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2014年7月出版

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# Blue Ocean Leadership in the Employee / Leader power balance

Interview with Professor Chris Roebuck, Cass Business School

Ming XU, Quanwei LI

Leadership research has always been an area of interest to business executives and management academics, but delivering and developing effective leadership is a difficult challenge. The article, Blue Ocean Leadership, by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, propose the concept of considering leadership as a “service” and employees as the “clients” of the service, which has received a positive response from management academics and business executives.

We interviewed Professor Chris Roebuck, Visiting Professor of Transformational Leadership at Cass Business School, on this topic. Professor Roebuck has extensive practical management experience and has held senior managerial roles at KPMG, HSBC and UBS. When he was the Global Head of Leadership and Talent Management at UBS, Professor Roebuck led and implemented a UBS global leadership development initiative. As a well-known multinational company, it is quite typical for UBS to face problems like merger and acquisition integration, multi-regional cultural differences and improvement of decision making efficiency. UBS implemented the leadership development initiative during 2002 to 2006 and eventually accomplished the goal of “One UBS” greatly improving performance.

The initiative received many awards, including being awarded the title of Best Company for Leaders and being made a Harvard Business School Case Study.

From the point view of Professor Roebuck, people’s expectation of leaders are clear and consistent and it is not as difficult as we would imagine to improve leadership. It can be achieved by a few simple day to day actions. Although “Blue Ocean Leadership”, to some extent, reflects the decline of Command and Control Leadership and the rise of Negotiation Leadership, leaders themselves are still the key to the success of improving leadership. Whether a leadership “buyer’s market” is achievable depends on the interaction between leaders and employees.

## Changing Behaviour Matters More

**HBR CHINA: W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne take the Blue Ocean concept to leadership from strategy. What is your opinion on this transition? What is your understanding of the relationship between strategy and leadership?**

**Chris Roebuck:** People usually separate organisational structures into different “silos” which makes it easier to think about them; however, the result is counterproductive, breaking the connection between key areas that

must interact to achieve success. This causes many of the problems facing organisations today. If managers can recognize the essential connection between strategy and leadership they should understand that it is impossible to succeed with a good strategy but poor leadership. However if a company’s initial strategy is poor but the leadership is very good it is possible to improve in the future. As a result, changing the principle from “strategy is vital” to “leadership is vital” is a better way of thinking. Many other problems can be effectively solved if leadership works well.

**HBR CHINA: According to W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, conventional leadership styles can be compared to a “seller’s market”, while the Blue Ocean Leadership a “buyer’s market”. Is it really the case that ordinary employees’ views and their leadership needs can determine leaders’ behaviour?**

**Chris Roebuck:** In my opinion, if the leadership approach changes from a “seller’s market” to a “buyer’s market” it reflects to some extent the decline of Command and Control Leadership and the rise of Interactive Leadership. However this does not necessarily mean that the outcome is more successful.

I believe that in general, people’s

people's expectation of leaders are clear and consistent. The ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi once said, "the supreme rulers are hardly known to their subjects. The lesser are loved and praised. The even lesser are feared. The least are despised. Those who show no trust will not be trusted. Those who are at ease will not be coercive. When the tasks are accomplished, all the people will say: we did this ourselves." Even 2,500 years ago leaders knew how to motivate people to be their best. The same applies in the modern world. People know what they want from their leaders and when they demand it the need for effective leadership becomes stronger. As a result they become "leadership consumers".

However, the leadership "buyer's market" isn't that prevalent. It's determined by the power balance between leaders and employees. When the economic climate is poor and the unemployed outweigh the employed, many leaders can get away with being ineffective without consequences even though the hidden side effects will hamper organisational improvement.

**HBR CHINA:** Both W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne mentioned that conventional leadership and techniques for motivating employees placed too much emphasis on building common values and visions. These are very difficult to measure and take a long time to deliver. They proposed the idea of focusing more on employees' behaviours and actions. How would you interpret this contradiction?

