Vigilant corporate leadership: A key to veritable organizational performance

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VIGILANT CORPORATE LEADERSHIP: A KEY TO VERITABLE ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Leading a construction-related business in the global competitive environment is a complex and challenging undertaking. It takes more than technical skills to unleash new opportunities, compete for a leading position in the local market, break into foreign markets, develop and sustain long-term competitive advantage, continuously reinvent the business to be able to attract, develop and retain talent. Corporate leaders must be able to see and do things that their competitors do not, make quick decisions to seize business opportunities, and constantly grow their people to take over the leadership positions within the firm. An in-depth qualitative study of 49 senior executive leaders in the construction industry of Singapore revealed that 'vigilant outlook' – inspirational vision, providing courageous impetus, systemic perspective, and vigilant decision making' – was a key characteristic of successful corporate leaders and their respective organizations. This article highlights how corporate leaders effectively employ 'vigilant outlook' to achieve sustainable growth and veritable performance for their people organizations.

Keywords: Corporate Leadership, Construction Industry, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Today's businesses operate in a rapidly changing, multi-cultural, and increasingly complex environment. Organizations are being compelled to keep abreast with these developments by adopting cutting-edge technology, innovation in products and processes, and sustainable management systems. In order to survive, let alone grow, corporate leaders constantly grapple with growing market demand for construction, increasing size and complexity of projects, conflicting demands of stakeholders, and scarcity of materials, machinery, and manpower. Additional complexity in leadership functioning is added by uncertainty of economic cycles intertwined with various socio-political upheavals, depleting environment, and increasing frequency of natural disasters. One key reason of successful organizations is judicious corporate leadership, lack of which usually leads to failed businesses that are somewhat more frequent in construction (see: Koksal and Arditi, 2004; Enshassi et al., 2006).

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Recent corporate meltdowns, ethical failures, business malfeasances, management malpractices, and obsession of capitalism have also resulted in reduced trust in corporate leadership (George, 2003; Halloway and Rhyn, 2005). Many scholars refer to this state of distrust as "leadership crisis", frequently noting "where have all leaders gone?" (See: Bennis, 2008; George and Sims, 2007). Some studies have also reported low satisfaction with ethics and authenticity of organizational leadership (Toor and Ofori, 2007; Toor and Ofori, 2008). This situation has poised a challenging task for corporate leaders to demonstrate genuine leadership to regain the trust and win over the confidence of their organizational membership and outside stakeholders.

It is also an opportunity for leadership researchers to highlight the examples of those corporate leaders who have successfully led their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious organizations towards veritable and sustainable growth. It is timely to revisit the common threads among corporate leaders of successful organizations and comprehend how effective corporate leaders are able to function within complex and ambiguous environment. This article targets to find answers to these very questions. Instead of offering a "comprehensive" shopping-list of traits, this article attempts to draw parallels between corporate leaders who have built sustainable businesses by demonstrating authentic corporate leadership. Discussion in the following pages attempts to highlight some key dimensions that differentiate high-performing corporate leaders from their ordinary counterparts.

ROLE OF CORPORATE LEADERSHIP

Corporate leadership is essentially a group of senior organizational leaders who possess managerial skills, have experience in varied disciplines, come from diverse backgrounds, and are willing to share their knowledge to lead the firm towards a sustainable future. Acquaah (2003) argues that capabilities of effective corporate leadership are firm-specific and rely on specific infrastructure, history, and collective experience in a firm, hence making it difficult to imitate by the competitors. Primarily role of corporate leaders is to identify opportunities and formulate strategies to maximize them – by comprehending the economic performance and increasing firm's profitability – while minimizing the impact of perceived threats. The effectiveness of corporate management is reflected by its innovative capabilities, clear strategic vision, and ability to manage human and financial assets (Ireland and Hitt, 1999; Acquaah, 2003).

Corporate leaders operate within complex and dynamic social systems and make trade-offs for their people and organizations. They exercise influence which may travel within a group of people in four different ways: top-down, bottom-up, lateral, and integrated – a combination of top-down, bottom-up, and lateral leadership (Locke, 2003). They bridge the past, present and future of organizations (Boal and Schultz,

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2007). This demonstrates the complexity of leadership influence process that takes places in everyday leadership process. In order to generate and sustain influence – while solving complex problems and dealing with large number of stakeholders – corporate leaders reconcile conflicting interests and goals of people and organizations. In doing so, corporate leaders typically play two roles within organizations: an architectural role – in which they redesign their organizations by putting into place appropriate structures and systems – and a charismatic role – in which they envision the future, empower and energize the elements of leadership (Kets de Vries, 1996). However, to be effective, they also reconcile between their architectural role and charismatic role in order to avoid a situation where they have appropriate systems without a vision or dysfunctional systems with an inspiring vision.

