

High-octane Leadership: building a resilient and futuristic organisation- A Critical Perspective

Prof. Dr Abhijit Ganguly

Professor- University of Northwest Europe, Netherland

Senior Lecturer (Sessional)-Global Banking School, London

Senior Lecturer(Sessional)-London School of Business and Management, London

Senior Faculty-Eaton Business School (Westford Group),UK

Adjunct Professor-EMPI Business School, New Delhi

Management Consultant- Qualtrain Consulting Inc., London, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Dubai

Abstract

The diabolical impact of disruptive economy clamours for a different leadership style which will create and bring a positive ripple in organisational culture and performance. Therefore, the remit of this paper is to bring a critical perspective on high-octane leadership style and to develop an understanding the DNA of said leadership and contribution to building a futuristic organisation rather tomorrow's enterprise. This article highlights the core concept of High-Octane leadership and its' applicability in building success quotient of organisation and making future proof and creating long-term sustainability of growth with profitability and liquidity. High-octane Leadership is evident across all performance settings in different industry verticals. The author will draw on the vast corporate experience and research from the aviation industry to reflect on the impact of said leadership style on making resilient and futuristic enterprise. This article further highlights the need for future research in this important area.

Keywords: *Diabolical, Disruptive economy, High-octane leadership, Resilient, Futuristic enterprise, Plateau out, transforming*

Introduction

The genesis rather conceptualisation of this article stems from my recent amazing rather incredible experience while flying with Southwest Airlines from New York to Boston on my way to Harvard University for presenting another research paper at an International Conference in May 2017.

It was indeed a treat to witness rather experienced their operating model. It is based on transformation of business eco system highlighting the shift from B2C (Business to Customer) to C2B (Customer to Business) .Their super mental attitude and proactive action made them industry benchmark and a hallmark of excellence in low-cost airlines globally. The vibrant display of customer centricity in their action and process coupled with high-octane leadership created an indelible imprint in my mind. Their organisational culture rather DNA made them insulated from vagaries of recession, volatility and unpredictability.

The sheer volume of pieces of literature on being a leader has already alluded to a challenge that requires fine balancing skills to balance between aspirations and frustrations. High-Octane leadership is inclined towards high performance driven model by energising the enterprise and overcoming the frustrations and fear of failures. The building block of high-octane leadership starts from the scratch of building the organisation to making it run better than the competitors towards differentiated value creations and sustainability. **The deliverance of the sustained value comes from the fine skills of balancing innovation and risk in the organisation.** The concept of high –octane leadership also brings into focus the impact it creates through **ideating**.

The criticality of the requirement of high-octane leaders can also be understood from the rapid transformation happening in the digital economy and business landscape. As the world is embracing digital economy, disruption has

become norms. Therefore the success quotient of the organisation will depend on how well and fast create enterprise capability platform in terms of technology absorption and talent equation. This will help reduce and sustain the impact of business model disruption and remain relevant and competitive in the marketplace and customers' mind.

The **key challenge** for any resilient, ambitious, aspiring and future ready organisation is to enhance the leadership effectiveness in a volatile environment marked with the high degree of unpredictability and complexity.

It is easier said than done. The job of this type of leader starts from creating the organisational internal environment that will deliver the performance. In other words, configuring internal environment of the organisation is quite a demanding tasks as performance delivery depends on this. It includes crafting organisational culture, setting values to drive success, selection of highly skilled personnel and putting the enablers and incentives around to make the high performers work for the organisation. Sustainability of any high performing organisation not only depends on the vision and values of the organisation but a clear understanding of the abilities, skill sets, the mental attitude of the manpower. Therefore, it is critical to have a meaningful alignment between different elements of an organisation. Following are some of the list of critical factors where high-octane leaders focus:

1. Alignment of right people in right places for better productivity by allowing them to do what they are good at and how it contributes to organisation's competitive equation.
2. Absolute clarity in terms of what is demanded from them individually and in the team on a regular basis and in the long run.
3. Create high levels of organisational support system so as to enable them to deliver performance expectations
4. Making the active practice of empowerment and delegation are the bedrock of organisational culture with well-defined system and process of feedback and accountabilities.
5. Inculcating the sense of ownership at every level of the organisation
6. High tolerance towards risk and encouragement of open and innovative mindset.
7. The spirit of " we are together" is the critical element of foundation for top performing team- a collaborative culture and sharing mentality helps to have a multiplier effect on organisational performance on a sustained basis.
8. Creating competitive spirit in terms of shared learning and commitments towards translating learnings into actions and results.
9. Crafting a well defined and transparent reward and recognition system in the organisation to enhance motivation and organisational belongingness.

