

Leadership in the Digital Era - Renaissance of The Renaissance Man

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Technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing.

Steve Jobs, iconic digital leader (1955 - 2011)

As businesses embark on digital transformations, it often becomes apparent to them that the traditional management styles are not adequate, as they render results far below initial expectations, providing half-baked digital solutions where potential commercial gains are poorly captured and leveraged, or simply not even identified. Mismatches between technologies, the *man-machine* (dis-)connect, or organisational dysfunctionality are typically pointed out as root causes, but beneath them lurks a more scathing problem; *an inadequate leadership*.

And it is generally not because of a lack of technological expertise or poor people management, these skills are often sufficiently resourced. The leadership problem is instead of a more imperative nature, this as the digital transformation comes to challenge the business to its core; *how do we provide customer value?* and *how do we organise us in the most (cost-)efficient way?*

In essence, it takes aim at a corporation's *raison d'être* and as such it goes far beyond technical solutions, corporate structure, or indeed even an in-depth understanding of products and markets, this as the digital transformation, explicitly (and implicitly) transcends all of these perspectives in its aspiration towards value maximation. By acknowledging these co-joined complexities, elements on what is it that the digital leadership requires can be formulated, namely a holistic approach capable of incorporating them, facilitated by a cognitive capacity able to craft commercially viable products and services.

But in the age of the specialists that are drilling down in ever more granular *minutiae*, do there even exist generalists equipped with this holistic mindset, and if so, what do they look like?

To start with, there are role models that provides inspiration and worth looking at but these brings us back a few hundred years in time.

Enter the Renaissance Man

Names such as *Leonardo DaVinci* and *Michelangelo* have come to embody the medieval *Renaissance Man*, well versed in pretty much everything that mattered in those days; being an architect, painter, sculptor, mathematician, physicist, biologist, philosopher, alchemist, and literally highly gifted both in prose and poetry. Through these deliberately acquired skills, they were able to view and fathom a highly mosaic world from its many facets, and as importantly, capable to eloquently articulate methodologies and models that allowed for an improved understanding of the world. The renaissance men proved a point that remains till today, as these masters of all trades can better than the singular specialist solve complex real world problems through dissecting and inspecting them from a variety of perspectives by applying analogies and different models across disciplines, as they uniquely manage to tie together distinctive disciplines' concepts and jargons.

Poetry and alchemy, whilst enviable endeavours and mandatory for yesteryear's renaissance men, to function as an ideal digital leader today, the compiling and calibration of knowledge need to reflect a vastly different world. Beyond the obvious qualifications as a leader of people and a profound understanding of digital technologies, preferably bolstered through a thorough understanding of the many facets of psychology and mathematics respectively, to this comes an intimate understanding of the market with its existing offerings of products and services also incorporating a knowledge of the legal framework surrounding it, as well as, the various trends and fads (whether of a cultural, economic or political nature), that influences customer preferences. Literary skills are therefore pivotal to be able

to succinctly and to the point formulate and convey strategies based on consolidated insights that guides and inspires a way forward facilitating the practical implementations. And yes, aesthetics still plays a vital role, but in the current setting more in the form of an understanding of the craftsmanship required to design and develop product and services, and the design thinking principles that such efforts rest on.

Versatile in all of the aforementioned key areas, the renaissance man is ideally positioned to successfully lead Agile cross-functional teams, able to fully comprehend each and every specialists point of view, and fluent in *Agilian*, integrate and augment these into a holistic perspective that better reflects realities.

One of the key questions then become, *can anyone become a renaissance man?* Is it merely a question of reading up on the plethora of topics that are relevant for digital transformations?

In short, no, as there are also requirements of a personal characteristic nature, which through a body of evidence from various psychological studies highlighting that these are largely of innate disposition, including;

- a cognitive capacity to be able to fathom highly abstract theories;
- an intellectual curiosity with a thirst for knowledge and new experiences;
- being a risk taker rather than risk averse with an entrepreneurial flair;
- having creative capabilities;
- having perseverance and the resilience to see things through, and;
- the leadership skills stemming from both cognitive authority and superior people management.

Basically, it is a true polyglot driven by an enormous curiosity, fascinated by the technical possibilities, and an acumen and eagerness to make commercial sense in a diffuse and fast changing environment, enabled through a 'can do' and high energy leadership.

Some bad news however, today's educational system does not groom renaissance men

The current educational system is developed on a dogma that promotes the specialist, with individual academic disciplines jealously guarding their sources of funding and intellectual domains against infringements from 'competing' faculties, with cross-discipline ventures appearing only rarely, hardly fertile ground for anyone seeking a generalist's cultivation. And the MBA degree, hailed by the corporate leaders of the 1980s and 1990s as the management education *supreme* which became close to mandatory for executives, eventually its perceived importance became grossly inflated, not quite standing the test of times given the changing conditions on the ground commencing with the *dot.com boom*. It is now largely considered obsolete as it has not managed to upgrade itself to the digital era but remains entrenched in the antiquated case study doctrine.

Sadly, the aspiring renaissance man will find that the tertiary education does not provide a diverse enough *bouquet* of academic flavours accompanied by the associated training in lateral thinking, hence leaving them to their own device, and therefore often opting for the autodidact route.

Then some more bad news, your HR function is going to reject applications from the renaissance men

The intellectual curiosity and high energy that form the renaissance men's personalities will be reflected in their resumes, typically featured through a peculiarly wide variation of both academic and work experiences. And that is rarely a resume that will entice the HR function which remains deeply rooted in seeking out candidates through a *check-the-box* approach. Their take on enabling diverse workplaces, in itself a conducive aspiration, rests however on a flawed assumption, namely that individuals only can represent one perspective at a time. By seeking to devise the appropriate mix of employees, HR policies pro-actively aspires to find stereotypes that are assumed to represent particular thought patterns, not only defined by merely academic and professional qualifications but extending to various demographic components where at times mathematical precision is sought to achieve the ideal workplace.

The renaissance man, often being an autodidact with a highly diverse (intellectual) background, which by default hardly can be boxed in to represent one particular stereotype role, gauged through simpleton tests, which HR functions are arranging its candidate scans by, will be rejected, often already at the initial stage of the recruitment process. This to a great loss to the business that will miss out on a future employee equipped with a wide knowledge diversity, ideally suitable to lead, rather than manage, a self-organising agile team with a strong focus on profitable innovations.

There is a way forward...

To handle an increasingly convoluted business and organisational environment, it is dawning on many executives, through either sober self-insight or the recognition of their peers' at times lackluster performances, that traditional leadership skills with its affiliated knowledgebase are far from adequate. These difficulties herald the return of the generalist, being not only tech savvy but possessing broad brushed skills that goes far beyond the current managerial practices and enable mastering the complexities of digital transformations.

But finding these apt digital leaders that are going to make a distinct commercial difference do provide severe challenges for recruiters, however proven strategies have evolved on how to find, attract and nourish them, highlighted through insights and thought leadership detailed in the forthcoming *Leadership in the Digital Era - Renaissance of the Renaissance Man*. To not lose out and ensure that you stay ahead of competition, be sure to pre-order your copy!