Brief

Better leadership: learning from the past and the future

Lessons from two books: Ibarra's *Act like a leader, think like a leader* and Dive's *Mission Mastery*

With so many books on leadership, why aren't there more brilliant leaders? Being a leader is complex and rapidly changing – and most feel they don't any time for reading.

What is the route to better leadership? We look at two recent books taking very contrasting approaches: Herminia Ibarra shows, in *Act Like A Leader, Think Like A Leader* how the requirement of leaders is changing rapidly, and old ideas don't work – research she carried out includes the result that 79% executives agreed: 'what got you here won't get you there'. Ibarra's book explains how to develop by acting and learning, rather than thinking.

Brian Dive shows, in *Mission Mastery: Revealing a 100-year-old Leadership Secret*, what we can learn from the original 19thC German military thinking about leadership – especially about delegation and distributed leadership, and how it has *not* been well-applied in more recent decades. Dive also argues powerfully that too much focus is placed on the qualities of leaders, and their capabilities, over the effectiveness of organisational design.

Here is our summary of key points from the two books.

IBARRA: *ACT LIKE A LEADER, THINK LIKE A LEADER*

Whatever got you here won't get you there

Surveys show that the challenges facing leaders in organisations today are changing fast from what they used to be. And that the required leadership competences are also changing. We must change how we approach developing ourselves towards effective and successful senior positions. At the same time, most leadership coaching focuses on introspection – changing our self-awareness and ways of thinking. Paradoxically, Ibarra argues, we only increase our self-knowledge in the process of making real, practical changes.

Her survey of executives also shows this view of what has changed most significantly in in terms of the key competences for leadership:

- Collaboration across units/functions
- Inspiring and motivating others
- Getting buy-in and support from others
- Providing strategic direction

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'Outsight'

Ibarra's argument is that in this fast changing and unpredictable world we will not plan and think ourselves into being a better leader – with insight and introspection. Instead we must act, experiment and learn from outside ourselves – what Ibarra calls 'outsight'. She says that 'outsight' comes from:

- Finding new ways to do (our job)
- New relationships (our networks)
- New ways of connecting to and engaging with people (ourselves).

Ibarra says that without outside-in approach our patterns of thought and action are fenced in by the past. Ina world where we are so busy – in meetings, travelling, dealing with the ever-rising number of corporate initiatives and regulatory requirements – it is very tough to make room for anything new. Successful leaders build slack into their schedule – allowing for the non-routine, the unexpected and the spontaneous.

How we spend our time

One of the biggest difference between managers who end up in more senior positions over their career, and others, is how they spend their time. Effective managers spent more time with their teams, but those who went on to senior roles spent more time on relationships across the organisations. And importantly – if we just build networks with people like ourselves we are building narcissistic and lazy relationships or networks.

Ibarra highlights the benefit of 'play' vs work. When we work we set goals, manage our time, try not to deviate from the linear straight and narrow. When we play, we lose track of time, we meander, we don't have to follow rules, we are curious, random, borrow ideas and discover new things. We have to find some times to be playful.

Vision

Having 'vision' is a defining characteristic of leadership. What is Vision? Ibarra described the key role as:

- Sensing opportunities and threats in the environment
- Setting strategic direction
- Inspiring others to look beyond current practice

Technology and rise in data available makes it much easier than in the past to delegate managing current operations, and has shifted the requirement on leaders to focus even more on shaping a common view of the organisations environment and its desired future direction.

Are you a hub or bridge?

At the heart of this view of effective leadership is the difference between a leader who's approach to their role and the team they lead is being a 'bridge' vs being a 'hub'. The traditional view was the effectiveness stemmed from acting as a hub for your team: setting goals for team, assigning roles and tasks, monitoring progress, managing team member performance and creating a good team climate. Stronger outcomes flow from being a bridge: aligning team goals with overall organisational priorities, funnelling critical information and resources into the team to support goals, getting the support of key allies, enhancing the external visibility of team, and getting wider recognition for good performers in the team.

So: are you a hub or bridge?

