

# Perfect alignment: strategy and leadership



**A question for executives: when there is a change in company strategy, do you consider the qualities you need from your leaders to make that strategy a success?**

It is a question that Roger Evans, the director of coaching at DBM, thrashes out with his clients. "Successful businesses adapt well to change," he says. "Every time a company changes what it is trying to do for its customers, it needs to adapt its leadership priorities to align with the business strategy."

All too often this simply doesn't happen. The crux of the matter is that too many companies strive for each leader to be a paragon of generic leadership values, without thinking about the specific behaviours they want to encourage to make the changes to the business that are needed for its success.

Evans is continually surprised by the sheer number of leadership qualities that companies expect from their management. "Companies often show me lists of up to 30 qualities," he says. "It's very 'vanilla' – all the things you'd ever want from a leader. It's almost utopian and bears very little relationship to business objectives. How can a company whose strategy hinges on innovation, for example, have innovative behaviour as one of these many qualities and not prioritise it?"

Evans's approach is to build the link between strategy and leadership by "getting the whole leadership issue into the executive thinking". He is concerned that leadership is too often seen as an HR issue and that bosses don't always see the critical link with commercial success. Evans sees

part of his role as creating a forum for debate and a language of leadership so that executives can argue constructively about what behaviours they want to encourage in their leaders. "I've found that executives are not used to talking about leadership behaviour," he says. "They are used to talking about leaders in terms of good, bad, failing, high-potential. It takes them a while to get used to putting into words what they want leadership behaviour to look like, but once they are used to it, it can make for a very lively discussion."

Once the key behaviours have been identified – innovative, persuasive or delegating, for example – companies can then target their learning and development budget on bringing out those behaviours in their leaders through training and coaching. Evans points out that this saves a huge amount of money because the L&D budget is being spent only on the critical behaviour sets, rather than trying to turn all of its management into generic, utopian leaders. "The danger is that the list of up to 30 behaviours becomes the Holy Grail because it's so all-encompassing," Evans says. "But actually they're never going to achieve all those behaviours. And they don't need it to achieve their business goals."

But businesses won't see the good effects of their strategic leadership programmes unless they follow them through. Evans says that the reality of business today is that pressure at the top and demands for greater return to the shareholders is leading to shorter executive tenures. And when the executive changes, the strategy usually

changes with it. "Trying to align leadership behaviours to strategy, when the commitment to the strategy keeps wavering, is like trying to hit a moving target," he says.

As the future of the economy looks less certain, companies need to be discriminate in how they spend their money. Aligning the behaviours they want their leaders to exhibit to the strategic direction of the company is one good way to do it. It's a simple concept but requires thought, planning and a commitment from the executive to make it happen. Evans says: "We don't have the luxury of developing every conceivable leadership quality in our senior team just in case we need it."

#### About DBM

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