

When Asian Leaders Are at Their Best

YOU ARE A LEADER. You make a difference.

This is true no matter what country you're from, what title you hold, or what function you perform. You make a difference wherever you are. You make a difference in how engaged people feel, how effectively they perform, and how successful they and the organization will be.

What *is* very important, however, is what you do. Just listen to Caroline Wang, formerly vice president and the highest-ranking Asian female executive for IBM globally, with more than twenty-five years of working experience in the United States and across Asia Pacific, and currently on the board of directors for three multinational companies in China. "When it comes to leadership," she says, "it is not about the leader's personality; it is all about how that individual behaves as a leader."¹ That's exactly what we have found in our research over the last thirty years. Leadership is not about

your position, personality, power, genetics, or family heritage. It's about how you behave in your relationships with others.

When you look up the word *lead* in a dictionary—whether the language is English or Chinese—the meaning is the same. In English, the origin of the words *lead*, *leader*, and *leadership* come from the word *leden*, which means “to go, to travel, to guide.” When you look the word up in Chinese (*ling dao*), the characters refer to *ling*, to take someone forward, and *dao*, to guide somebody. It's about taking people to places they have never been before. Two very different languages but two very similar definitions. At its core, leadership is about guiding people on journeys to places they have never been before. How you guide them along this path—what you *do* to lead them—is extremely important to your and their success. That's what we discuss in this book: how you can most effectively lead others to make extraordinary things happen.

While the focus of this book is on leaders and leadership, keep in mind that leadership is not all about the leader. Leadership is not a solo act. It's not about doing something all by yourself. There has never been a leader who's gotten anything extraordinary done alone. Never. Leadership is always a team performance. Strong relationships with your constituents—your co-workers, direct reports, and other key business partners—are key to making things happen in your organization, and are essential to your and your organization's success. The reason that so many managers and executives fail to lead is not so much that their vision and strategy are inadequate or off-track. It's not because they're incompetent in their functional areas. It's because they have not built the kind of collaborative relationships that enable everyone to succeed together. It's because they aren't able to mobilize others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. In this book you will see how leaders work with others to liberate the leader in everyone.

The Leadership Challenge Around the World

One of the leaders we studied once described himself as an “Indonesian Cantonese, carrying a German passport, working for a Mexican company in the Czech Republic.” He represents five different cultures all by himself. Now one school of thought is that you have to lead differently in different countries. So if this were true, this leader would have to learn at least five different approaches to leadership. That’s a nearly impossible challenge for anyone to undertake. And it’s entirely unnecessary.

While we have to be sensitive to each and every person and organizational environment, one of the most intriguing results of globalization is that it has actually increased the search for leadership concepts that are relevant and effective across various cultures, environments, settings, and populations. Indeed, experts say global managers “need universally valid leadership theories and principles that transcend cultures.”² Technological imperatives, worldwide industrial and supply chain logistics, boundary-less marketplaces and currencies, ubiquitous communication and social media platforms—among other factors—are serving to harmonize and homogenize leadership, management, and organizational practices. The *process* of leadership is quite universal, even though particular applications may be context-specific and appropriate. Culture matters, but its impact is not as strong as commonly thought.³ Global leaders from Asia echo this viewpoint.⁴ David Kim, senior operations manager with Siemens Ultrasound, echoes Carolyn Wang’s assessment: “Everybody is a leader whether you supervise a group of people or not. Titles don’t make you a leader. It’s how you behave that makes a difference.” Thinking along similar lines, Rajeev Peshawaria, CEO

of the ICLIF Leadership and Governance Centre, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, says that no matter where he is in the world, his “leadership style never changes.” He maintains that “the assumption that people are motivated differently around the world—especially in Asia—and that leaders must adapt their behavior accordingly is wrong. Having led and managed people in eight countries across three continents, I have found the exact opposite to be true. Regardless of geographic location or culture, what drives people to the highest level of engagement is innately human and universal. Thus, great leadership looks the same wherever you are.”⁵

This perspective is echoed by Mike Osorio, global vice president for learning & development and chief learning officer at DFS Group (Hong Kong), when applied to developing leaders. They have a leadership development program for managers at DFS, and it doesn’t vary much across the many countries around the world that they do business in. Why? Because, Mike says, “People are people.” Jean-Andre Rougeot, CEO at Benefit Cosmetics, also leads a global enterprise with operations in Asia, Europe, and North and South America. He’ll tell you that “laughter and fun are essential to the DNA of the company” and this doesn’t change depending upon location. Jean-Andre will acknowledge that what’s considered funny does vary around the globe, but he won’t concede that there’s a place on earth where leaders don’t have to be concerned with applying “laughter and fun” to the way that they conduct business in their companies.