'Hub' leader	'Bridge' leader
Set goals for team	Align team goals with organisational priorities
Assign roles	Funnel critical information and resources into the team to support goals
Assign tasks	
Monitor progress	Get the support of key allies
Manage team member performance	Enhance the external visibility of team
Hold meetings to co-ordinate work	Get wider recognition for good performers in the team and ensure the next great assignment.
Create a good team climate	

Buy-in

Ibarra reminds us that no matter how much strategic insight we have, no matter how compelling our ideas - if no-one else buys in, not much happens. People don't buy-in because they have read an analytical report, email or presentation – but because we have connected with them. It is not the idea that is the ultimate selling point – it is the nature of engagement. Ibarra proposes this formula:

The idea + the engagement process + you = success in leading change.

In other words, the secret of a great argument is not just the great idea, but the reason why someone should commit. That is one reason why a message is twenty times more likely to be remembered when it is conveyed in an engaging story than when conveyed through facts and figures.

Authenticity

Ibarra tackles one of the popular and challenging recent ideas about leadership: the importance of 'authenticity'. 'Authenticity' can become an excuse for staying in our comfort zone. We must stretch beyond those boundaries to move towards a future version of our authentic self.

Being a leader for the first time can so often feel like a requirement to be 'fake'. But as a visible leader, we have to be aware that everyone's brains are wired to focus on, and remember most, those things which might hurt us threaten us, or have gone wrong (the "bad is stronger than good" effect). As a leader we have to overemphasise the 'good' and positive, and underemphasise the 'bad'. This is not 'PR' or sugar-coating – it is essential to opening people's minds and engaging them.

Leadership transitions

In Ibarra's view, there are five stages in stepping-up to a bigger leadership role. Success is more likely if our expectations are managed about it being a bumpy, more than smooth, ride:

1. Disconfirmation: feeling the gap between where you are and where you want to be, with the pressure of urgency

2. Simple addition: adding new roles and responsibilities without letting go of old ones

3. Complication: back-sliding and setbacks, exhaustion from making time for old and new behaviours and experiences

4. Course correction: stop, think, bring the outsight in, make new goals

5. Internalisation: becoming the new you, with new self-identity.

Ibarra tells us that stepping up to a new role is not an event – it is a process that takes time through many steps. And her clear conclusions are to learn by doing, listening and adjusting, rather than by too much thinking in advance.

MISSION MASTERY: REVEALING A 100-YEAR-OLD LEADERSHIP SECRET

Learning from the past: going back to the start

While Ibarra points out that recent past is no guide to the future, Brian Dive reminds us, thoughtfully, that the foundation theories of leadership and organisation were laid down nearly two centuries ago by German military theorists Clausewitz and Moltke – and it is worth re-discovering them.

It is thought-provoking that Dive believes that Clausewitz and Moltke have more to teach us than the organisations and leaders of the past few decades. Many of us instinctively believe that the military are not the best source of leadership learning – mainly on the basis it will be based on a top-down, command-and-control attitude that treats all the same regardless of individual circumstances. And we all know that is unworkable in today's world. This instinct assumes, of course, that by comparison, today's businesses are quite unlike this in real life.

Clausewitz's great and unique insight was to focus on the gap between strategy and execution – caused by what he called 'friktion' (from physics – to explain the discrepancy between the ideal and reality). Clausewitz said there was internal friction (within the organisation) and external friction. Moltke then added to this theory of leadership by specifying the split between 'command' and 'control'.

No such things as a perfect plan

Dive summarises the Clausewitz insight that there is no such thing as a perfect plan. Strategy is one thing, but execution is always faced with reality. There are three 'traps' from the 'friktion' between strategy and execution:

1. *Not enough information*: seeing through the fog that surrounds all situations, making and accurate assessment of what you know, guessing what you don't and making a judgement.

    The wrong response is to look for more and more data and assume you can aim for perfect judgement – there will always be gaps and unknowns.

2. *Lack of alignment between plan and action*. The wrong response is to impose more controls and instructions from the top – which results in constipation and complexity.

3. *The wrong outcomes*. The wrong response is to impose additional levels of hierarchy and control which muddy accountability and cause ambiguity of responsibility.

    A classic example was the succession of child protection failures in Haringey Council in London in recent decades. Clearly the wrong outcomes prompted imposition of extra levels of management, which then led to more risk as accountabilities became ambiguous.