To build sustainable organizations, corporate leaders skillfully balance the interests of all stakeholders, including their own interests, those of their followers and organization. They face paradoxes – such as paradox of knowing (self and other); paradox of focus (individual and communal); paradox of communication (direct and indirect); paradox of action (doing and being); and the paradox of response (time focus: short and long-term) (see: Fisher-Yoshida and Geller, 2008). They treat dilemmas as opportunities and are able to draw new directions for their organizations. For this purpose, effective corporate leaders stay focused, remain dynamic, and prepared to change (Lowy, 2008). Corporate leaders also employ skillful organizational politics in order to reconcile issues within the organizations (Kan and Parry, 2004).

Given that today's corporate leaders live in a whole series of complex adaptive organizations (Boal and Schultz, 2007) which are intricately intertwined with individual and social demands, constraints, and choices (Stewart, 1982), leadership process is also more complex and adaptive (Marion and Uhl-Bien,2001). Under such systems, its primary task is to establish a dynamic system where bottom-up structuration emerges and moves the system and its components to a more desirable level of fitness and order (Osborn and Hunt, 2007). In corporate leadership positions, leaders face more external pressures and lesser internal constraints while they develop, focus, and enable an organization's structural, human, and social capital and capabilities to meet real-time opportunities and threats (Boal, 2004). They engage in sense-making of environmental turbulence and ambiguity, and sense-giving to their followers (see: Figure 1). Through active sense-making (an upward process), leaders actively construct joint identities that help define future possibilities as well as make sense out of current realities. Through sense-giving (a downward process), leaders are able to achieve alignment between the sense-making process of themselves and their organizational members (Reicher and Hopkins, 2003).
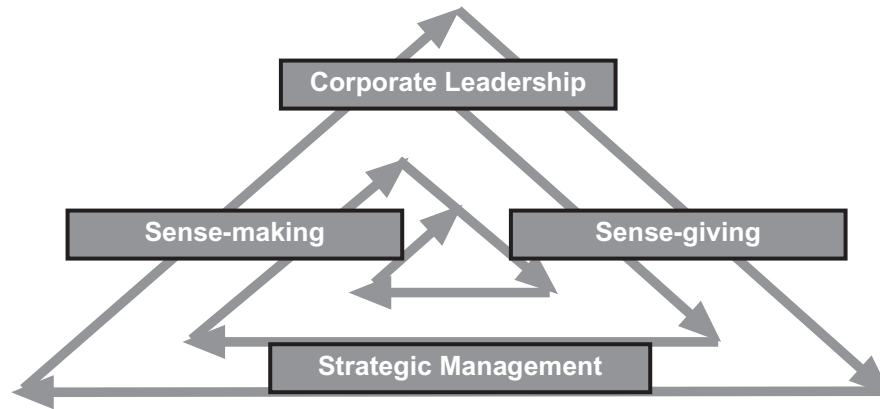
Figure 1: Sense-making and sense-giving in corporate leadership.

Characteristics of prudent corporate leaders include readiness for change, creative and critical reflection, self-organized networking, virtual and cross-cultural communication, coping with uncertainty and various frames of reference, increasing self-knowledge and the ability to build and contribute to high-performance teams (Thomas and Mengel, 2008). Such corporate leadership is able to operate on the edge of chaos in the multiplicity of complex adaptive systems. It is able to reconcile the varying social demands of social agents and other related systems. It takes a systemic approach in which leaders are able to integrate ideas that previously were seen as unrelated or even as opposed (Sternberg, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on part of a larger study that was conducted in Singapore. The study followed a qualitative grounded theory methodology. Driven by theoretical sampling procedures, a total of 49 leaders were interviewed. These leaders belonged to various trades in the development industry and occupied senior managerial and corporate leadership positions in their organizations (see: Table 1). Many of them were also serving on executive bodies of various professional organizations.

Most study participants (over 75%) sat on corporate boards of their organizations. Study participants were chosen based on their reputation for authenticity and success in their respective professions. They were nominated as authentic leaders – individuals who practice solid values, lead with heart and soul, establish connected relationships, and demonstrate self-discipline (George, 2003; George and Sims, 2007) – by their peers in the construction industry of Singapore. They were also well known as successful in their careers and respectful across other professions in the industry. Majority of

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interviewees had significantly contributed to success and sustained performance of their respective organizations – most of which had not only survived many economic recessions and organizational changes but had grown and diversified across the region.

