development of creativity among higher education students is but an evolutionary step in the adoption of a curriculum which favors student participation and

critical thinking.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the book Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience and a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University's Drucker School of Management has extensively researched the importance of creativity in an organizational environment. He believes that "Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Being able to work in teams and collaborate on projects are essential requirements of a creative and innovative staff. Any idea or product "that deserves the label 'creative' arises from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). And because of the weak economic results of 2009, 2010 brings a degree of hope and anticipation that businesses will be able to innovate their way out of the recession.

Even though "not all creative individuals are innovators, nor are all innovators invariably creative or inventive as individuals" (Adair, 2007) there is an association in the literature between a creative workforce and an innovative organization. Innovation is often the consequence or product of a creative process which invigorates an organization's productive capacity. A creative workforce as previously noted is team oriented with ideas being formed through

an unstructured collaborative process. "Studies of creativity by psychologist Theresa Amabile indicate that creative people are not only more tolerant of ambiguity than others, they also are able to consider multiple options for a longer period. They don't rule out possibilities prematurely and so they are able to make better, more artful choices" (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). The realm of the possible does not automatically lead into the acts of the probable, but a workforce that is trained to view their work beyond a singular focus is also more apt to see innovation as a consequence of their actions.

Being capable of leading a creative work-force implies that at the very least, a person understands the elements of the creative process. The optimal circumstance is for such a leader to also be a creative person who is capable of adapting the skills of his/her creative workforce with the needs of the organization. "In essence, adaptive capacity is applied creativity. It is the ability to look at a problem or crisis and see an array of unconventional solutions. Flexible, resilient people are not repelled by problems; they pounce on them, determined to find solutions to the puzzle, however painful they may be. Adaptive capacity allows individuals to confront unfamiliar situations with confidence and optimism" (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). The recession has led to many unfamiliar situations for many organizations in Vietnam. Perhaps these same organizations may view unconventional solutions as an option for leading them to success in 2010.

An organizational leader who can successfully create an environment that encourages innovation and collaboration among employees demonstrates an "appreciation of the unique talents and perspectives of each member" (Douglas, 2009). Providing the means and the opportunity for self-motivated creative employees to flourish within an organization is an acknowledgement that traditional structures and existing systems may need to be modified. "Creative leaders need to be able to identify, articulate and express constraints that provoke the team to creative responses within the right field" (Ibottson, 2008). Organizational challenges to the creative process may temporarily restrict the productivity of the staff, but the organizational leader should not diminish his/her commitment to promote innovation. "It is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Leading an organization beyond the limitations of the recent recession would be enhanced by a person who has already demonstrated a good understanding of the creative process. Such a leader would also be well qualified to motivate the inherent creative spirit of the workforce and move the organization beyond an unstable economic environment. If creativity is to be viewed as a workplace skill necessary for the evolutionary development of Vietnam's business and industry then there is the reasonable expectation that a organizational leader should know how to maximize the productive consequences of creative talent among his/her staff. Creative leaders as "creative individuals also respect the possibilities of the future. They are open to novelty and curious about how to make things better. Whenever they can, they try to combine the achievements of the past with the possibilities of the future and express them in the present" (Csikszentmihaly and Nakamura, 2007).

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