Are you a leader, a manager, or both? HRM’s Ananya Mukherjee charts the changing nature of leadership in Singapore’s business environment.

Industry gurus agree that if management is about getting things done, leadership is about getting others to get things done. History testifies that great leaders are capable of moving and motivating whole populations, armies and companies. How then do great leaders manage to achieve more than others?

In tomorrow’s world, exemplary leaders will be distinguished by their mastery of the softer side – people skills, taste, judgment and, above all, character.

Warren Bennis, global leadership expert, observes: “Character is the key to leadership. This is an observation confirmed by most people’s personal experience, as it is in my 15 years of work with more than 150 leaders, and in other studies I’ve encountered.”

Research at Harvard University indicates that 85% of a leader’s performance depends on personal character.

HR pundits agree that Singaporean leaders are rated highly in terms of the trust they engender for financial stewardship of their organisations, and their intellectual ability, integrity and performance focus. The Gallup Leadership Institute in collaboration with Singapore Management Institute recently published a report, The Singapore Leader, based on a leadership survey (with a sample of 1010) of Singapore’s working population. The survey revealed some interesting results, including, for example, that government leaders are generally rated higher than business leaders. Almost 73% of those reporting to their top-level leaders indicated that these leaders considered the moral and ethical consequences of their decision at least fairly often. Close to 50% indicated that their senior-level leaders focused on developing the strengths of each employee, while 66% indicated that their managers picked out the best people for leadership roles. Ironically, only 43% felt they saw their best ideas being implemented.

Expectations
Increasingly, the modern corporate world requires leadership rather than just management. “Walking our talk, promoting a shared vision, listening actively, achieving an organisation’s objectives through people. These are just a few of the phrases that define leadership. But with the evolution of
today’s workforce in Singapore, it’ll take more than these to be a good leader. The workforce is expecting much more from their bosses. They want to be engaged and to be acknowledged,” says Anna Chan, director, human resource division, Economic Development Board (EDB). To keep in step with the changing needs of the time, Chan suggests leaders need to go beyond the business outcome by becoming a coach and a mentor. She continues: “Behind the essence of coaching and mentoring lies the engagement factor – taking a personal interest in the people, bringing out the best in them to deliver the highest performance and to be there for them. When anyone, at any level, is able to win respect and engage a colleague – not as just another ‘digit’ but as an individual, they’re a good leader in the making.”

It is one universal truth that apart from their technical competence and industry-specific knowledge, good leaders need to have a whole range of interpersonal and analytical skills.

Singaporean leaders are faced with a range of additional challenges. “Besides the obvious – the ethnic diversity in their organisations – Singaporean leaders have to manage companies that have overseas parents and subsidiaries, and workers located in various parts of the world all operating under different institutional and regulatory influences, not to mention overseas suppliers and customers. Consequently, the people they lead and interact with have very different assumptions about how they should be led and managed, the nature of their relationship with the organisation and even their most fundamental beliefs about what good leadership is and is not. Simply understanding these differences is a challenge in itself,” says Donald L Ferrin, associate professor, Singapore Management University (SMU). Leading well in the midst of all these different expectations requires a blend of knowledge, insight, experience and creativity, he adds.

While leadership culture among the workforce in Singapore is going through an interesting transformation, the outcomes are yet to be seen. “For the rising Singaporean talent, good leadership would mean setting an example of recognising your own resourcefulness, and combining your talent with that of others to spark increased creativity,” says Matias Komulainen, Nokia’s regional manager, human resources for Asia-Pacific.

“Leaders and aspiring leaders in Singapore have to ask themselves whether they want to keep on building upon tried and tested leadership practices and importing western concepts, or whether they are willing to encourage themselves and others to create something uniquely Singaporean. As a small but successful and well-recognised country with a varied culture, Singapore stands an excellent chance of showing the way of a new Asian style of leadership,” maintains Komulainen.

**Why do leaders need training?**

Today more and more companies are fast recognising that good leaders are not ‘born’ or simply a product of the ‘school of hard knocks’, but rather are ‘made’ through a range of development.

Readiness to benefit from coaching, no matter who provides it, is key to achieving sustained greatness as a leader. “As I see it, leadership is very much about applying your personal characteristics, insight and spirit into bringing about results through others. Therefore, renewing your insight and spirit, and adjusting your personal characteristics to rapidly changing conditions is critical. Receiving coaching and leveraging upon it is one of the most powerful ways of boosting that renewal,” says Komulainen.

