

The leadership circle



“Leaders get the best out of followers and followers get the best out of leaders,” says Manfred Kets De Vries, Clinical Professor of Leadership Development at INSEAD. The connection between leaders and their staff is only one of many circular connections he sees.

The challenge for leaders multiplies as organisations get bigger and as globalisation makes companies more diverse and more virtual. “It’s very hard to manage large organisations, things become so enormous,” he said in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge.

Another circular challenge for leaders is to keep an organisation growing over generations. “To me, the real test of a leader is how well his or her successor does, and very few leaders pass that test,” he says.

Leaders have to help people re-invent their organisations. Kets De Vries imagines this as an ancient mythical serpent that swallows its tail but is constantly reborn in a circular connection.

To complete that circle, leaders are required to leverage their vision and their skills to create sustainable, results-oriented organisations. He believes group or team coaching is one of the most effective ways of achieving that long-term success.

Kets De Vries, the Director of INSEAD's Global Leadership Centre, recently won a lifetime achievement award from the International Leadership Association for his contributions to the study of leadership. It was the first time the prestigious organisation had given the awards.

His extensive work in coaching business leaders has led him to believe that leaders need greater self-awareness: “Many executives don’t know themselves very well.” Some know the issues but they don’t know how to shift direction. Kets De Vries says for those executives it’s very difficult to set the right goals and get people to buy into your values and goals.

“Leaders need to help people think outside of the box,” he says, adding: “When you are riding on a dead horse the best thing is to dismount. Many people try to keep on riding the dead horse, but you have to do something different.”

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That requires teams of good leaders not just a single strong executive in any successful organisation. “Leadership is a team sport,” he says. That team needs to have clear goals and values. The leadership teams that are most successful know how to get people to buy into those values and practice those values.

Leaders, he believes, should strive to create better places to work. Kets De Vries argues that isn’t just an altruistic notion. Work today is complicated by rapidly changing technology, virtual working teams separated by cultural and geographical differences and the challenges for individuals of managing their own careers.

Workers want jobs that make them want to come to work everyday and that should be an important goal for any executive.

Leaders who make a deep connection with their employees will succeed, he says. They lead in ways that are symbolic – as well as literal – to create organisations where people feel like they can and should do their best.

“You have to get people’s hearts and minds and get them to buy into the DNA of an organisation,” he says.

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