Table 1: Demographic details of study participants

Attribute	Properties	No. of Cases
Gender	Male	42
	Female	7
Company Type	Architects	8
	Consultants (Engineers, Designers)	9
	Contractors	7
	Developers	11
	Quantity Surveyors	7
	Architects + Engineers	4
	Others	3
Position in the Organization	Manager and senior manager	7
	General/Deputy General Manager	2
	Director/Executive Director	20
	Managing Director	2
	CEO/Deputy CEO	10
	Managing partner	2
	President/Vice President	4
	Chairman/Group Chairman	2

In-depth interviews were used as principal source of data collection. Interviews typically lasted for 75-100 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed into text. Analysis of transcriptions was carried out under the guidelines of grounded theory. Open coding procedures helped to identify various concepts within the data. Axial coding was used to integrate the emergent concepts into lower-level, middle-level, and higher-level categories. Theoretical sampling, memoing, and various other techniques were instrumental in developing higher-level of abstraction of lower- and middle-level categories and to convert them into higher-level categories.

STUDY FINDINGS

Analysis of qualitative data resulted in various higher-level categories which include leadership development, self leadership, self-transcendent leadership, and

sustainable leadership. Sustainable leadership referred to the strategies that the leaders adopted for performing effective and successful leadership and influencing their followers and organizations. Middle-level categories that fall under 'sustainable leadership' include: (i) vigilant outlook; (ii) creative problem solving; (iii) developing high-performance and sustainable teams; (iv) sustainable human and social capital development; (v) leading and sustaining change; (vi) building sustainable organizations; (vii) and sustained succession planning. Although all these categories are important for effective functioning of corporate leaders, 'vigilant outlook' make the corporate leaders stand out and enable them to effectively accomplish later six strategies to eventually sustain their leadership.
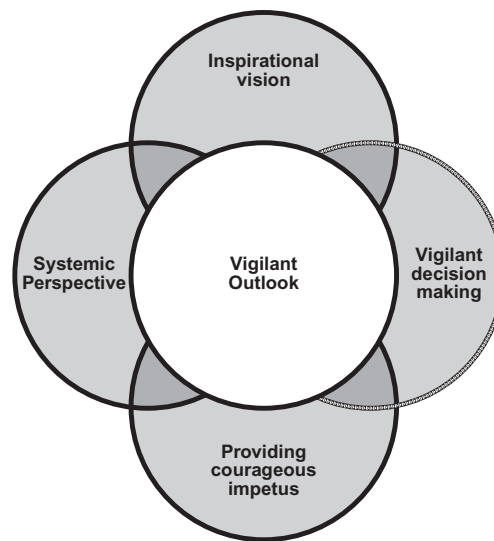

Figure 2: Vigilant outlook of corporate leadership

VIGILANT OUTLOOK

Lower-level categories that collectively generated the concept of 'vigilant outlook' include: inspirational vision, providing courageous impetus, systemic perspective, and vigilant decision making (see: Figure 2). Various concepts that produced each of the lower-level categories are shown in the Table 2. They know their destination and have a clear picture of their goals. They are also able to inspire their followers to come together to achieve the common goals. In doing so, they also take the responsibility of their own actions as well actions of their followers.

Through vigilant outlook, authentic leaders are not only able to inspire a vision; they refine their goals by keeping the bigger picture in front. They are also able to garner the support of their by providing a courageous impetus. In doing so, they also take the

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responsibility of their own actions as well actions of their followers. Their watchful decision making helps them to take right decision needed to transform their plans into actions and results.

Table 2: Sub-categories and concepts under 'vigilant outlook'

Vigilant Outlook			
Inspirational Vision	**Providing Courageous Impetus**	**Systemic Perspective**	**Vigilant Decision Making**
Bringing people on a common goal	Be able to see long-term	Leadership is all-encompassing	Gathering information; getting clarity
Conviction to make a difference	Following the lonely path	Being versatile	Facilitating decision making
Finding community oriented solutions	Making unpopular decisions	Bridging the gaps between stakeholders	Courageous and shared decision making
Inspiring a vision	Providing impetus and initiative	Building market intelligence	Firmness and flexibility
Knowing your purpose	Sharing authority	Conducting the orchestra; producing a play	Sensibility and maturity
Prioritizing the issues	Taking responsibility	Looking at the bigger picture	Timely decision making
Setting a direction	Showing positive firmness	Not bogged by the routine	Accepting responsibility of decision

INSPIRATIONAL VISION

When leaders were asked about their leadership philosophy, they frequently noted that having a vision and setting a common goal for followers are essential aspects. CEO of a consulting group noted:

I guess good leaders are able to formulate the vision and then motivate others to carry the vision through…you must still have people behind you to carry that vision through.

