INTRODUCTION

Today’s organisational environment and reality is one of complexity and uncertainty. Hardly anywhere is this more present than for leaders in international public organisations. Gone are the days of relatively stability, secure resources and predictable work objectives and arrangements. Today, leaders in international public organisation face constraints and pressure to perform better with less in environments that are characterised with an increasing complexity of expectations and involved stakeholders. The operating environment is more than ever crisis-prone and complex. Collaborative behaviour with all the other players in this increasing crowded environment of agencies, governments, NGOs, local initiatives, etc. is or will become the norm. Donors, sponsors and society as a whole will want to monitor the investments and to be sure they receive the service requested.

This means that there are new challenges but also potential opportunities for the successful leader. The skills and qualities to succeed as a leader in today’s international public organisations are changing as well. Or rather, we would say that a set of personal and professional skills and qualities must be added on top of the already existing skills-set in order to become a successful leader in today’s international public organisations.

This white paper contains a brief description of the key challenges leaders in international public organisations face and some of the essential skills leaders today are expected to master in order to successfully navigate in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment.

Professional and Organisational Leadership Trends in International Public Organisations

What it takes to be an effective leader today is quite different from what it took to be an effective leader in an international public organisation just a decade ago.
Moving from an environment of stability to an environment of complexity and constant change requires new leadership skills and qualities. While leaders in the private sector already have been operating in these environments for some time, leaders in international public organisations now face the same challenges of dealing with increasing pressure and expectations to obtain results. International public organisations might not be driven by an objective of profit. However, international public organisations are as result driven as any private organisation. Today there a pressing need to achieve improved efficiency and effectiveness with limited resources.

However, being results-driven and being able to increase organisational effectiveness and efficiency is not the only challenge today’s leaders face. Today’s leaders have to operate with a keen awareness of an increasingly complex stakeholder situation. The stakeholders for whom they are responsible and whom they serve are in some ways less clearly defined than they are for private organisations. Both are ever more responsible to an increasing number of stakeholders, such as interest groups and NGOs and society as a whole. However, unlike leaders in the private sector, the international public leader does not always have the clarity of who their ‘real shareholders’ are. Leaders in international public organisations must therefore have a high level of diplomatic and political skills, a clear picture of the objectives he or she tries to achieve, as well as what success means in his or her role. For example, what is the value the organisation provides for those it is responsible to and for those it offers its service to? Finally, leaders must continuously consider ways to improve their service to the different stakeholder groups.

Effective leadership is without doubt a challenging task. It requires a leader who is mentally agile, flexible and willing to re-new and continuously learn. He or she must also be able to create an equally agile, flexible and learning organisation that continuously can improve and change its focus when needed. Based on MCE’s years of working closely with international public organisations worldwide, on our work with highly successful leaders as well as on our research, we have identified a set of Organisational Leadership Qualities and Personal Leader Characteristics that are particularly essential for any leader who wants to excel in today’s international public organisations, as discussed below.

Organisational Leadership Qualities

![Organisational Leadership Qualities Diagram]

**Cultural Awareness**: The first thing leaders realize as they move to an international public organisation is the difference of leading in a national versus an international context. As if leadership is not challenging enough, the leaders in international
public organisations are faced with the challenge of 1) how to effectively lead and get the best out of having a culturally diverse workforce, and 2) how to navigate often sensitive political and national agendas effectively in order to get things done. It is therefore hardly surprising that many leaders in international public organisations are quite diplomatically and politically astute as well as sensitive to cultural differences.

We have noticed, however, that awareness of cultural and national differences sometimes results in not getting things done as effectively as they could be done. This is often because of fear of appearing cultural insensitive. Frequently, the result is that leaders either avoid the needed confrontations or that they surround themselves with colleagues of the same nationality for political or comfort reasons. In today's increasingly complex and uncertain environment, effective organisational leaders need to embrace collaborations within and outside the organisation; building networks and partnerships as well as being able to create diverse and agile organisations. To master that requires an ‘organisational cultural intelligence’. The leaders who understand how to truly capitalise on cultural diversity in every aspect will have an edge in today's environment.

Change Leadership: A success criteria for anyone leading under increasing pressure in a complex and uncertain environment is the leader's ability to increase the organisation’s effectiveness and efficiency, either through initiating new solutions and/or improving existing policies and programmes. Increasing the organisation's effectiveness and efficiency requires an adaptable organisation. It is therefore hardly surprising that one essential quality is the leader's ability to become a master in leading change.