While the above critical factors got elements of commonality to a large extent with another kind of effective leadership style but, the fundamental departure from other leaders lies in high-octane leadership is creating enthusiasm quotient of an organisation. Enthusiasm quotient in the organisation acts as a glue between members and the organisation.

The belief system of high-octane leaders centres on creating positive energies and vibes in the organisation resulting into getting superior results through enthusiasm.

High-octane Leaders believe in creating positive emotional connectivity in the organisation whereby moods and attitudes of one team member can have a viral effect on other members and create a conducive atmosphere to deliver superior performance on a sustained basis. They believe in filling the organisation with oxygen resulting in innovative thinking and high-impact results. High-octane Leaders maintain a huge passion and commitment to the organisation and team's vision. The passion of making the vision work for the organisation is extremely critical to successful leadership.

In the quest to make the futuristic organisation, this kind of leaders continuously busy in creating cultural quotient of the organisation which value and actively practice the cycle of 'Learning-Transforming-Leading'. They practice the equation of Idea-People-Action to get the value from the concepts and practice of ideating to profiting.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

A brief literature review of the various authors helps to distil the conceptual framework and philosophies of various

leadership styles along with high-octane leadership style.

Jo Owen(2015) has opined that future lies with organisations who are having a focus on building intelligent quotient of the organisation. For instance, the world's most value generating smart companies Google, Facebook, P&G, Apple all started from a simple idea of redefining the customers' expectations based on innovative approach and culture of risk tolerance. One of the common thread running through these organisations is creating the atmosphere of motivations. High-octane leaders work relentlessly to kill various fear factors which come in the way of innovating mindset and collude the atmosphere or makes it more intimidating. Fear of failure and rejections are not allowed to puncture the wheels of experimenting and innovating spirits.

Barchiesi et al (2007) highlighted the impact of leadership effectiveness and role on performance, leadership behaviours, attitudes. It is researched that high leadership indexes are not related to the pathological report on past performances but associated both to the higher potentiality of enhanced performance and organisational reputation, pointing in the direction of a meaningful influence of behavioural complexity and dynamics on the leadership perceived level.

Chung – Hs in Fang et al (2009) found that leadership style got the profound impact on organisational commitment and work satisfaction positively. Job satisfaction is the key to organizational commitment and performance. Leadership is largely culturally centred without diluting traditional beliefs, norms and values and a preoccupation.

Lu Ye et al (2011) underlined employees' perceptions about two key leadership styles transactional or transformational leadership as both have the highly positive correlation with the understanding of leaders'/management's encouragement factors of its innovation climate.

Podsakoff P. M., MacKenzie S. B., Moorman R. H. and Fetter R.,(1990) said that employees trust and satisfaction primarily and largely depends on leadership behaviour which further enhances the relationship between leadership style and organisational commitment.

Guang-yi Wang Zhi-sheng (2008) made the comparison of another key leadership styles i.e., Transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transformational leadership styles are considered to have a lasting impact on improvement of the subordinates' performance by transforming the motives, values, beliefs of employees.

Bass(1985) divided leadership style into transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Transformational leadership has the characteristics of individual influence, spiritual encouragement and intellectual stimulation.

The above review of different authors suggests that Leaders often take the individual into consideration, establish vision and aim inside, create the open culture, trust the staff and provide support to reach their goals and give full play to staff's potential. The fundamental departure of high-octane leaders with other leaders is creating organisational motivation to have an easy and productive flow of communication, collaboration and cohesiveness.