However, having a vision is not enough; communicating the vision down to the whole organization is imperative. "You need to know how to cascade your vision down to many many teams", said one CEO. Knowing the destination and persuading the followers to follow the common goal differentiates the leader from followers. In order to get to the destination, leaders garner the support from the followers and foster the attainment of mutual goals. For example, a female CEO noted:

We will have followers when we share the same objectives and they see we are sincerely working towards the objective. We have to try to be as fair as possible to everybody. It's not always that easier in practice.

Emphasizing on setting the direction and getting the support from people, another senior executive spoke:

You are supposed to do two things [in leadership]. You set the direction that is how things should move. Second part is to get people to support you … Now the part of setting the direction…it demands quality…you need to ensure safety, progress time, cost, and each and everyone of these issues is like a priority … as a leader … you must be able to make a list of priorities and actually make it very clear to those people who work with you.

PROVIDING COURAGEOUS IMPETUS

Another sub-category that emerged under the 'vigilant outlook' was 'providing courageous impetus'. Individuals in leadership positions are usually lonely and have to work their own way to provide direction and impetus, initiative to their followers. They have to take the responsibility of their actions as well as the actions of their followers. Their failure results in profound repercussions. Therefore, they have to make unpopular decisions sometimes. Occasionally they are unable to expose their concerns to keep their followers motivated. They may be smiling but they deeply understand inside the severity of the matters they are dealing with. Therefore, it is usually said that leadership is a lonely path and leaders have to find their own way and solve their problems. However, they still have to take steps to keep the wheel rotating. Therefore, 'providing courageous impetus' is important for leadership role in the business world.

CEO of a large consulting firm emphasized the long-term thinking of the leader. "I suppose, what is most important is that a leader, whatever you are, you must be able to see what real long term is", he said. And while thinking long-term, the leaders do not always make popular decisions. Sometimes they ride against the tide and make unpopular decisions. CEO of an engineering design firm observed:

I really think good leaders make all the difference. And good leaders don't work on the philosophy of getting popular because as a good leader you sometimes need to make some unpopular decisions. But that is the role of the leadership to look ahead, to project what's coming, to be able to see the future, and lead and motivate the people.

However, the leader has to take the responsibility of the collective decisions and actions. CEO of a quantity surveying firm gave the example of good leaders, saying:

They do not expose you when you're in trouble, because they take the responsibility …if something goes wrong, they are the ones responsible. I think leadership is taking responsibility, not exposing your team.

Under the category of 'providing courageous impetus', another concept that emerged was loneliness at the top and the severity of responsibility that leaders felt being in the leadership positions. One CEO, while talking about the issue of loneliness at the top, noted:

He who wears the crown traces the lonely path. [As a leader], who do you turn to? You are alone at the top. And the sad part associated with the leader is that the leader must worry first of all. On the other hand, as a leader, you celebrate after your flock has done it. It is a huge sacrifice.

Another CEO also noted that he had to work much harder to create an example and to keep his staff motivated. He mentioned:

Very often, I am the last one to leave the office. Even until now, in my late age, in the old days, I would stay behind, although I don't need to work, I will just stay with them.

However, while providing courageous impetus, the leader has to show positive firmness to ensure that things keep moving. Giving the example of positive firmness, a CEO noted:

There are people who do not listen to you and have problems to understand. You can't help it much. Until certain point, you have to stand firm and tell them that they need to change. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not.

SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Under 'systemic perspective', several important concepts emerged shown in Table 2. Leaders interviewed in this study frequently noted that they saw leadership as a 'whole-sum' and overarching concept in which they had to understand the objective, comprehend the context, set the direction, and demonstrate strong leadership within and outside the organization. Vigilant corporate leaders respond to the situation differently. They take the stock of the crisis, measure the damage and then take appropriate action. They remain calm in the midst of chaos. They keep themselves composed and have a deeper look into the problem and then find solution. They don't panic when they face failures or problems. Although no organization and no leader is fully prepared to meet the challenge and failure; the leader has a responsibility. He must assess the damage calmly. Then he should chart a course of action without getting panic and without getting into tension. Then comes the implementation. Selecting the right leaders to run the implementation is the key to formulating an overarching strategy to meet the challenge.