Being a change leader includes a personal change-oriented mind-set as well as capability to lead the organisation through needed changes, and finally, it includes the ability to turn the entire organisations and its staff members into an agile and adaptable organisation.

The effective change leader is aware that change must start with himself or herself. The leader lives by the words of Ghandi: 'Be the change you want to see in others'. In other words, if the leader aspires to create an agile and change-ready organisation, he or she must first demonstrate agility and readiness to change. It requires maturity as a leader and a high level of self-awareness and willingness to let go of old habits and ways of seeing things in order to become curious, open-minded and striving for continuous personal growth and development.

The effective change leader is aware that no organisation, no matter how successful it has been in the past, can live on previous achievements. International public organisations are under pressure to perform and demonstrate their added value for a large group of stakeholders and only an agile and flexible organisation will be able to do that.

While change can come from every part of a flexible organisation, it is vital for the effective change leader to pay special attention to the leadership team's functioning. The leadership team sends a signal to the rest of the organisation about how things really work within the organisation. It is therefore important that the leader builds a leadership team culture that demonstrates the behaviours and attitudes the leader wishes to experience at all levels within the organisation.

Collaboration: Interacting with different stakeholders and engaging in public or public-private joint undertakings have been a reality for many international public organisations for years. Hence, not surprisingly, the leader and the organisation's ability to engage in constructive collaboration with different stakeholders is a crucial skill.

However, in today's environment, the organisation's relatively stable environment and partnerships have been replaced by a need for the organisation to further increase its collaboration in new ways and with new, and at times, unlikely partnerships, whether they be with other public organisations, NGOs or other interest organisations, local governments and/or private organisations.

Today's effective leaders are aware that collaborative efforts are more essential than ever and that it means continuously nurture existing relationships as well as constantly being on the outlook for new and potentially unlikely partnerships. This requires a different mind-set for the leader and the entire organisation than previously experienced. Today, leaders must insure that their organisation understands how to use new potential collaborative opportunities through being active in social media and engaging with local partners with specific knowledge in order to create new ways of working as well as improving how the organisation performs existing tasks.

Decision-Making: In international public organisations, political and national considerations play an inherent part in many decisions. As a result, the standard decision-making model for most of these organisations is based on consensus.

An often-criticised aspect of many consensus-driven decisions is that they are bureaucratic and time-consuming. In a fast-changing environment, speed is of the essence. A long consensus-driven decision process will obviously hinder an organisation's
agility and ability to respond quickly to changes in the environment. Today, organisational leaders must decide which decision-making model to apply for the different decisions. There will be decisions where the speed of the decision is important and where a consensus-driven decision will slow things down unnecessarily.

However, the reality for many international public organisation leaders is that due to their political nature, many decisions will be based on the consensus-driven decision-making models. They are bound by the different political stakeholders’ expectations and interests. Therefore, a critical skill for any effective leader in international public organisations is the ability optimise every aspect of the consensus driven decision making process. The effectiveness of any decision is a function of the quality of the decision itself and the decision’s successful implementation.

The quality of the decision is a result of several factors, such as the leader’s ability to build relationships, networking, negotiating, staying open-minded and flexible as well as challenging the way we are thinking in order to avoid the often unconscious pitfalls and flaws we possess when making decisions. Effective leaders invite others to challenge their thought process because they realise constructive confrontations lead to improved decision-making.

Successful implementation is a result of understanding why people resist or reject other’s suggestions. Of course, some resistance is due to real differences in objectives. However, resistance is psychological as well and is due to resistance towards the other person or due to the process. Today’s effective leader is aware of this and knows how to include, respect and bond with both internal and external stakeholders in order to improve the effectiveness of the decision at hand.

A Professional Leadership & Management Culture: Today, international public organisations are expected to do more with less. They are expected to be agile and able to respond to changing demands. They are expected to have engaged and change-ready staff members. It is no longer enough to have highly technically skilled people as managers within an international public organisation. Today, a professional leadership and management culture is required. International public leaders need to be alert to the external and the internal effectiveness of their organisations. This means that the leader needs to ensure that the entire organisation is aligned around its core purpose, that it stays open to new opportunities and that it executes existing strategies and policies effectively and efficiently. It requires leaders who ensure the effective flow and transparency of communication; who ensure that managers at all levels create engagement and involvement among staff members; who ensure alignment around processes and procedures and who, finally, ensure that the organisational culture becomes one of continuous learning and adaptability in order to constantly improve its service level.

