

Building Sense-Able Leaders

Here are seven Sense-Abilities leaders must cultivate in order to survive and thrive in an increasingly connected and complex business context. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**

In the latter half of 2012, my colleagues at Duke Corporate Education and I conducted interviews with 36 CEOs from around the globe to better understand what it takes to lead in an increasingly connected and complex business context.

The executives we spoke with described today's leadership context as one where it is increasingly challenging to foresee problems, where the problems they do identify are increasingly multidimensional in nature, where the solutions required to address these problems are increasingly complex in nature, and where the authority required to address these problems increasingly must come through influence as opposed to authority.

Additionally, these CEOs emphasized how difficult it is to lead effectively in a context where the shelf-life of information is increasingly unstable, the interconnection of information resources is increasingly non-linear, access to information is increasingly uncontrollable, and the source of true differentiation lies in *figuring* things out as opposed to *finding* things out.

Our research uncovered seven Sense-Abilities leaders must cultivate in order to survive and thrive in an increasingly connected and complex business context:

1. Understanding how to understand: Leaders must be able to deal with increasingly complex and unfamiliar contexts. The key question leaders must contemplate to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How can I make sense of unfamiliar contexts as quickly as possible?"

2. Developing reliable sources of knowledge and insight: Leaders must cultivate and curate a network of trusted knowledge resources to help them read weak signals and anticipate business impact. The key question leaders must contemplate to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How good is my radar for picking up weak signals that could undermine my business or for identifying new opportunities to grow my business?"

3. Developing the ability to grapple and grok: Leaders must form a process of sense-making that enables them to more quickly identify leverage for action. The key question leaders must contemplate to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How long can I hold on to multiple conflicting

hypotheses about which course of action to take until I can see a way forward that gives me the most leverage?"

4. Leading through successive approximation: Leaders must cultivate the ability to make forward progress without complete information. The key question leaders must contemplate to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How can I quickly figure out the next move that will leave me the most options for the move after that?"

5. Building and influencing collectives: Leaders must form collectives of individuals and entities that can take on questions together, solve problems, and break through barriers to growth. The key question leaders must contemplate to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How can I ensure that my network of resources and capabilities is robust and resilient enough to act immediately on an unforeseen challenge or opportunity?"

6. Broadening systemic self-awareness: Leaders must understand the upstream and downstream implications of their actions and interactions in the ecosystem within which they operate. The key question leaders need to ponder to develop this Sense-Ability is: "What could be the systemic consequences should I choose to take a particular course of action?"

7. Engaging the organization in the new rational: Leaders must work to redefine rational behavior—from avoidance of risk and following the rules to seeing and seizing opportunities that will advance the business. The key question leaders need to ponder to develop this Sense-Ability is: "How do I move the default position of the organization from avoidance of risk to the pursuit of opportunity?"

Taken together, these Sense-Abilities enable leaders to make sense of what is going on in an increasingly unfamiliar and unpredictable business context and invoke the appropriate set of resources and capabilities to take collective action to achieve a desired outcome. The journey to building Leadership Sense-Abilities begins not with answers, but with questions. I wish you all the best in finding the answers to these questions for yourself and hope they are as revealing to you as they have been to me. **T**



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