Dive says the route to avoid these traps is:

1. Being clear what really counts

2. Getting the message across

3. Giving people space, and support

The what why and how

Most leaders assume that they should direct the 'What', 'Why' and 'How' of their teams or units. By doing so on the 'How' they disempower their organisation, especially their frontline or junior colleagues. Moltke was clear that the senior leader's role was the what (goal, mission) and why – the 'how' had to be delegated. As Dive describes, everyone needs to understand the what and why, so that they can take all their 'how' decisions in that context – and be accountable for them.

As Dive summarises: within this framework – the essence of 'mission command' is ensuring that trained leaders (at all levels) understand their own part in the overall purpose, but are left free to decide how best to accomplish it. In other words, clear devolution of decision-making in ways that result in unity of effort and direction.

Distributed leadership

Dive describes how the two most popular explanations of the 2008 banking crash and all that followed, are (a) it was a moral failure (for example - greed), and (b) it was a cognitive failure (in other words, failure to understand what they were doing). But Dive's view is that is most likely to have been (c) organisational failure, where structures, accountabilities and empowerment were all wrong.

Dive says that effective organisation is all about 'distributed leadership' – having effective leaders at every level, with clear accountability and empowerment. In his definition, in the typical organisation, about 15% of all roles could be leadership ones at one level or another.

Metrics over accountability

Dive also focuses on the trouble with the over-emphasis on metrics that we now have everywhere. It drives drives micro-management – which is the opposite of accountability. As Dive points out, the numbers should measure the outcome of strategic plans, not be the goal itself.

For clear accountability focus on the vertical dimensions of the organisation structure

Dive's experience over 40 years has made him clear that the true driver of distributed leadership and clear accountability is to focus on the vertical dimensions of organisation design – the number and nature of layers. The typical obsession of most attempts to improve organisation design focus on spans of control – which in Dive's approach are an outcome not a goal.

The primary purpose of the way an organisation is set-up is to ensure the best decision-making. Pope Leo XIII introduced the idea of subsidiarity in 1891. Although an old idea Dive sees it as rarely properly executed. It means that whatever people can do for themselves

ought not to be removed from their competence and taken over by others more senior. Decisions should made as near the frontline as possible.

Organisation design is about decision rights

As Dive describes, key to successful design is to know how many levels of decision-making are needed for the particular organisation and what it does. If you are a retail bank operating in one country, how many levels of decision are there? If the answer is not clear, then the organisation structure is a guess. The result is increased risk, reduced performance and less resilience to changes in the context. Dive says that compared to this focus on clear decision rights, so many organisations do this by looking at what resources each leader has, to define grades (and titles) which then determine layers.

As Dive also says, removing layers "to reduce bureaucracy and empower staff" – or even worse, to reduce costs - may well simply make a bad situation worse by forcing a new range of senior managers to start interfering unhelpfully and inefficiently. He points out that is amazing how often senior managers instigate cost-reduction 'delayering' that leave the all the top levels intact.

Key steps

For Dive, the key steps to successfully improving structure are:

1. Core choice of structure, aligned with strategy (Is it focused on geography, process, market segment?).
2. Build the target structure top-down and bottom-up, to ensure it works both ways.
3. Design the levels around key accountabilities – ensuring no overlaps, or ambiguities in decision-making.
4. Train people in the new roles to understand their level, accountabilities and how they have been changed.
5. Engage all stakeholders in understanding these changes and new set-up.

As Dive concludes: having a good strategy does not lead to strong distributed leadership to ensure effective delivery, without the right organisation design.

CONCLUSION: STONECOURT VIEW

Dive is excellent (and technically strong) on the power and importance of getting distributed leadership accountability and organisation design right – how to unleash the power of an organisation (and he perhaps underestimates the neuroscience and behavioural aspects).

Ibarra is excellent on 'be the change you want' and on the challenge of continually changing yourself to be fit for the future (and perhaps underestimates the role of the leaders in shaping organisations and on ensuring distributed leadership).

Together, they are an interesting, useful and very contrasting complementary pair of books that avoid the ruts of many business titles.