Our empirical studies back up the experiences and claims of these executives. More than 26,000 people from eleven Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam) responded to a series of questions about the extent of their commitment and engagement in their workplaces. In addition, they provided

demographic information about themselves and their organizations and indicated how frequently their managers behaved as leaders. The statistical results were remarkably clear: what explained their commitment and engagement was the extent to which their managers provided leadership. Factors like their age, gender, educational background, hierarchical level, functional field/discipline, years with the organization, organizational size, and industry, *taken together*, explained less than one-half of 1 percent of how people felt about their workplaces. How their managers *behaved*, or not, as leaders, accounted for nearly 32 percent of how these constituents felt about their workplaces. The impact of how those Asian managers behaved as leaders was sixty times more important than any personal or organizational characteristic of their constituents.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

Leadership is not about *who* you are or *where* you come from. It's about *what* you do. Remember how Carolyn Wang put it: "It's all about how leaders behave."

So, what exactly is it that leaders do?

And what are they doing when they are making a positive difference in the lives of others and their organizations?

During the past thirty years we've asked people around the globe to tell us about the times that they were at their *personal best as leaders*.⁶ To date we've gathered more than five thousand personal-best stories, and the results are strikingly clear. First, everyone has a story to tell, and this in itself is enough to assure us that leadership is accessible to everyone. Second, when people describe the times at

which they were operating at their best, they discuss behaviors and processes, not backgrounds or personalities. Leadership is an observable process and an identifiable set of behaviors. And last, the stories that people tell are considerably more similar than they are different. Whether the setting is in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, North America, or South America, our findings are consistent.

While each leadership experience was unique in its particulars, every case follows a comparable pattern of actions that leaders take. We call it *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*[®]. The practices are

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

Can The Five Practices framework be applied in Asia—with Asian people, in Asian organizations, and by Asian (and non-Asian) leaders? The answer to all these questions is categorically YES. And in this book you'll find the evidence that proves it! Here you will read stories about The Five Practices as told by real people in Asia who are applying them in their work or have experienced them as constituents of an admired leader.

In the chapters that follow you will find deeper insights into what The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership look like when leaders use them to get extraordinary things accomplished. For now, here is a brief overview, followed by a summary in Table 1.1.

Model the Way

In talking about her personal-best leadership experience Olivia Lai, senior marketing associate at Moody's Analytics (Hong Kong), noted

TABLE 1.1. The Five Practices and Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership**Model the Way**

1. Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values.
2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

Inspire a Shared Vision

3. Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

Challenge the Process

5. Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.
6. Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.

Enable Others to Act

7. Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.
8. Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.

Encourage the Heart

9. Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

that “in order for me to become a leader it’s important that I first define my values and principles. If I don’t know what my own values are and determine expectations for myself, how can I set expectations for others?” The first step on any leadership journey is to *clarify values*. This means finding your own voice and then clearly and distinctively giving voice to your values. As the personal-best stories illustrate, leaders are supposed to stand up for their beliefs, so you’d better have some beliefs to stand up for. But it’s not just the leader’s values that are important. Leaders aren’t just representing themselves. They speak and act on behalf of a larger organization. You must affirm shared values, forging agreement around common principles and common ideals.

Eloquent statements about common values, however, aren’t nearly enough. Actions are far more important than words when constituents want to determine how serious leaders really are about what they say. Exemplary leaders *set the example* through their daily actions, demonstrating deep commitment to shared values. Penny Zhang, senior manager, merchandising strategy and innovation at Wal-Mart China, realized that “I must change myself first and let others see me, and then they will know how to follow.” This perspective is reflected in the traditional Chinese proverb: “The lower beam will not be level if the upper one is not.”

Jiangwan Majeti’s experience as research project manager at Amgen underscores this observation: “Leading by example is more effective than leading by command. If people see that you work hard while preaching hard work, they are more likely to follow you. Indeed, one of the best ways to prove that something is important is by doing it yourself and setting an example.” As Jiangwan discovered, leading others is about living the shared values every day. After all, people will not believe the message if they don’t believe in the messenger.

