

## How to act like a leader

When faced with new roles, old patterns of thinking and behaving can hang around. But in order to become a great leader, you must change your mindset by acting a different way, according to Herminia Ibarra. 29.06.15

However, you may feel about management acronyms, the concept of VUCA (that's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) should resonate with most business leaders. The world is changing so fast that keeping up can seem a rather Sisyphean task.

To deal with this change, received wisdom dictates thinking should come before acting – think through your options, reflect, then make your move. But INSEAD professor and HR Most Influential International Thinker Herminia Ibarra doesn't have much time for received wisdom.

In her provocative and essential new book, *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*, Ibarra flips the status quo on its head. The only way to become a leader, she states, is to start acting like one.

HR magazine was lucky enough to catch up with Ibarra over lunch, after she'd presented her ideas to alumni of our HR in the Boardroom programme. Read on for some of the highlights of the conversation...

### **Act first, think later**

The central premise of Ibarra's book is, in her words: "That when you are faced with a new role that's very different from anything you have done before, you can't think your way into it. You have to experiment and act your way into it."

"Thinking only brings you back to the past," she explains. "It's doing something you've done before. It reinforces your competency traps and your old way of seeing the world, which is precisely what you're trying to get beyond."

Whether you are stepping up into a new role, taking on a stretch assignment, or the world outside has changed so much your job has no choice but to change with it, Ibarra is clear action is the only option. "You have to change your mindset but the only way to do it is by starting to do some new and different things that then change the way you think and your capacity," she says.

And what is driving this need for action? Ibarra, who spends much of her time developing leaders on her courses at INSEAD, has seen the concept of leadership shift in organisations. "Promotions are few and far between, but people's jobs are growing all the time because companies are getting leaner or consolidating, people leave and aren't replaced, people are getting more responsibilities and geographies thrown at them," she explains.

In other words, all of our jobs are getting bigger. "You can't do more and more, and do it the same way, something has to change," believes Ibarra.

Leadership is also becoming more widely dispersed – a necessity given the changing business context. “Despite there being little time, the only way for organisations to be effective, the way the world is changing, is to have people at different levels thinking strategically about what’s next,” she says.

### **Focus on oversight**

So, you know you need to act like a leader to step up, but how can you actually do it? Ibarra is one of the world’s most prominent voices on the importance of strategic rather than incidental networking, and advocates looking outwards to improve inwards.

“I call it the difference between the ‘insight’ and ‘outsight’ approach,” she says. “Outsight is about the external perspective. It’s about seeing things differently because you have expanded the activities you are involved in and the people you interact with. It gives you fresh stuff, instead of rehashing the old.” Ibarra is clear that changing your professional identity isn’t about “giving yourself an assessment, or reflecting on your strengths and weaknesses, or imagining who you want to be”. “You change by starting to talk to people differently, by trying new things... you discover who you might become. That’s learning by oversight.” And when it comes to increasing your oversight, Ibarra advises you focus on making changes in three key areas: your job, your network and finally yourself.

“First tweak, expand and redefine your job. Doing new and different things immediately changes your network,” she says. “The main reason we don’t change is your old network reinforces the old you. Start talking outside those circles and you’ll see how to sell what you do and get new ideas. Those two things help you start to see yourself differently and allow you to become more playful with your self-concept.”

### **Be a bridge**

Are you a bridge or a hub? To truly add strategic value as a leader, you want to be the former. Hubs put their team and customer at the centre of their work, whereas bridges link their team to the (relevant) outside world. While hubs have an important part to play, occupying the bridging role is critical for seizing competitive advantage and coming up with new ideas. (See the table below for more.)

“Being a bridge means you are a boundary spanner as opposed to staying in your silo,” explains Ibarra. But for time-poor or inexperienced leaders, that’s easier said than done, as the day job and the bureaucracy of people management can crowd things out.

