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Rebooting the leadership operating system

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Singapore has constantly adapted to keep growing, but what mindset is needed now?

Using Silicon Valley terminology, a recent Straits Times article ("Singapore: An exceptional start-up turns 50"; Aug 7) referred to Singapore leaders "rebooting" the country's system whenever needed. It was a reflection of their ability and willingness to constantly adapt and change for the continuous evolution of their country.

The focus has always been on the vision for the future, with a creative tension that continues to establish competitiveness as a way of achieving continuous growth.

Coping with the ever-increasing complexity and planning for the future requires a completely new way of making sense of the world and doing what needs to be done to generate or maintain competitive advantage.

In my interactions with chief executive officers (CEOs) as their business performance coach, I am always asked what they need to do make the necessary changes in the way they manage business, manage themselves, and their people. How they can be more effective as leaders to stay on track and achieve their vision.

Managing the business and managing others get a lot of coverage and are usually addressed reasonably well. Most leaders, however, fail to pay attention to the need for managing their inner state of being which has as much, if not greater, impact on business performance.



Coping with the ever-increasing complexity and planning for the future requires a completely new way of making sense of the world: PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

DANGER OF REAR-VIEW THINKING

Thinking anew and acting anew require a new level of consciousness, a new set of beliefs and assumptions about the business, their inner state of being, and the state of the world they live in.

Making decisions based on the past is a bit like driving into the future using only our rear-view mirror. This view of the world significantly impacts on the leader's ability to understand the difference between what is possible and what is probable. Our patterns of actions and habits of thought ensure that we continue to see things in a linear and sequential manner, driven always by a cause- and-effect mode of thinking.

Dealing with complexity requires not the understanding of what is probable, but what is possible, a sense of what could happen, not because the past tells us that, but because we are willing to look at things from completely new and unexpected perspectives.

This requires a significant shift in the way leaders think, the conversations they have, the questions they ask or do not ask, and the very language of the organisation. This is not easy, as conventional thinking is safe thinking and does not, on the face of it, lead to greater levels of risk.

India-headquartered Omniactive Health Technologies is a good example of a company that has developed a way of addressing complex challenges for customers in the dietary supplement, food and beverage space.

Once they hone in on a consumer need, they research new ways to leverage technology to meet that need. Their bestseller, Lutemax 2020, which has a large share of the US market, started this way with the unexpressed need to combine the vision health benefits of lutein with enhanced levels of isomers to protect the eye from oxidative stress. Creating the right blend came from asking a different set of questions and responding with a whole new approach not used before.

Recently the CEO of a Singapore-based conglomerate, who has had some success in emerging markets, asked me if he can replicate past successes by being in the right place at the right time with the right product one more time.

This question is fraught with risk, as it comes from a mindset that is looking for wins based on thoughts like, "If I had one chance, where would I place my bet?". Often we have to question the very question we ask.

When this CEO first got his success, it was based on an open and transparent process of learning, with lots of experimentation. Having enjoyed the success, he has changed his way of thinking, and now he is afraid to fail. He needs to free himself of the burden that he places on himself - the anxiety to succeed.

Author Jennifer Garvey Berger, who has written several books on the subject of change, refers to the mindset of leaders who do not know the difference between complex and complicated situations and challenges.

Her mentor Bob Kegan at Harvard University, who has done a lot of work on adult development, refers to the structure of mind that drives performance. Just as a Honda, which is otherwise a well-designed car with a good engine, cannot perform like a Ferrari, the leader's state of mind has to evolve to be able to deal with uncertainty and complexity in order for the business to perform at the levels the organisation needs.

IT'S COMPLEX

A more complex mind is a more developed mind and will be able to distinguish between the complicated and the complex problems to find a simple solution.

When you engage a complex situation, you can simplify it, but that does not mean that the world is simple. It means that there is more to a given situation than just a cause-and-effect relationship, and you have a complex mind that is capable of finding answers from a much broader perspective.

This requires the ability to distinguish an adaptive challenge, which needs a new way of thinking and will not be resolved by throwing technical solutions or using skills that have worked before.

Dr Ronald Heifetz refers to adaptive challenges that have a different timeframe for resolution. Unlike technical challenges that can quickly get fixed with appropriate skills, with adaptive challenges you have to discover a solution that does not exist.

This is a bit like the challenge that Singapore has faced with its low population growth rate that requires a whole bunch of behavioural and attitudinal changes before we can see any positive outcomes.

Resolving challenges of this nature needs a leader with a new state of being, a capacity to "reboot" her inner operating system and find a new consciousness that will rise to the new challenge of developing new responses that have not been used before.

In the realm of sport, the legendary cricketer Sunil Gavaskar used to take fresh guard - altering his batting stance in relation to the bowler and his stumps - after he had reached the milestone of scoring 50 runs, so he could get to a century. The next 50 would take a different mindset.

Singapore, at 50, finds itself in the same situation, and the realisation that what got us here will not be good enough to get us to where we need to be, is of critical importance. It will take some more rebooting of our leadership minds and systems to help us build on this amazing foundation.

- The writer is the chairman of Thought Perfect, a Singapore-based organisation that provides business performance coaching to CEOs.