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Under 'systemic perspective', several important concepts emerged namely: all-encompassing success, conducting the orchestra, producing a play, versatility of skills, seeing the bigger picture, etc. Interviewees noted that they saw leadership as a very 'whole-sum' and overarching concept in which they had to understand the objective, comprehend the context, set the direction, and demonstrate strong leadership within and outside the organization. In a memo that was written about systemic outlook during the analysis stage of interviews with authentic leaders, the current author noted:

Leaders respond to the situation differently. They measure the damage and then take appropriate action. They remain calm in the midst of chaos. They keep themselves composed and have a deeper look into the problem and then find solutions. They don't panic when they face failures or problems. Although no organization and no leader is fully prepared to meet the challenge and failure; the leader has a responsibility. He must assess the damage calmly. Then he should chart a course of action without getting panicked and without getting into tension ... Then comes the implementation part. Selecting the right leaders to execute the implementation is the key to formulating an overarching strategy to meet the challenge.

Therefore, when leaders are performing authentic leadership, they are not only leading the people within their own organizations, they are also performing leadership role outside the boundaries of their organizations. Director of an architecture firm noted that leadership is about 'all round success'. He said that:

You have got to be handling the people both inside and outside the firm. So, leadership means that you are able to relate to your own people as well as others outside. This is one of the most important criteria. You have to bring success to the organization and respect comes when you achieve this all round success.

Another CEO viewed leadership as an all-encompassing role in which the leader was not self-centered; they were rather more concerned about others and were driven by the passion to bring success to their organizations. He observed:

Leadership is a very all-encompassing role…it's a lot of teamwork as well, you can't do everything alone. Even if you can chalk the way, you can point people in the right direction, you must still have people behind you to carry that vision through. I guess good leaders are able to formulate the vision and then motivate others to carry the vision through.

General Manager of a developer's firm noted that "…the developer is only a facilitator and he is a conductor and must be a good listener". Another senior director in a consulting firm echoed the notion of 'conducting the orchestra':

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In a senior position in a profession, you are like a conductor. You have to know all the instruments to play the whole orchestra, the whole team. If you have not been through all that, you may not know who is committing the mistake in the orchestra. If you have not been through, you don't know whether the violin guy is playing the best or what. I am lucky to have gone through this all in my earlier career, much wider and deeper in many aspects.

CEO of a consulting firm related leadership to producing a dance item or a play. He said:

Within our senior guys, we actually did agree that this is the right way that we put in systems that will serve our people, so that they can actually do their dance. [Leadership] is like producing a play, or a dance item. You have to have all those things; the lighting, the music, the necessary stage, props and all that. Once you do that, they can dance.

Otherwise, it makes no sense; they can't even do what they need to do.

Another Director in a quantity surveying firm noted the importance of looking at things from a different perspective. He noted:

I have learnt how to deal with people, to take a step up and redefine the whole thing. I have learnt how to look at things differently…straight away the whole ball game changes. For example, if some one is pressuring you on a certain issue until you get backed up into a corner, but then you look at the issue from another angle and you raise a new question, straight away the whole thing changes because the person then has to react.

You have to step back and re-look at things and pave the way strategically.

CEO of another consulting firm said that a leader should be "versatile" in order to perform numerous roles under different circumstances. He said that the leader is the one who is able to see the "big picture". An Executive Director in a contractors firm said:

I look at the bigger picture in most of the issues but I do go into smaller details when I think it is necessary for me to get into.

These selected excerpts show that effective corporate leaders posses a systemic outlook and are able to make a "total" sense of the environment. They are able to comprehend the big picture, understand the context in which they operate. Viewing

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things in totality helps the corporate leaders produce a harmonious play of leadership within their organizations.

VIGILANT DECISION MAKING

Decision making emerged as an important category during the analysis. On average, every leader interviewed in this study touched the issue of decision making in some sense or the other. Leaders explained why decision making was so crucial for leadership, how they made decisions, what factors they considered while making decisions, and how they dealt the consequences during post-decision stage. Decision making process, as it could be seen from the responses of interviewees is complex, multidimensional, and contextual. However, leaders have to make decisions given all complexity and demands of different situations. A senior executive in a consulting firm said that "…it can be very frustrating, when the leader doesn't decide."