**Chris Roebuck:** If an organisation wants to change and improve leadership, there are three approaches: firstly, to set out the actions required to achieve specific organizational goals; secondly, to change existing culture within the organisation; thirdly, to transform the leaders' personalities. It is extremely difficult for leaders to transform their personalities in order to be better leaders. To change existing culture is easier but still difficult. Therefore the best route is to focus on specific actions to deliver the organisations goals as the best way forward.

But focus just on delivery is not the only thing that needs to be done because delivery is only momentary. Instead, we must change behaviour and culture so that delivery can be improved long-term. But when it comes to change behaviours, people's first reaction can be resistant. They think it means changing their personalities, or very complicated organisational changes and an

increase bureaucracy. But in fact, what people need to change is not their personalities but the most simple day to day behaviours, such as caring about the employees and their professional development, sharing with them the organisations plans, and giving regular feedback. These things seem easy to do, but executives often don't pay enough attention to them and forget them. If the management team of an organization is aware of why people potentially resist change, they will not be directive, but rather help the employees understand that change can bring them a lot of benefits such as promotion, a simpler life, or a happier team; encouraging them to embrace and support change.

**HBR CHINA:** So may I say that you don't totally agree with the authors on focusing on action, because you think it is a palliative strategy?

**Chris Roebuck:** I partly agree with what you said. The reason is that in this article, the authors implied repeated actions may change behaviour if people undertake them long-term. Even though the authors didn't identify this, I agree with this principle. When doing consulting services for organisations I suggest the leaders make small changes, at the initial stage, to get things moving. If the cost of this change is fairly low and the gain for the organisation is comparatively high, eg by explaining to employees how what they do fits into the bigger picture, the leaders will be willing take this first step easily. As long as they then continue to do the action repetitively it will, over time, be transformed into behaviour, which will ensure it becomes part of day to day activity.

**HBR CHINA:** Is it necessary to take the market needs into consideration in leadership development? Does leadership target a specific objective or an organisation's vision?

**Chris Roebuck:** When organisations set out a vision they have to work out the strategy to deliver it, and staff at all levels should be clear about the target they are working towards and the vision. Not only senior executives, but also everyone from top level to frontline should be aware of the strategic perspective. Professor W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne highlight the importance of cultivating leadership at all levels, which I totally agree. According to my experience serving in the army, it is only by having effective leadership at all levels can you

guarantee the efficiency of the whole organization, this applies in other organisations as well.

Top leaders must take a strategic and holistic overview. This firstly requires the capability to understand the market. However, in Professor W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne's article, the emphasis is more on responding to the market, that market determines the development of organisations. However, in my opinion, if organisations want to have an optimum future, all managerial staff should understand the market, and try to predict it rather than merely follow it.

## Leadership for all

**HBR CHINA:** You mentioned that you agree with the idea that effective leadership must be delivered by all managers at all levels. What's the critical point in sharing and reallocating power throughout the organisation?

**Chris Roebuck:** When people use word "leaders", they tend to think about executives at the most senior or the strategic level. They think that in Chinese or other organisations leadership is only at strategic level and everyone below just has to implement tasks. When I say leadership at all levels that doesn't change the fact people do their job, just that they are developed to lead their people. With all managers being better leaders, the team will be more efficient. For example, without any reallocation or increase in resources, better leaders could improve the work of their own team, maximise the return on investment of the team and deliver better customer service via their improved leadership. The whole team will generate more income and thus the whole organization will be more effective.

After the financial crises in 2008, many organisations laid off workers in a large numbers, so those left have more responsibilities and a higher workload. Thus the importance of getting effective leadership for all employees is now even more critical.

**HBR CHINA:** Since everyone needs leadership, what kind of organisational change or adjustment needs to be made to make this happen?

**Chris Roebuck:** Ideally, we want every employee achieve deliver their best at work and want to get even better. However this is far from the reality. If an excellent mid-level leader manger is in an organisation where senior leaders are very poor, they have two choices: either quit right away or he can initiate changes for the their team and hope it spreads. They become and island of excellence in a sea of mediocracy making the people on that team give their best, not only for the team but for the entire organisation. If senior executives can create a favorable environment for this leader, then others can learn from the experience and gradually spread this effective leadership across the organisation delivering high performance and alignment to the overall vision.