Ibarra continues: “You tend to focus a lot inside your group, managing your team and relationships, and you forget that to be useful to them your job is to be the link and the funnel of information, ideas or resources from the outside to the group. Think about changing your job by making it a bridge role rather than a hub role.”

Networking externally is becoming ever more important as so much critical information is now to be found outside the boundaries of one organisation. “Everything has become much more connected,” she says. “Your customers, your competitors, your peers, your suppliers... If you’re just in your silo, you miss out.”

## Are you a hub or a bridge?

**In Ibarra's work she talks about hub versus bridge roles, with the view that while hubs have value, being a bridge is more strategically effective and has more impact. Here's how to tell which one you are.**

### **Hub roles:**

- Set goals for the team
- Assign roles to your people
- Assign tasks
- Monitor progress towards goals
- Manage team member performance; conduct performance evaluations
- Hold meetings to co-ordinate work
- Create a good climate within the team

### **Bridge roles:**

- Align team goals with organisational priorities
- Funnel critical information and resources into the group to ensure progress towards goals
- Get the support of key allies outside the team
- Enhance the external visibility and reputation of your people
- Get recognition for good performers and place them in great next assignments

SOURCE: ACT LIKE A LEADER, THINK LIKE A LEADER, HERMINIA IBARRA, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

For HR, being a bridge means interacting more with the line and linking HR to other functions. Ibarra also identifies the trend for HR leaders to come out of the line rather than necessarily out of the HR function, but acknowledges this may be a “frustrating career path”.

“You can't expect people to hunker down in the function and then all of a sudden step up in a strategic role,” she points out. “You have to find ways to develop that capacity through a person's career. For example, when you create taskforces why not have people from HR involved so they can network with, learn from and connect to the rest of the company?”

### **Authenticity isn't everything**

The importance of authenticity in leadership is referred to again and again in today's leadership literature, but Ibarra feels we may be framing it the wrong way.

“Whenever you're constantly emphasising something and talking about it it's because there's a problem,” she says. “People don't feel authentic at work, they don't feel they can

be themselves, they don't trust their leaders. The talk about authenticity strikes a chord because people don't want to be machines."

She believes that while authenticity is important, when moving into a new, unfamiliar role, striving to remain authentic is overrated – and could even be damaging. "Stepping out of your comfort zone means it's not going to be authentic, it's not going to be natural, it's not going to be the real you right away – but that doesn't matter as long as you're not violating your integrity," she says.

"Moving towards a more skilled version of yourself as a leader feels fake at first as you try to be more people orientated, or more emphatic or to listen more... It might not be who you are, but it's the only way you are going to learn."

### **Lessons for leadership development**

Ibarra's work has resonance for HR leaders who want to think differently about their jobs, their networks and themselves, but beyond that it can also provide valuable lessons for leadership development.

She cites the 70:20:10 model of learning and development (which explains that actually doing a tough job is the most effective way to learn). "Remember the 70:20:10 rule," she advises. "People learn from direct experience. Try to organise your talent and development practices around that."

However, that is often easier said than done. As Ibarra puts it: "We know that people learn from direct experience but it's harder to implement that to scale than programmes."

The most effective form of leadership development is to think strategically about what assignments employees are given, she says. "Put people in projects that get them in touch with those in other areas of the business or in front of senior people or encourage participation in things outside of the company."

More traditional leadership development programmes do have their place though, she adds. "The great thing about programmes is they take people out of the daily grind and routine. It creates space to think, and that is important. But in my programme I get [leaders] to think about the action steps that they can take immediately, which will grow them and their capacities in their jobs."

So while acting your way into leading remains critical, there is a place for thinking too. "The step back [to think] is important, but sometimes it feels more useful after you've been out there trying some new and different things," Ibarra explains. "You do need [thinking], but [action] comes first."

***Herminia Ibarra was speaking to members of HR magazine's HR in the Boardroom programme, our exclusive development programme for HR directors looking to increase their influence at board level.***