



Tofu And The Changing Nature Of Leadership

KEVIN CASHMAN 05.08.07, 6:00 AM ET

It's been fun to chart the high-growth, low-pitch success of Taiwanese computer maker Acer. In contrast to the clamorous competition usually associated with computer sales, Acer has quietly gone about its business and is now nipping at the heels of Dell to become the world's second-biggest notebook seller.

A good share of the credit can be attributed to Gianfranco Lanci, the understated yet upbeat company president who has become the first non-Asian ever to hold such high rank among Taiwan's technology

titans. The son of an Italian construction worker, Lanci is an anomaly compared to the razzle-dazzle of most fast-moving high-tech execs. Yet, as *Forbes Asia* pointed out last year, Lanci, operating out of a foreign culture where he barely speaks the language, has found success by winning over Acer's 5,300 employees because he "beams humility" and "treasures relationships."

Amid a landscape of headlines related to more heroic, charismatic styles of leadership, it may be easy to point to cultural factors as a key reason for Lanci's management success. In reality, though, he's at the forefront of a just-emerging approach to global leadership.

You see, as the more heroic, charismatic styles of leadership were grabbing the headlines over the past decades, another more silently effective leader has been taking hold. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* calls these individuals "Level 5" leaders, and he once referred to them as "tofu leaders"--executives who are somewhat bland, mix really well with everything around them, and still provide necessary sustenance. Sure, a more heroic, Welch-esque approach is still needed in some circles and business environments, but in a by-gone era, results aren't enough.

Top leaders now need to be a more well-rounded breed with results and people muscles ready to bend and flex under more diverse and challenging circumstances. On the one hand, they must please an increasingly demanding shareholder base, but on the other, they have to improve upon the low levels of allegiance plaguing their organizations--a reality hit home last year by a Hewitt Associates survey that found four of 10 employees were interested in working elsewhere.

In their book *Extraordinary Leader*, John H. Zenger and Joseph Folkman studied the 360-degree assessments of 400,000 leaders. One of their key findings isolated leaders whose main skill was getting results from leaders whose main skill was engaging people. The results showed no statistical difference between these groups. Results-oriented leaders got to the 90th percentile of leadership effectiveness 13% of the time, and the people-oriented leaders got there 9% of the time.

And what about those leaders with both results and people competencies? A whopping 66% achieved the top level of leadership effectiveness.

So it turns out Lanci, in all his tofu modesty, is a genuine trend setter--a new brand of corporate athlete. Though less boisterous in his words, his mounting track record for people and progress is a lesson for what real leadership power and clout is all about.

Here are your questions and my responses related to real leadership issues. The names of individuals and their companies have been withheld to maintain an open dialog.

CEO, EAST COAST DESIGN FIRM: How can today's baby-boomer leaders evoke more entrepreneurialism out of the younger generation, their successors?

CASHMAN: Entrepreneurialism is one of the most difficult qualities of leadership to foster. While it's something that might be developed a bit, deeply-seeded propensities such as comfort with risk-taking can have dramatic sway. That's why many companies, overwhelmed with this charge, choose to make entrepreneurial leadership a talent selection rather than talent development process.

The key to encouraging entrepreneurialism out of tentative talent is to find a project or function that deeply resonates with successors. Start with a task that means more to the successor than their average work task in order to energize the behavior your organization needs. Model the leadership conduct you desire and then build folklore around your workplace culture for the advances made in this area. Remember, such a metamorphosis will likely take time. It may also help to reflect back on what work was like when you were in their shoes.

TRADER, LARGE HEDGE FUND: Are there ways to improve my low energy characterization at work? I have been the first person in the office, and I work over the weekends. Still, this area is questioned by colleagues and in reviews.

CASHMAN: Time can be a bad barometer of leadership. Ask anyone who's ever had a boss on the job 24 hours a day! Just as it's not necessarily indicative of the true level of results and output, the time you spend in the office may have little or no correlation to your style--drive, commitment, etc.--within the workplace.

Instead, take a deep look within the environment to notice workplace patterns and norms and who stands out from them in a positive way. Other than punching in and out, how are people creating motion that produces value? Find those around you that seem to be high-energy and consider using them as a model or mentor for improvement in this area.

It might also be helpful to get more clarification around the comments other have made to understand what actions and characteristics you exhibit that lead them to interpret you this way. After all, taking a proactive approach in sorting out this matter may be the first step in having your colleagues sense your energy and commitment.

PRESIDENT, WEST COAST CONSULTING FIRM: A philosophical question: Can we be trusted to manage others if we can't manage ourselves?

CASHMAN: Not generally. As research on emotional intelligence has shown us, all leadership begins with self-leadership. If a manager is decaying from the inside, so too will his or her larger influence. We expand our organizational capacity in direct proportion to expanding our own self-development. Growing ourselves grows our organizations.

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