

//// Questions for:
Deborah Ancona

Q&A



Leadership roles are changing. The director of MIT's Leadership Centre explains **who**

will lead the change.

Interview by Stephen Watt


Your work at the MIT Leadership Center has given you some fascinating insights into the nature of organizational change. What are the key challenges faced by today's leaders?

The number one question we are seeing at the Leadership Center is, 'how should we approach going global?' Leaders want to know how to set up operations around the world and get them up and running quickly, while keeping them coordinated with the rest of the organization. The challenge is to be innovative, to be entrepreneurial, to meet customer needs and to build on emerging technologies and trends, but maintain alignment across those efforts.

The nature of work has also shifted. People have gone from working on very clear, designated tasks, where they may be connected to a number of people in a laboratory or division, to being interconnected in a much larger way, both within and outside of their firm. We are seeing value chains expanding to include NGOs or even local farmers who provide raw materials to a supplier. This new outward focus means that workers have to expand their networks and be able to work across multiple boundaries.

You have stated that leadership is not solely the responsibility of the CEO, but can and should permeate all levels of an organization. Please explain.

At MIT, we are big proponents of what we call 'distributed leadership', especially when it comes to large, decentralized or global organizations. These organizations are moving from traditional bureaucratic structures to flatter forms to cope with a more dynamic and complex world. Within these new structures, organizations find that they need to develop new leadership practices that rely less on the *individual*



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efficacy of ‘stars’ and more on the *collective* efficacy of networks of leaders – some formal and some informal – operating across organizational levels and often across organizational boundaries. As CISCO CEO **John Chambers** has pointed out, “We are seeing a massive shift from management by command-and-control to management by collaboration and teamwork. You could almost say this shift is as revolutionary as the assembly line.”

A concept that supports the model of distributed leadership is that of the ‘X-team’. Most current team training focuses on internal processes such as setting goals, allocating roles, and building trust and cohesion among members. But our data suggests that the best teams are *externally* oriented and make it part of their daily business to cross boundaries. These ‘X-teams’ are engaged with the world, talking to customers, learning about new technologies, figuring out what their competitors are doing, and developing ideas that suit a changing global landscape. X-teams generate superior results because they frame their product or process within the larger priorities of the organization, and also within the needs of the outside world. They are able to create synergies and alignment within the firm and with key stakeholders. A successful X-team is also very agile, moving rapidly from planning to execution to exportation to quickly bring a product to market or to the rest of the organization.

Describe the role of ‘sense-making’.

‘Sense-making’ is the process by which people develop a deep understanding of the problem they are trying to solve, and it is essential to creating change. Sense-makers aim to understand the overall landscape of the initiative, how it is changing and where it is moving, so that when they make a decision, they do so with a profound awareness of the larger context. At the renowned design firm **IDEO**, they have all sorts of fun and interesting ways of sense-making. When called upon to design an emergency room, for example, IDEO designers conducted a careful study of the key stakeholders, the most important of which is, of course, the patient. Early in the process of product development, they put a camera on a patient’s head and recorded the resulting footage for ten hours. Of course what they saw when they watched the video was mostly views of the ceiling. This key piece of research led to some genuinely innovative ideas on how to improve the medical experience.

Discuss the importance of building relationships in an era of networking.

We can’t overemphasize the importance of building relationships. Whatever else might have changed in the workplace, the way to get things done is still with and through other people. The most successful leaders are those who are able to build strong networks and effective relationships within their group and outside the organization.


The challenge in an era of teamwork is that you might not necessarily have formal authority over the people with whom you are working. Also, in a global world, the people that you are working with may be very different from you. Leaders thus need to learn how to get their point across in a way that takes into account cultural difference and how others prefer to work and communicate. They also need to check to make sure that others understand them and that they have truly understood what others have communicated.

How can managers develop a vision for an organization that engages and inspires its stakeholders?

Building a vision starts with leaders thinking deeply about what they think is important to them, their people and their organization. They then need to check with others to make sure that the vision resonates and that they can communicate it in a way that tells a story that others can see themselves in. Through this interaction, the vision shifts to take into account the needs and ideas of others. Next is communicating the vision to bring others on board.

Recently at MIT, we had a ‘visioning’ session where leaders went through the process of honing in on what was important to them by talking about their ideas through stories, analogies and metaphors, and then linking their ideas back to key values in the culture of the organization. By framing their vision in a compelling way, they were able to paint a picture of what the organization could accomplish in the future.

To cite a well known example of a visionary, consider **Steve Jobs at Apple**. Whether he is promoting the iPhone or the iPad, he makes a convincing case that the consumer is about to discover an entirely new way to work, communicate, think and learn. By selling an experience that goes well beyond a mere physical product, he is able to present his company’s activities through a revolutionary lens that the public finds enormously exciting.



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For some people, the leap from vision to implementation is the most difficult of all. What are some practical ways to turn aspirations into results?

I call this skill ‘inventing’ to suggest the role that creativity plays in the transition from vision to implementation. Inventing means creating the structure and processes that are needed to move the organization forward. It involves asking the question, ‘What are new ways of working together to enable both innovation and operational excellence?’ Inventing also involves creating mechanisms to reach the new vision, whether it is a new reward system, new ways to use IT, or new processes to broaden engagement.

Meg Whitman of **eBay** is often cited as a leader who is adept at carrying innovations to completion. eBay has created a new business model that has allowed thousands of people to start a new career in sales by connecting to each other over the Internet. As the company has evolved, it has successfully tackled issues like maintaining its website architecture through exponential growth, preserving online security, and making the transition from small- to large-scale clients. From its inception, the company has demonstrated an impressive track record of constant invention and reinvention.

How can leaders turn a recognition of their shortcomings into a source of strength?

Leaders need to have a strong sense of what they do well and what they do poorly. At our Centre, we help students in the MBA and executive programs discover their individual personality, experiences, strengths and weaknesses. Once they become aware of their own style of managing, or their ‘leadership signature’ as we call it, they become more confident in their ability to guide a project to completion and to take on

new skills. We also have students reflect on times when they were confident as leaders so that they can capture the circumstances that led to that confidence.

By knowing their strengths and weaknesses, leaders may also find it easier to choose team members that complement the qualities that they themselves may lack. **Disney** is an example of a successful partnership that combined different temperaments: **Walt Disney** was the visionary of the team, while his brother **Roy** did much of the invention and implementation, transforming visionary ideas into reality.

Why is it time to end ‘The Myth of the Complete Leader’?

The myth of the omniscient, omnipotent leader is causing more harm than good because it ultimately erodes peoples’ confidence. Those who try to do everything themselves will be defeated by a world that is increasingly complex and unpredictable. In truth, we are all incomplete leaders who must rely on others. The challenge is to develop the mechanisms that allow us to pull on the ideas and motivations of creative minds throughout the organization, to leverage the strengths of the group, and to think about networks of leaders working together to move the organization ahead.

Deborah Ancona is the Seley Distinguished Professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and faculty director of the MIT Leadership Center. She has served as a consultant to companies such as AT&T, Credit Suisse First Boston and Merrill Lynch and is the author of *X-teams: How to Build Teams That Lead, Innovate, and Succeed* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).