

The Way Ahead Series: Practical Advice for Leaders, by Leaders

# How to Secure Leaders That Will Succeed

A new series of articles, written by many, and presented by Richard Moore, CEO of Mercuri Urval



**Mercuri Urval**

It's All About People™



# FOREWORD

In our 'Way Ahead' series of articles, Richard Moore leans on the track record of Mercuri Urval's consulting team and insights from our global network to offer practical advice on important topics that CEOs and Boards face, through and beyond Covid-19. This article addresses what is perhaps *the* key question Boards and CEOs face:



**What leadership do we need? How to secure leaders that will succeed**

Other articles in 'The Way Ahead' series address important associated challenges:



**What are the new conditions we face and what opportunities can we see? How to navigate the best course**



**What changes do we need to make in our organisation? How to organise for success**



**What will improve leadership results in our organisation? How to strengthen leader performance**



**Read more about this and the additional advice and stories from leaders who already commented**

## Join in, please

I also invite you to continue to **add to the advice we present, as contributors**. With your active involvement we leaders can share more practical advice that makes for stronger organisations in the future. Please join in and send us your stories and advice, so we may include it in this series.

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# What leadership do you need?

## How to secure leaders that will succeed in three steps

Your organisation's Way Ahead relies on effective leaders. Despite many well-researched attempts there is no standard profile of an effective leader.

**It is difficult to predict who will succeed.** Yet now, more than ever, you need leaders who will succeed.

Leaders who know what they are doing and who can take care of your people and achieve results are in high demand in times of change. It's not only you that are in need. **Demand has just gone up, but supply has not.**

Volatility and uncertainty mean fewer leaders will perform well. New risks, opportunities and problems come and go at breakneck speed making the job more difficult. At the same time demand on your leader's performance increases, their contribution is ever more obvious, and they may prefer a change themselves. **It is highly likely you will need to consider new leadership soon.**

Acquiring the leaders that will be highly effective in your new context becomes more important, urgent and demanding than ever. It is arguably your greatest opportunity, and your largest business risk. To ensure you acquire effective leaders follow these three steps in a well-managed professional project:

1. **Understand precisely what you need:** How to see past distraction and know what leaders you really require?
2. **Attract the most relevant leaders:** How to find and engage the best possible leaders for your organisation?
3. **Select predictively:** How to correctly choose leaders that will perform immediately and create a successful future?

## 1. Understand precisely what you need

*"Winners focus, losers spray" – Michael LeBoeuf, business professor and author*

An effective leader correctly understands their current conditions, determines the right opportunities and decides how to organise for success in a given context. They will stick to the things that need to be done and secure the most able and willing followers. And so they will have huge

and immediate impact on results. The ineffective leader will decrease the company value, undermine your culture and as a worst case – given long enough to do their work – will erase your enterprise altogether.

Understanding the leadership you need can be made simple. Effective engagement and selection of a new leader will come later, if a clear understanding of precisely what you need is defined at the start. To begin the project, decide on your most important **expected results, the context in which the leader must perform and the tasks they must succeed in**. Then by connecting these three, you will create the profile of the leader you need for your organisation.

### Expected results

Fortunately, although every leadership challenge is unique, the scope of results your leader must achieve is not. Analyse the scope, and then decide what matters most:

1. **Customer (or citizen for public sector):**  
Lead value creation, innovation and alignment to common purpose and direction
  - What result do you need to achieve for customers?
  - How will you relate to customers, stakeholders, competitors and society?
2. **Economic:** Lead actions to set goals, achieve income and make the right decisions about capital, resources and costs
  - What financial results do you need to achieve?
  - What assets do you need to develop?
3. **Organisational:** Lead the right organisation design, select able people who can perform and grow and shape your culture
  - What organisational vision and goals do you need to reach?
  - What people, set up and process will work best?