Effective senior leaders are aware that the best way to create a professional leadership and management culture is to ensure that the senior leadership team itself sends the right signals to the rest of the organisation. It sends a message of openness to learning in order to create an adaptive and engaging leadership culture.

Furthermore, international public leaders are aware of the often complex political aspects involved when, for instance, hiring new staff or when restructuring the organisation. While political and national interests often play an essential role for these organisations, the effective leaders are pro-active and they use their influence skills and savvy to ensure that new senior staff members are hired for their potential as leaders, and not merely due to political or national reasons. They look for leaders who can move the organisation forward and who can motivate staff members through their leadership styles. It is no surprise that in general, the best leaders attract the best talents and that these leaders are able to get the best out of others.

Create Leadership at Every Level within the Organisation: As the overall goal for today’s international public organisations is to continuously improve effectiveness and efficiency with limited resources, succeeding in establishing or continuously improving the above five competence areas will be increasingly important. However, none of the above will be possible unless the leader is able to push a sense of leadership down to every level within the organisation. In a complex environment, no one has all the answers. Good ideas at times come from unsuspected sources. Hence, it is crucial that the whole organisation feels engaged, committed and involved in improving existing policies or even in contributing to future opportunities. Pushing leadership down to every level within the organisation does not mean that everybody has the formal authority to make certain decisions. However, it does mean that there is the right amount of accountability at every level and that staff members are engaged, take pride and are responsible for finding ways to improve services and policies further.
Personal Leadership Characteristics

Above, we described six organisational leadership characteristics that leaders in international public organisations need to pay attention to in particular. In this part of the white paper, we want briefly to summarise a set of key skills that our research and experience indicate as being important for today’s leaders in international public organisations.

One conclusion from our work with highly effective leaders in today’s international organisations is that the complexity of today’s environment definitely has increased the demands of international public leaders. The result is that the personal leadership skills and qualities required for today’s leaders have evolved in line with the increasing demands. Today, it requires a leadership that is complex and nuanced.

Or as one senior manager in an international public organisation stated: ‘It seems that what is required for leaders today is often apparently mutually exclusive leadership qualities in order to lead in today’s international public organisations’.

The essential sets of leader qualities mentioned below do, in fact, appear to be mutually exclusive at times. However, they illustrate the challenges leaders face today and the fact that the required quality of effective leadership is a balancing act. Effective leadership is a result of the right match between the leader’s qualities and the environment in which he or she leads. Leaders today need to demonstrate personal agility. Leaders need to be highly self-aware, adaptable and able to switch between handling detailed technical challenges and taking a helicopter view of what is going on within the organisation. It takes a leader who is continuously open to learning and growing while simultaneously being open to feedback from his or her surroundings.

The following set of leader qualities is by no means exhaustive. It does, however, include leader qualities that are essential for leading in today’s uncertain and complex environment.

- **Perseverance and Flexibility**: In an uncertain world with limited resources, having perseverance and being flexible become critical skills. Perseverance refers to believing in your direction and overcoming hardships and stumbling blocks as you move towards your objectives and goals. Perseverance is obviously a critical leadership skill. Not many have achieved their objectives and goals without failing and/or meeting resistance during the process. However, a dogged pursuit of a goal can result in the leader becoming narrow-minded and stubbornly resistant to changing direction when needed. The effective leader, therefore, has a healthy flexibility and is ready to listen to others and change course when needed.

- **Influencing Skills and Being Influenced**: Successful leaders possess effective influencing skills. It is hard
to imagine any leader succeeding without having the capability to convince others and get them to adapt to his or her suggestions of the direction that needs to be taken. However, in a complex and uncertain world, there are no easy answers, and no one has all the results. There is an inherent danger of being ‘too skilled’ at influencing others, in particular when this skill is combined with a strong, powerful and passionate personality that many senior leaders possess. The danger is that the leader pushes forward with his or her idea without being open to the possibility that other options might be better. The leader creates a tunnel vision and the followers are persuaded by the leader’s influencing skills and personality. The result is that the leader convinces others of the direction to take even if that direction might not be the optimal decision. The most effective leaders are aware of this danger and they are able to step back, to be non-judgmental of other ideas and to allow others to influence them.