In today’s knowledge-based economy, successful leaders have to constantly learn and upgrade themselves to prevent career plateau. “The minute a leader stops learning or being coached, that marks the beginning of their leadership downfall,” says Low Peck Kern, Agilent’s human resource director for Singapore and Thailand. She believes that as the marketplace becomes more global, leaders have to keep an open mind if they are to lead their organisations into “new frontiers and higher profitability”. Worldwide, Agilent has senior leadership programs at various levels to cater to the many needs of its senior leaders and to drive business results through effective leadership.
Chan agrees that leaders must always be learning. “Coaching in its basic form is a reflective conversation. Formal coaching initiatives are one form, but it’s more important for leaders to have deep and reflective conversations at regular intervals and at different milestones of their lives. The coach could be a formal coach, their boss, their peer or someone they trust. The essence is the same – to help them be more effective, and continue to mentor and lead others even though the approach taken can be different.”

Where does HR fit in?
Needless to say, organisations that lack effective leaders face an uncertain future. “Given the critical importance of leadership, I’d say that it is senior management who should lead the effort to identify and develop leaders organisation-wide,” says Ferrin.

Moreover, HR plays a crucial role in this too. If senior management hasn’t already made leadership development a high priority, HR can take the initiative and get it on the radar screen. “The role of HR is to coach the business line to formulate a specific business case for leadership development within the organisation. The main challenges lie in maintaining a mutually committed partnership for genuine leadership renewal, avoiding leadership development ending up on a no-man’s land between distinct organisational domains, where nobody feels a genuine ownership and dedication for it,” says Komulainen.

Low echoes Komulainen’s stand. “I’d say HR has a big part to play in building the business case for implementing leadership skills development. Generally, leaders are measured based on their results and although leaders always say that people are their key asset, they do not have a clue how to measure how leadership effectiveness impacts the talent pool, which in turn translates to business results.”

Under a microscope?
Having effective leaders is crucial for identifying the goals you are going to pursue as an organisation or work unit, and then motivating your people to pursue them. The only way you can pick the right goals and pursue them effectively is to identify and develop your leadership competencies with the organisation.

What should leaders be leading?

- Building constituency. Place importance on building networks of trust and support with a wide range of internal and external associates.
- Maximising values. Provide direction and motivation by articulating through words and actions the values you believe in.
- Knowing yourself. Gain respect, support and personal fulfilment by understanding yourself and staying true to your values.
- Making sense of experience. Promote effectiveness by helping to interpret the events and challenges being confronted.
- Challenging experience. Stimulate great achievements by raising the bar for yourself and your organisation.
- Visioning. Inspire others by imaging and articulating vivid pictures of the future.
- Mentoring. Bring about growth by developing others and yourself.

*Ranked in terms of emphasis by leaders in Singapore.*

“At Singapore Management University, we’re seeing an increasing number of companies who have gone to the trouble of identifying 50-100 high potential leaders worldwide, and then putting a plan in place to groom them for their future leadership roles. Note that these ‘high potentials’ are drawn not only from all over the world, but also from all functional areas of the organisation, not just operations,” Ferrin says. NOL and Intercontinental Hotels Group are two examples, he says, of companies that have flown their high potential leaders to Singapore for several weeks of formal training at SMU. While this is a substantial investment for a company, they realise the payback is also significant. “Besides the obvious benefit of providing ‘high potentials’ with additional technical and leadership skills through classroom training, it also allows them to develop informal relationships with each other that are
invaluable for spreading best practices and coordinating activities within their global organisations,” notes Ferrin.

Another factor to consider is the loss of high potential leaders to competitors. By labelling them as “high potentials”, he says, and investing in their development, you are much more likely to keep hold of them.

**Scoring goals**
Whatever leadership change and development you want to implement has to be intertwined with your organisational goals. It has to be considered in many contexts, from attracting talent to identifying the future leadership potential you already have in-house, or renewing your more seasoned leadership resources.

Nokia is certainly one company that has grown enormously successful due to a clear vision of innovation and leadership that has permeated all aspects of the business. And

Komulainen is passionate about his role in facilitating the development of leaders. “In my leadership vision I look forward to the challenge of more and more people, and goods and services being mobile globally in the future, while people increasingly value a sense of belonging and meaningfulness to contribute their best,” he says. “When aspiring for great levels of innovation and sustained results, this opens up vast opportunities for developing leaders with a focus on their people, and a genuine sense for making a difference together with them, no matter what their line of work. And, especially in the APAC context, I’m excited about the opportunities of new talent from the area redefining Asian leadership culture, more independently from the standardised business school and corporate models of the US or Europe.”

Leaders are always being examined under a microscope. Their behaviours are observed, discussed and dissected by their employees as well as a myriad of others outside their business. Leading an organisation, large or small, is not an easy task. As Bennis notes: “Exemplary leaders never forget that they must ultimately take their best shots and create a climate that tolerates missed shots, yet demands that everyone continues to take them. Moving from talk to action is imperative, but especially in the times we live in, it requires commitment, enterprise, curiosity and courage.” In one word, it requires leadership.