When it comes to the wider picture, top management should make an effort to make things simpler, to admit that there is always room innovation and improvement. They should review legacy systems to see if they are still fit for purpose. They should inspire their employees not drive them and they should be an exemplary model of behaviour. In addition they should also ensure that their direct reports and all the line managers at lower levels are also delivering effective leadership. Finally they must ensure that effective communication means that all leaders and employees are aware of what the wider organisation is trying to achieve and how they fit into that.

**HBR CHINA:** Regarding organisational adjustment, W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne has proposed four steps to deliver Blue Ocean Leadership. What do you think of these?

**Chris Roebuck:** The four steps are really a model of prioritising; in other words, do more of whats important, less of whats not, and start to do the things we should do and stop doing the things we shouldn't. I agree with these four steps which are important to analyse what is key to business success. The most critical thing for a organisation to do before trying change structures and culture is to define its key objectives. Only with a clear understanding of this can leaders know where it is now, what it has been done right or wrong, where should it spend more or less time, what should or should not do, what changes are key and how to change its strategies etc. Improving leadership is also focused on these key criteria as well.

One interesting thing about the four-steps mentioned in Blue Ocean Leadership is that the authors adopted a customer service perspective and emphasised that employers should treat their employees as customers. I have used this principle for a number of year. If leaders don't inspire employees, engage them in the organsiations strategy, to be willing to make it succeed, how can they then expect employees will work hard to engage clients and customers ? At its most basic level if senior leaders don't show they care about their employees those employees won't care about the organsiation or its customers and will just do the minimum work and take the money.

Generally, the four steps proposed by W.Chan-Kim and Renee Mauborgne focus on taking action. But it's not just about delivery. Prior to action leaders must discuss values, what should or should not be done during the implementation of the task or strategy. They should also agree the steps everyone is going to take via good task management skills. However, these skills are often what is lacking in leadership in many organisations making the task likely to fail, at least be more difficult, from the start.

**HBR CHINA:** According to some readers' feedback, the Leadership view that W.Chan-Kim and Renee Mauborgne proposed is not a new idea, as many companies nowadays are adopting this method, which is to define the optimum employee behavior, find what is currently happening, assess the difference and improve accordingly. Do you think so?

**Chris Roebuck:** To be honest it doesn't matter to some degree if it's a new idea or not. As regards getting more effective leadership if you look we have enough information from all the various sources to know what works and what doesn't. So what we are doing now is collating all the information to create new approaches that allow more people to better understand and master leadership more easily and effectively.

As regards Blue Ocean Leadership and my work, we are facing the same challenge: there is too much information on leadership, be it old or new, for leaders in the real world to use it effectively. What we must do, and my main objective, is to present this information in the best way to enable leaders everywhere to become effective as quickly and simply as possible.

Those who are in charge are actually fully aware of what they need and what they are short of, like you said. The management team has already heard of and studied the core idea of different managerial knowledge and theories. But the management or those people in charge tend to forget the ideas they have learnt before, due to the poor delivery of those theories and knowledge. For instance, I combine leadership research with neurology to explain why employees are not willing to make a change. Subconsciously, people tend to defend themselves. When employers say something that make the employees unhappy or feel unacceptable, the employees will still defend themselves subconsciously even if they accept it mentally, which is why their work will also be affected.

The reason why I use this example is to explain that the most important thing is to compile useful information together and use it to drive a person or an organisation forward. In this way, I believe my book and the core idea of Blue Ocean Leadership share the same goals.