Inspire a Shared Vision

The people we studied described their personal-best leadership experiences as times when they imagined an exciting, highly attractive future for their organization. Exemplary leaders speak comfortably about what is unique and singular about the organization, making others feel proud to be part of something extraordinary. Exemplary leaders *envision the future*. In fact, our data show that focusing on the future is the attribute that most sets leaders apart from individual contributors.⁷

The best leaders also understand that it's not their personal view of the future that's important; it's the aspirations of all their constituents that matter most. Elaine Fan, brand manager at Johnson & Johnson China Limited, explained: "You must understand the needs of your followers. I have never encountered a circumstance in which leadership was a one-way street. You won't be a leader for very long if you only do what you want to do. You have to reflect the needs of the rest of the group or soon you won't be leading anyone." You need to appeal to common ideals, lifting people to higher levels of motivation and morality, and continuously reinforce that they can make a difference.

Exemplary leaders also know that they can't command commitment. They have to inspire it by *enlisting others* in a common vision. This means, as Rajan Prajapat, product manager at Google, pointed out, "that you have to have a vision in mind and be clear about why it's important to you. And you need to be equally clear about why it should matter to those you're sharing your vision with." What Rupesh Roy, project manager at NetLogic Microsystems, realized in his personal-best leadership experience is that people have to believe that you understand their needs and have their interests at heart: "You need to have clear goals and a vision to make a positive

difference; and you have to be able to share that vision with others and get them to believe in it.” Unity of purpose is forged by your showing constituents how the dream is for the common good. By expressing enthusiasm and excitement, you arouse passion in others.

Challenge the Process

Challenge is the crucible for greatness. When at their personal best as leaders, people realized that along the way they had to overcome uncertainty and fear in order to achieve their best. In reflecting upon her experience with Macmillan Publishers in Hong Kong, Jade Lui said: “I learned that in all environments when things don’t work properly you shouldn’t just accept it as being ‘just the way it is.’ There are, in fact, massive opportunities to shine as an innovative person.” Like Jade, no one sat idly by waiting for fate to smile upon them: every single personal-best leadership case involved a change from the status quo.

Being a leader, Tiffany Nguyen, senior technical recruiter at SnapLogic, explained “is always looking for ways to improve yourself and your team; for example, by taking interests outside of your job, staying current about what the competition is doing, networking, and taking the initiative to learn and try new things.” And because innovative change comes more from listening than from telling, exemplary leaders are continually looking outside of themselves and their organizations for the clues about what’s new or different and possibilities others are not seeing. They *search for opportunities* to innovate, grow, and improve.

Exemplary leaders also *experiment and take risks*. Life is the leader’s laboratory, and exemplary leaders use it to conduct as many experiments as possible. They engage in a continuous learning

process. But sometimes people are resistant and afraid to take risks, so leaders deal with this reluctance by approaching change through incremental steps and small wins. Venkat Dokiparthi was asked to lead a technical development team in India, and he realized that he “needed to break down the task and make it simple for them to feel successful.” He learned the value of using small wins to catapult individuals and teams forward, motivating them to move ahead even when times are tough. Try, fail, learn. Try, fail, learn. Try, fail, learn. That’s the leader’s mantra. Leaders are continually learning from their actions, especially when things don’t go as expected. Leaders learn from their failures and their successes, and they make it possible for others to do the same.

Enable Others to Act

No leader ever made anything extraordinary happen by working alone. It requires a team effort. “No matter how capable a leader is,” explains Eric Pan, regional head of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in South China, “he or she alone won’t be able to deliver a large project or program without the joint efforts and synergies that come from the team.” Leaders *foster collaboration and build trust* by engaging all those who must make the project work. Early in her career, Ana Aboitiz, assistant vice president with Union Bank of the Philippines, learned that “in order to build collaboration you need to let go of responsibility and give others a chance to take it on. By entrusting others with responsibility you are letting them know you believe in them and that you have confidence that they can achieve it.”