However, the critical question is how high-octane leaders make the organisation future ready!!. Therefore, this leadership style need to be analysed from the perspective of their action towards making organisation future ready in digital economy and world and most importantly

The critical and major task of high-octane leaders is to build the organisational culture and action bias of the organisation so as to create an increasing level of immersive customer experience across the complex business environment and business ecosystem that customers expect in today's highly interconnected, high paced digital environment. In order to do so one of the major tasks of high-octane leaders is to get a comprehensive understanding of the ringside view of today's competitive environments and business ecosystem to successfully navigate this ever-changing space and stay on the top of the competition.

Now another critical question comes to mind is what are the traits that High-octane Leaders need to eschew and demonstrate to disrupt status quo leaders must get beyond diversity, and create inclusive environments to enhance the level of predictability with employees, clients, products and services. Practising of inclusive leadership is about fostering an environment where all people, including leaders, are growing and evolving together and focusing on following key actions:

- Building meaningful inclusive environments where leaders allow employees and customers to influence the future
- Redesigning accountability metrics for measuring results and rewarding high-performance cultures and actions
- Designing and drawing corporate strategy and transformation plan on the basis of principles and cultures of inclusiveness
- Practising the principles of ideating to profiting and bringing more collaborative cultures in decision making and strategizing

As regards traits, high-octane leaders differentiate themselves over other leaders on giving utmost importance on thinking element and learning element. They are always in the mode of learning, transforming and leading mode while other or average leaders stick to tried and tested success formula which plateau out over a period of time. Therefore, high-octane leaders think and behave differently by being:

- Creative and disciplined in ideating to profiting
- Visionary and looking into details
- Inspiring, motivating and leading with good command
- Directing, empowering, delegating
- Ambitious, aspiring and humbleness
- Innovative, Intuitive and Rational
- Reliable and risk tolerance as reflected in risk taking ability
- Mentoring, coaching, training and controlling

The above analysis reflects the fundamental departure of high-octane leaders over other average leaders. High-octane leaders think beyond number driven targets and drive performance agenda of the organisation with top priority so as to create sustainability. They create the environment for the better performance and bring inspiring and motivating leadership style by **energising the organisation with enthusiasm and enterprising ability.**

Therefore, it can be said that high-octane leadership is primarily responsible for building enterprise capability and culture to act as a differentiator to mediocre companies. Unlike the old economy, it is no longer valid and valued by the business world in terms of what the organisation owns or asset portfolio but how they generate the value using those assets where styles of leadership play the critical role.

Organisations with futuristic mind-set should work on the following areas to cement their future:

- Transformation of their core business to become more efficient and value generating
- Relentless strive to access new revenue sources
- Develop new rather innovative business models for effective value generation and relatively long-term competitiveness and sustainability
-

Research Method

Now, it will be better to apply case-based research method (case analysis) to understand the visibility of high-octane leadership in driving growth curve of the organisation in highly competitive and otherwise saturating industry. The author thinks US-based Southwest Airlines made the case in point. The rationale for selecting the said organisation is it's the smartest approach to staying relevant and competitive in highly competitive and disruptive aviation industry where the almost majority of the organisation are fighting with sustenance problems and bleeding to stay afloat in the industry.

I. Brief overview of the company

Southwest airlines were founded in 1967 by Rolling King and Herb Kelleher. It started its operation in 1971 covering intrastate Texas cities, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio. The airline's new president, Lamar Muse, adopted the "love"

theme for attracting the attention of passengers as it was based at Love Field in Dallas. For executing the “love” theme, lots of efforts were made. Drinks served on board were called "love options", ticket machines were called "love machines", and cabin hostesses were sexy and had seductive voices. Their low-cost fares were below than the cost of driving a vehicle over the same route. Southwest’s policy of pricing its service was to compete with auto travel.

II. Leadership Challenges

Southwest Airlines is in one of the most competitive industries characterised with high mortality rate. Therefore the critical challenges before the south-west leadership is to make the attitude and culture of the organisation customer centric and maintain innovative spirit for continuous value delivery to stakeholders. And, most importantly to stay relevant and competitive in the highly volatile aviation industry in the US.