A Senior Vice President in a developer's firm observed that the project manager has to make the eventual decision. Although he relies on the information various stakeholders provide, the final judgment still has to be made by him. She observed:

Quality of decision making is the key. Project manager is not an expert, [neither] a specialist. He is a generalist. The project manager is a people manager. You rely on your service provider to provide the service and there you make a decision or a choice. That is why I have to respect what advice they give me. From there, I tell them what my decision is. I do it based on my own knowledge or feedback.

However, the whole process of decision making is intricate and multifaceted. Articulating the process of decision making, a female leader noted:

I think the main thing really is that you have to be confident enough, you look at the available information you have, and you have to make a decision. And then you have to convey the reasons for your decision to your followers …the rest of the team. And if there is any change in the circumstance, then you may have to change your decision. But if people know the reason why you make the decision, they can also help you to look out, in case circumstances change …And if it is wrong, you have to just see what you can do to rectify it.

Interviewees noted that empowerment of followers along with clear instructions and direction was important to facilitate the decision making. CEO of a consulting group noted that empowerment was fundamental to his decision making. He noted:

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My other approach is empowerment …give your staff the authority to make decision BUT and a big BUT… always asked them to think of implications, that is "see things that others do not see"… Also, if there are problems, try and think through your options and then come to me to discuss the options. Do not come and see me asking for my decision if you have not in the first place, brainstormed through the options. Such training will help them to think better.

During the decision making process, however, the leader must remain vigilant and impartial. He must take the stalk of the situation and then decide. CEO of a developer's firm commented on this, saying:

For decision making, one has to set aside the ego. The ego is very important. You need to have it so that you can feel that you can do it. But one has to have a balance to do something that is less glamorous and is more appropriate to the market.

In the process of decision making, the leader must remain courageous to take unpopular decisions which may not suit the majority. Also, authentic leaders, while making decisions, keep a fine balance between firmness and flexibility to ensure that the decisions are for the greater good of people. Maturity and sensibleness are also part and parcel to decision making process. Also, the decisions should be shared and timely so that everyone can work towards the common objectives to achieve the results from the decisions made. An important characteristic of vigilant decision making is that the leader takes the responsibility of the outcomes. A senior executive in an architectural firm noted that:

…if I make a decision, I hold its responsibility. I won't push the blame on anyone else... [Sometimes] to them, I make a decision that is against their interest…May be I make wrong decisions [sometimes]. But along the way, I hold the responsibility.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current study shows that 'vigilant outlook' of corporate leadership is instrumental in establishing, developing, growing, and sustaining businesses. Flexible and adaptive management systems; attracting, developing and utilizing home-grown talent; diversifying across product and geographical boundaries; and developing niches are the tools that successful corporate leaders adopt to distinguish their organizations in the market. Corporate leaders who are able to attain sustainable growth of their enterprises despite the formidable array of issues are those who turn the challenges into opportunities. They recognize and empowerment of their employees, and develop the next generation of leaders. Their leadership purpose and aspired legacies are aligned

and portray the future they envision for their people and organizations. Their vision and philosophy mould the culture and values which determine the future prospects of their organizations. They provide initiative so that others can comfortably follow their path.

Vigilant corporate leaders also keep the bigger picture in front before they take any decisions or strategize any changes for their organizations. They are able to think out of the box and engage in systemic understanding of issues that matter for their organizations. Given the complexity of environment and high stakes involved in corporate decisions, vigilant corporate leaders adopt the approaches of informed, shared, collective, sensible, and vigilant decision making. They defy the tradition of "command and control" and take a different route of leadership that encourages empowerment and participation of organizational membership at all levels so that people can feel participated, acknowledged, and valued. Such leaders bring people to around a common vision, align them towards a single goal, empower them to innovate, promote a culture of shared values and understanding, and believe in serving the organizational stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective corporate leaders reconcile between their dynamic roles such as transformational visionaries, effective managers, astute entrepreneurs, thoughtful strategists, systemic thinkers, and vigilant decision makers. Their actions are guided by their values and their behaviors are governed by their principles. Workings in concert with their other corporate counterparts, effective corporate leaders are able to keep the organizational values alive and develop a culture in which everyone participates, thrives, and feels valued. Although they use a repertoire of strategies for effectual functioning, 'vigilant outlook' is makes the difference. In mathematical terms, corporate leadership minus vigilant outlook will eventually result in organizational failure.

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> Man can never come up to his ideal standard. It is the nature of the mortal spirit to raise that standard higher as it goes from strength higher as it goes from strength to strength, still upward and onward – the wisest and greatest man are ever the most modest.
>
> **- S.M.F. Ossoli**