Within this scope, the essence of superior leader performance in your organisation can be crystallised. Is it a transformation of how you operate, or to drive out costs? Is it a repositioning towards your customers or growth through organic means or acquisition? Once you know precisely which

result is most important and agree it with all key stakeholders, the context in which your leaders must perform can be considered.

### Leader performance context

The main reason why there is no single profile for effective leaders, is that each context in which leaders must perform is unique. The environment in which the leader must succeed needs to be properly understood:

- Ecosystem – customers, suppliers, partners and society
- Colleagues – people, teams and culture (including how the new leaders own personal characteristics may impact on these)
- Organisation set up – structure, systems and processes
- Future – possible changes and known strategic goals and plans

Post Covid-19 every leader's context has changed of course – already now and further so in the months to come. The effect of the recent disruption on leaders and followers may be profound, but most likely there is no 'new normal' for all of us – but rather versions of change for each of us.

### How has the furnace of Covid-19 forged your context?

## ALTERED REALITY

Leaders in our network, report very different perspectives on both forced changes and new opportunities

### Culture change – we are all in this together. Or are we?

The experience of living through and beyond Covid-19s impact has been very different for every leader and follower in your organisation. Some have been furloughed, others have been given more work to do with the same or less reward. There is naturally some process of healing and re-adjustment when your colleagues come back together. And for some organisations solidarity, team spirit and cultural bonds have been able to be strengthened. What scars will need to heal, and how will leaders support the process? **Culture will need high attention.**

### Working practices change – we are all digital now. Or are we?

When and how will we meet again? To what extent has your employee, customer and stakeholder behaviour changed? Have new digital working habits been formed? What about traditional pre-19 offices, do you need those? Whatever else has happened, a lot has been learned and a lot of new ways of working have been made possible. And some will like it, and others will not. If you have operated satisfactorily or even very well with home working, on what grounds do you expect buildings to be important in the future? If people need to meet at your workplace still, how will that be different now? **New ways of working should be established.**

### Environmental change – some are homeworking, others are at home trying to work

Domestic realities and individual- family situations are now workplace issues. Whilst some are lucky enough to be able to work productively at home, many others are at home with full hands desperately trying to be productive. What is work life balance post-19 for those that need to attend a workplace, and those that do not. **The key to future productivity and flexibility is not the same.**

### Supply chains change – just in time or just in case

Is it more valuable and cost effective to reduce inventory and have a Just in time supply chain, or rather is greater resilience required? **The balance between lean and resilience shifts.**

### Management change – harnessing the breakout of innovation whilst maintaining control

We should expect, after rapid change and disruption, to see a period of innovation. At the same time many organisations need to control and manage costs, resources or supply chains with a closeness and detailed follow up that is unprecedented. Leaders need to ensure innovation is captured and great ideas are put to use – whilst not becoming distracted from the results and task that matter most. **The balance between inclusive innovation and disciplined focus changes.**



Understanding your context, and how it is changing, means the most important leader tasks and the effort required to accomplish them can be determined. To succeed your leaders will rely on relevant functional expertise and will need to perform well in the most vital leader tasks:

**Formulate strategy:** The task to solve certain problems and decide on future actions – What strategic choices does your leader need to make and when?

- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Direction setting

**Execute strategy:** The task to relate to and influence individuals and teams – What change does your leader need to secure and how?

- Stakeholder communication and interaction
- Aligning and shaping behaviour
- Motivating action

**Manage operations:** The task to ensure performance – What must your leader make happen and how?

- Planning, budgeting and resource allocation
- Employing and developing
- Organising and controlling

In summary, to create the profile of the leader you need, these are the essential points to work through:

- ✓ **Your expected results:**
  - What result(s) must be achieved in this position
  - Which result(s) are most important?
- ✓ **Your leader(s) performance context:**
  - What is the culture to fit and shape?
  - What is the organisation to perform within?
- ✓ **Your required leader(s) task:**
  - What is the size of this leader position?
  - What are the most important tasks in this position?
  - How will the position demands change in the future?