III. Actions Initiated

If there is one truism about southwest, it is that things are never the same from one day to another day. Leadership ability to create a culture of innovation and embracing change with organisational preparedness made southwest airlines is the most successful and competitive aviation organisation. Leaders invested their time and energy to build the corporate character which values corporate ethics very highly. There is zero tolerance when it comes to ethical values of the organisation which otherwise may dilute the image and brand equity of the organisation resulting in negative impact on competitiveness and sustainability. Their leadership success also reflects in building the character and DNA of the organisation which challenges status quo and every assumption.

The think tank of Southwest Airlines also made their leadership impact visible in terms of creating sustenance through ethical behaviour towards employees, customers and other stakeholders. No change in business dynamics could create a diabolical impact on Southwest Airlines

IV. Impact

No wonder, the impact of Southwest Airline's leadership behaviour and action was visible in all metrics as reflected in the balanced score card. They thrive on strategies that set new standards of performance and innovativeness. Their leaders could build the character of the organisation as the foundation of their ability to sustain excellent performance consistently. They could create an infectious atmosphere rather the environment in the organisation which promotes inclusive and pluralistic cultures.

Another important reflection of the leadership of southwest airlines is to withstand US economy meltdown when others were bleeding and busting on daily basis, they were consistently growing. Therefore the principles and practice of high-octane leadership could be seen and understood how it created insulation from the competitive vagaries of the industry and economic environment. They become one of the organisational benchmarks in the aviation industry and even in another industry spectrum.

Conclusion & Recommendation :

Leadership matters as it insulates the organisation from the risk of going bust by being relevant and resilient. The preceding paras demonstrate quite scientifically that effective leadership is the bedrock of sustainable and competitive organisation. Many companies fail not because of business dynamics alone but because of lack of sensible leadership. This article introduced the concept of High-Octane Leadership and how it matters to build a highly innovative culture and spirit of the organisation which defies competition and create competition for others. It also demonstrates that how practising of high-octane leadership can create an infectious environment to motivate and inspire employees rather talents to bring out their best and create

the best value delivery mechanism in the organisation. The application of case of Southwest Airlines helped to understand the impact of the organisational leadership towards building inclusive cultures and promoting uncompromising ethical values, standards and behaviours. It is a clear demonstration of high-octane leadership which has given the enormous amount of organisational energy to outperform other competitors and set the industry benchmarks.

It is highly and sensibly recommended that leaders should understand the implications of investing time and energy to configure or re-architect organisational DNA which promotes the nuances of high-octane leadership and bring a transparent culture and accountability metrics in the organisation to review the performance from the 360-degree perspective. Also, to ensure as to how the organisation can become more relevant, competitive and resilient enough to defy the competitive pressure, and set the competition for others players in the industry.

Future Research

Future or further Research can be done on building architecture of high-octane leadership and design a measurement index to understand the organisational value this leadership style generates including stock market returns and how it helps to create long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

References

1. Jo Owen, How to Lead, 4th Edition, Pearson (2015)
2. Barchiesi Maria Assunta, LA BELLA Agostino, Leadership Styles of World's most Admired Companies A Holistic Approach to Measuring Leadership Effectiveness, International Conference on Management Science & Engineering, 14th August, 20-22 (2007)
3. Chung, The Exploration of Relationship between Organizational Culture and Style of Leadership, IEEE (2009)
Chung-Hsiung Fang, Sue-Ting Chang and Guan-Li Chen, Applying Structural Equation Model to Study of the Relationship Model among leadership style, satisfaction, Organisation
4. Bass B. M., Leadership and performance beyond expectations, New York, Free Press, 3-242 (1985)
5. Guang-Yi Wang Zhi-sheng, The Impact of Transformational Leadership Style on Organisational Performance: The Intermediary Effects of Leader-Member Exchange, International Conference on Management Science & Engineering, 15th September (2008)
6. Lu Ye, Deng June and Ma Yan, The Relationships between Leadership Styles and Organizational Innovation Climate, IEEE (2011)
7. Podsakoff P. M., MacKenzie S. B., Moorman R. H. and Fetter R., Transformational leader behaviours and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviours, *Leadership Quarterly*, 1, 107-142 (1990)
8. DuBrin A. J., Leadership: Research findings, practice, skills, 3rd ed., Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin (2001)