**Self-confidence and Humility:** Believing in one’s ability and effective leadership go hand-in-hand. Self-confident leaders are self-assured in their own judgments, power and abilities. They have the courage to make the tough decisions. Hence, it is hardly surprising that self-confidence, or rather having a positive self-regard, is an important quality of effective leaders. If you do not believe in your own message, then why should your staff member or stakeholders? However, too much self-confidence can lead to a perception of arrogance and a false belief that the leader has all the answers to every question and challenge. The result can be high dependence on the leader and the belief that he or she has all the answers. This can even lead to a feeling of isolation for the leader. In today’s complex environment, this can create an unsustainable situation that can lead to lost opportunities. Thus, while the most effective leaders are high on self-confidence; they also possess a healthy dose of humility. They realise that they do not have all the answers and that great achievements are due to staying open-minded and harnessing the power of a collaborative intelligence.

**Organisational Awareness and Politics:** Socially intelligent leaders are aware of the dynamics and emotions around them. In the context of organisational awareness, this translates into an awareness of what is going on in the often complex and diverse political and national agendas and the turf wars that take place between individuals and departments.

Effective leaders realise the difference between the formal organisational chart and the informal organisation. The informal organisation is where the power games take place. These often have more importance than the formal organisation chart would indicate. Political astute leaders know that real power and influence often doesn’t come from their formal authority but rather from understanding the power dynamics that exist within their organisations. They also understand how to make these dynamics work together for the best of the organisation. The critical leadership skill required here is social intelligence, which is the leader’s ability to gain awareness of what is going on around him or her and the ability to build trusting relationships and astutely analyse the organisational dynamic.

**Engage and Detach:** There is a fundamental in leadership that says: ‘Followers follow the effective leader, not because they have to but because they want to’. Engaging and inspirational leaders are passionate about what they want to achieve. It is the leader’s passion, engagement and personal conviction that make people want to follow the leader.

However, passion and engagement combined with a strong leadership personality can also lead to a dysfunctional dependence on the leader. At a certain point, the leader will need to step aside and allow action to be taken at all levels within the organisation. It can be very difficult to detach when one is very engaged and passionate. The leader’s ability to detach does not mean that the leader becomes laissez-faire or ‘disappears’ from the scene. It means that the leader allows the group to solve its own problems while the leader role becomes more of a coach and mentor who leads by asking questions and listening rather than directing. If the followers get ‘stuck’, the leader will have to step back in and through inspiration, engagement and the appropriate leadership styles reignite the followers’ commitment.

**Communication and Listening Skills:** None of the above can be achieved without effective communication and listening skills. Effective communication means the ability to engage in transparent, open and frequent dialogue with staff members and stakeholders. Effective communication helps avoid misunderstandings, alleviate potential hidden agendas and build trust in the leader. It is paramount for creating clarity about the direction and expectations the leader has. The most successful leaders feel comfortable applying the two fundamental ‘laws’ of communication: ‘The meaning of the message lies with the receiver of the message’, and ‘One cannot not communicate’. Effective leaders are aware of the frequency with which to communicate and the format and methods to choose when communicating to others. They apply these consciously in order to create clarity, adapt their communication style and format to the audience in order to achieve the intended results.
Moreover, effective leaders are aware of the importance of effective listening. The skill of listening is an often overlooked quality. But it turns out to be one of the most important skills among highly effective leaders around the world. Good listening skills make all the above mentioned professional and organisational leadership trends possible. Effective listening is a sign of respect and it helps build trust. It furthermore increases the leader's decision-making skills. The most successful leaders have a high degree of conceptual intelligence. They are capable of creating clarity in fuzzy information. Carefully listening to staff-members’ and stakeholders’ inputs helps the leader discover patterns, opportunities and ideas about the best way forward.

Summary

Today's leaders in international public organisations are faced with the challenge of leading in an environment characterised by complexity, uncertainty and increased pressure from all stakeholders to produce results with limited resources. As described in this paper, this new reality requires a different skillset of the leader than what was required just a few years ago. Today, success as a leader in international public organisations means being adaptive, flexible and being able to lead change and get the best out of others. In order to achieve that, today's leaders need to possess a wide range of technical, political, adaptive, social intelligence and conceptual skills in order to drive for results, build networks and collaborate in order to engage staff members and stakeholders along the way.

White Paper – Leadership in International Public Organisations

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