With these essentials in hand, you precisely know what leader you need to find and attract. Now the search for relevant candidates moves your project on to the next stage.

For more insight into how to understand the expected result and organise for success, please read the other [articles in this series](#).

## 2. Attract the most relevant leaders

*“Go after the cream of the cream” – Apple founder and former CEO, Steve Jobs*

It's not what you know or who you know – **it's how you reach who you need to know**. In the 'old normal', many thought it was enough to have leaders with similar leadership experience who would take on the job. Your personal network, or that of

a contact, was regarded as enough to find a new leader. But the enlightened always knew securing an effective leader was the most important act to get right. Now, with leadership at a premium we all need to set the bar to its maximum height.

To be able to employ the most effective leader possible, you will need to know what relevant leader talent is available to you. This necessitates a profound knowledge of where such leaders can be found and an analytical and systematic approach to map them. Only a targeted, engaging and adaptive search will work. Thorough enough not to miss suitable candidates, focussed enough to not waste time on those who cannot perform the vital tasks you need:

- **Research strategy.** Based on the vital tasks and performance context, what leader profile is searched for?
  - Track record: What experience and prior achievements are necessary?
  - Demonstrated competence: What skills abilities are needed?
  - Prior culture impact: What fit and leadership impact is required?
  - Evidence of further potential: What abilities beyond short term requirements are desirable?
  - Motivation: What aspirations would ensure a fit to this opportunity?
  
- **Leader mapping and analysis.** Where are the leaders you need?
  - Who knows the network of leader talent you need to target?
  - What is the best way to map relevant talent?

- Business context
- Organisation
- Role and function
- Geography
- What similar roles and organisations are irrelevant and so should be discounted?

- **Targeted attractive offer.** Why should the right leader be open to join you?
  - How will they be appreciated?
  - What is appealing in your culture and team?
  - How can they have impact and develop a vision?
  - What is worthy about the challenge?
  - What mark will they get to leave?
  
- **Approach tactics.** How do you engage the most relevant leaders?
  - How to make contact in the most interesting way?
  - How to influence your target to be interested in you?
  - What messages to communicate, when and by who?

With a systematic and complete mapping identified, you will have identified and engaged candidates with relevant professional background and track-record. But which leader should you entrust with the keys to your organisation's future?

### 3. Select predictively

*"The best way to predict your future is to create it" – Abraham Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> President of the US*

Unless you have achieved something valuable, you have not been a good leader. But everything your effective new leader needs to create will be in the future. Whilst analysing the past and the current has brought you potential candidates, matching

the right leader to your context requires you to relate their achievements to a new future situation. A new future that the new leader will play a big hand in creating.

As performance in the future cannot be directly observed, the selection of a leader needs to be predictive. As the future is uncertain, and leaders are complicated, the prediction has a high risk of error.

To make an accurate prediction, selection must effectively forecast a leader's behaviour and performance in relation to your result need, context and vital leader tasks. The more these performance demands on the leader can be described in an observable and measurable way, the more accurate the predictions will be. These three steps will guide you to select an effective leader. And in following them, make sure your approach avoids a few increasingly large pitfalls by ensuring your way of working is properly regulated, data compliant and ethically sound. [Read more about those here.](#)

**Step one** is to focus on a small number of the most important facts about the leader and the performance demands. This limits the amount of distracting information to focus on the core issues:

- What does success look like and so what does it take for the leader to succeed?
- What are most decisive leader characteristics in the context where performance should be achieved?

The more valid the information considered, the more reliable and accurate the prediction of which leader will be most effective. Place special attention on:

- Track record of performance – demonstrated creation of prior results:
  - Task and content experience; demonstrated competence
  - Decision making and cognitive abilities
  - Career progress
  - Achievement
- Interpersonal behaviour – way of approaching and interacting with other people:
  - Personality and self-awareness
  - Motivation
  - Ability and will to influence others in your context
  - Strength of network

The simpler and more factual the assessment, and the sharper your focus on needed leader results, the more reliable your selection.