Exemplary leaders also *strengthen others* so that constituents know they are capable of delivering on promises. You need to make your constituents feel powerful and efficacious. Barbara Chiu,

managing director for Cisco in Hong Kong and Macao, explains that “leaders have a responsibility to bring out the best in others” and that this involves paying great attention “to developing people.” By focusing on serving others’ needs, and not just your own, you build people’s trust in you. Lorena Compeán, founder of Co-Creating Hong Kong, appreciated that she had to trust others on the project team and learned that she needed to “show my trust in others in order to build their trust in me.” And the more people trust you, and each other, the more they take risks, make changes, and keep organizations alive and movements vibrant.

You develop trust and respect by building personal relationships, as well as by treating everyone with respect and making sure to keep everyone up-to-speed on what is going on. When people are trusted and have the information, authority, and discretion to make things happen, they’re much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.

Encourage the Heart

In climbing to the top people can become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. They are often tempted to give up. Genuine acts of caring draw people forward. Ian Foo, IT strategy and transformation consultant with Accenture in Singapore, says that to be a better leader you “need to simply enjoy the process of thanking someone, being sincere; be present; enjoy yourself and the team by thanking them with a smile.” This sentiment was echoed by Wilson Chu, program manager at RingCentral, in his personal-best story when he said he “made sure to personally thank each team member for his or her part in the project’s success.” When asked to make a presentation at the quarterly division meeting, Wilson made it a point to

“represent the team well and talked not only about what *we* accomplished but about who was involved and what each contributed.” In developing a robust recognition program you not only motivate people, but you also build a community of trust that will be the foundation for future organizational successes.

Exemplary leaders *recognize contributions* by showing appreciation for individual excellence. It can come from dramatic gestures or simple actions. For example, writing a personal thank-you note, rather than sending an email, can do wonders for making people feel appreciated and valued. The payoff, as Jason Cha, senior manufacturing engineer with Abbott Vascular, explained: “Team members feel appreciated, and being recognized raises the individual’s commitment to excellence, because his or her name is associated with a given project. It also creates a sense of community in that people feel they are part of a winning team.”

It’s part of your job as a leader to show appreciation for people’s contributions and to create a culture of *celebrating values and victories*. Recognition and celebration aren’t necessarily about fun and games, although there is a lot of fun and there are a lot of games when people encourage the hearts of their constituents. And it isn’t about pretentious ceremonies that promote some phony sense of camaraderie. “It’s all about people,” says Bert Wong, president/managing director, Fuji Xerox Singapore. “It’s all about being very people-centric.”⁸ Encouragement is serious business because it’s how you visibly and behaviorally link rewards with performance. It’s how you make sure that people see the benefit of behavior that’s aligned with cherished values. Celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through particularly tough times.

The Five Practices in Action

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership have emerged from extensive research in Asia, and around the globe, on what people actually do when they are leading others to greatness. The evidence clearly shows that the more you are engaged in these leadership practices, the more likely it is that you will make extraordinary things happen on a regular basis. And we've also found that in the best organizations, everyone, regardless of title or position, is encouraged to act like a leader. That's because in these places people don't just *believe* that everyone can make a difference. They consistently *act* in ways to develop and grow people's talents, including their leadership abilities. To this point Joon Chin Fum-Ko, director of people development and engagement at Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, explains how they are "working to build an organization and culture where everyone feels that they are leaders, regardless of what they do, and appreciates that what each one of us does has an impact, even a legacy."

In the next five chapters you'll meet real people as they share their real-life experiences with each of The Five Practices. The cases are about their personal-best leadership experiences; and they are about the people they have worked with whom they most admire as leaders. The focus here is on Asia, and all the stories give voice and evidence to the importance of leadership in this vital, growing, and multi-cultural part of the world. At the same time, these case examples echo the experiences of leaders around the globe over our thirty-plus years of leadership research.

The stories and examples you will read come from virtually every arena of organized activity, and they come from all across Asia. Most were provided by senior managers while enrolled in the

Executive MBA program at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.⁹ These leaders are open and outspoken in writing about themselves, their leaders, organizations, and experiences with The Five Practices; and in exchange for their candor we agreed to protect their anonymity as well as that of the people they wrote about. The stories are true.

At the top of each story we have inserted a brief note about what we believe it illustrates about leadership. Each chapter ends with a summary of the leadership lessons the storytellers learned, and each chapter provides an outline of what you can take away from these experiences to become an even better leader yourself. The truth is that the best leaders are the best learners. In the final chapter we'll take a look at what is required to continue to grow and develop as a leader yourself, as well as what is required for bringing out the leadership capabilities of those around you.