## The Balance of Leadership

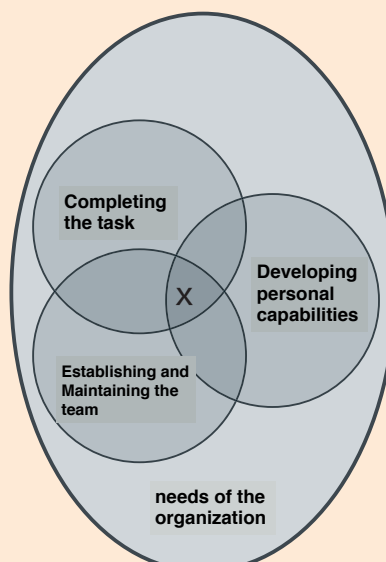
### Senior managers' action plays a crucial role

**HBR CHINA:** During your meetings with senior business leaders in China, what do you think is the largest challenge for the management of Chinese enterprises?

**Chris Roebuck:** From my point of view, there are three major challenges. Number one is system challenge. The structure of Chinese businesses is very complicated and inflexible with serious bureaucracy. Number two is that there are too many management layers, sometimes more than that of some western businesses. The third challenge is culture. My concern and a real challenge is how many people have the courage to speak out in Chinese businesses, eg "I have an idea that could make our team and organisation perform better." This shows that legacy systems may not now be appropriate for the current environment. Such a situation is very common but few employees have the courage to express this view. Instead, only with the proactive consent and encouragement from senior executives, can bureaucracy be reduced and rigid systems changed with employees help.

**HBR CHINA:** With these issues existing in Chinese enterprises, what's your suggestion regarding the improvement of leadership for them? What do you think should be the main focus?

**Chris Roebuck:** I think they should start with improving senior management capability. Senior management should be honest, sincere, and clear-minded. They should also be able to encourage and inspire their staff, and always focus on their customers. Success comes through maximizing effort and focusing that on what matters though collaboration. The leaders role is to get that effort, and focus it via collaborations. Maybe we can view an organisation like a village or a community; in this community, every member should give his or her fair contribution to it the outcome and they should work together towards the same objective.



According to John Adair's Action Centred Leadership, the leader has to balance delivering the task, building an effective team, and inspiring and developing the individuals in order to maximise their performance. The optimal outcome of leadership won't happen if it is only the task performance which is over-emphasised and team-building and personal development ignored. Chris Roebuck believes that when implementing leadership, it is necessary to ensure every tier of managers in an organisation to realise that both individual's and team's high performance and development are needed for the organisation to achieve its goal. Leaders have to help their people to achieve high performance, to develop skills and capabilities, and find personal development goals outside their tasks. Effective leadership needs to be aligned with the organisation's needs, and should be achieved through a balance of task, team and individual.

**HBR CHINA:** So your advice is for Chinese enterprises start from their senior management. But W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne think that employees don't have to wait for the senior management to act first, but can take proactive actions to create their own potential and inspiration. Do you agree with their opinion?

**Chris Roebuck:** I totally agree. Every member of staff is capable of innovation, and taking actions for improvement. It will have immediate effects. But it is their leaders' reaction that would determine the overall benefit. This applies to every level of leaders. In order to maximise the benefit for the employees and the whole organisation, the best way is that the top leaders act as role models, setting the norms of encouraging their staff. They will encourage others to further implement this good leadership down throughout the organisation. Its better to start at the top as if junior managers have been developed to recognize good leadership, then they might question the credibility of more senior managers when they see that their actions cannot meet that standard.

**HBR CHINA:** A "centralised" system of leading is normal in Chinese enterprises; would this hinder the promotion of leadership?

**Chris Roebuck:** If a centralised model includes a coherent, flexible and aligned approach, and can ensure good operation and quality, then it wouldn't. However, a centralised system can limit leaders ability to make decisions quickly, if this system concentrates decision making to a higher level of management. Good leaders will delegate decision making to the lowest possible level of management, to enable managers and teams at lower levels to respond flexibly to the business and organisational need. Of course, all this is based on a thorough communication of operational practices, strategic objectives, visions, and values. If neither managers nor members of staff know what they are supposed to do, or why they are doing it, or where the organization is going, then the decisions made would make no sense to them.



Professor Chris Roebuck is the Visiting Professor of Transformational Leadership at Cass Business School