**The second step** is to focus on the likely shorter-term future for your new leader. In order to make effective long-term predictions, you need to first get short-term predictions right:

- What is the immediate result and task performance that is required?
- What future changes in the task are already having impact now?

If leaders fail in the beginning, they will not have the opportunity to succeed for you later. Only a leader with current success stays in a role long enough to have a longer-term impact. The best approach is to separate expectations on leader performance over time and weight nearer term predictions higher in your decision-making logic:

1. Necessary achievement in the first 6 months: What can the leader do now?
2. Necessary achievements in 2 years: What must the leader do next?
3. Longer term goals in 5 years: What longer term opportunities can the leader realise?

The closer in time the predictions are, the more accurate they will be. Success at the start is the best predictor of success much later. For leaders, future potential is built on current performance.

**The third step** is to augment the right data and facts on the leader with the right human expertise that understands the leader's future task and performance context. Effectively combining facts and data with a suitable person's judgment improves forecast accuracy.

- How can you make sure you interpret information on leaders correctly and so secure a firm and sound assessment?

In a situation like matching a leader to performance demands and context, it is necessary to handle large amounts of information. Digital tools, algorithms, 'big data' and structured methods process data in a way that minimises error.



- Track record profiling
- Systematic biographical data collection
- Psychometric tools (personality and cognitive profiling)
- Structured self-descriptions

This data will then need to be augmented by a person able to understand it fully, weight it correctly and apply it effectively to the situation the leader will face and must perform in. Specifically, someone who has expertise in making such decisions in a proper objective way, understands the leader talent market and knows how to process it through appropriate means, such as:

- Track record profiling
- In-depth semi-structured interviews
- Thorough and careful referencing

Once an expert has processed the most important information about the leader and weighted it in relation to the required result, performance context and vital leader tasks, a logical chain of arguments that form a solid prediction can be made. Reporting this recommendation allows for effective follow up with the leader and the Board or CEO later. Consistency and accuracy always increase if a suitable expert makes a clear recommendation and documents it for follow up. Professional projects are always reviewed for impact.

**In summary, the key points for successful predictive leader selection are:**

- ✓ Make sure you know what success looks like and what it takes to be successful - the fewest near term criteria possible
- ✓ Find out which of the accessible information is most useful and how this information relates to success
- ✓ Make sure that you get access to the most relevant information, wherever possible as a fact
- ✓ Plan the process and reassure that the most important information gets appropriate focus
- ✓ Make sure that you interpret information correctly using appropriate data and a suitable expert
- ✓ Report predictions on leader task performance and follow up

Following these steps will ensure the most important decision – Who will lead your organisation to future success? – is well made. Having completed the project and secured leaders that will succeed, it is now possible to accelerate their performance further. And that is the subject of the next article in our ‘Way Ahead’ series:

- ✓ **What are the new conditions we face and what opportunities can we see? How to navigate the best course**
- ✓ **What changes do we need to make in our organisation? How to organise for success**
- ✓ **What leadership do we need? How to secure leaders that will succeed**
- ➔ **What will improve leadership results in our organisation? How to strengthen leader performance**

Much of the content in this article about the changing leadership context organisations face, post Covid-19, came from fellow leaders in our network. As they did, please send your ideas, additions, questions and challenges to me, and we’ll develop our advice with your input included. And if you need expert assistance to acquire the leaders that will pave your Way Ahead to success, our team is ready to help – online, face to face, wherever you are and wherever you need us.

*Richard*

## Mercuri Urval

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### For more information

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### About Richard

Richard is Mercuri Urval's Chief Executive Officer. Richard leads the Mercuri Urval team worldwide, working closely with colleagues and clients in all sectors across Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Americas. Prior to this he has more than 15 years' experience in advising organisations in Leadership Acquisition and Business Transformation. Richard has a Masters in Psychology and is also a Board Member and Partner at Mercuri Urval.

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