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Future of Leadership in Thailand

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Abstract

Leadership across all aspects of Thailand's society is under stress. The future shape and capabilities of effective leadership in Thailand to achieve its stated goals must grow from the seedbed of its unique identity. The Paper reports on the author's original research conducted on behalf of the Thai Consulting Group APM. The research engaged a diverse pool of Thai individuals and leaders, utilizing systemic thinking and methods to illuminate the intersection of an uncertain sustainable future with the current Thai leadership norms, tendencies, and practices. The research did not start with a hypothesis or a theory to prove or disprove. The research findings are impersonal; the insights are born of the collective wisdom of the diverse participants over the months of May to October 2012. Six clusters of sustainable leadership competencies were identified as a starting point for improvement. Specific competencies most often required to improve Thai sustainable leadership identified by participants are:
• Appraising change.
• Assessing new knowledge and ideas, based not on who created them but on the quality and scope of improvement they offer.
• Egalitarian forms of collaboration and discourse.
• Utilisation of experiential knowledge.
• Working with options not solutions.
• Being accountable for performance and outcomes
• Using the reason for the organization's existence (higher purpose) and not just immediate outcomes (like profit) to shape plans and programs.
The outcomes of the study can be used to inform theoretical constructs like the Sustainable Leadership Pyramid

Keywords: Leadership, Thailand

1. Problem Statement - Scoping the Challenge

Leadership across all aspects of Thailand's society is under stress. This is true globally, however, Thailand's history and culture is unique. The future shape and capabilities of effective leadership in Thailand must grow from the seedbed of its unique identity. Blindly grafting "leadership practices" from Western business authorities fails to recognize the inherent strength and limitations of current Thai leaders. No matter wherever an organization is striving to succeed if its leadership fails so will the organization. Sooksan Kantabutra addresses the essence of this 'stress' in several of his publications on Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy[i]

Leadership is not a static resource; it must evolve to meet the challenges from changing organizational demands. Every leader faces the questions of why evolve, when to evolve and how to evolve; uncertainty about the action to take is generating significant leadership dysfunction.[ii]

The traditional expectation that leadership is created and delivered by one individual, the nominated leader, also adds to the stress. Today and tomorrow the complexity of organizations and their relationships with the world around them is too much for any one person to comprehend. More and more organizations are seeing leadership as a function of a group working collaboratively, as a core to being sustainable. The resistance of many Thai organizations to engage the idea of collaborative leadership is seen as one reason for the leadership gaps discussed in this Paper. Throughout this research we have used the term 'leader' in a way that allows it to be interpreted as a single 'nominated person' or as a 'collective of people'. However, it is emphasised that few examples exist where the gaps in leadership have been filled through the actions of a single person.

The goal has not been to find fault, but rather to illustrate where investment and transformation are needed if leaders are to embody and manifest those new sustainable leadership capabilities that the country needs to thrive. Some traditional capabilities need to be "unlearned," because they will cause trip-ups and breakdowns. Some capabilities, although counter-intuitive and counter-culture, need to be "learned" and adopted as the new norm.

Current Thai leadership is often characterized as strongly hierarchical. It is powered by wisdom drawn from past experiences and by a culture that mixes tolerance with elitism. Current Thai leadership is bounded by entrenched respect and reverence of position and age. Events in the political sphere have, in recent history, seen these characteristics aggressively challenged. New values and attitude to inherent issues such as 'corruption' and the 'common good' are disrupting entrenched 'ways of dong'. In some areas of Thai society these traditional characteristics remain dominant and generally unchallenged. *No organization can exist separate from others and people coming into an organization bring different values and attitudes implying change is near for all[iii].*

The plausible future challenges that could place many aspects of Thai life at risk come from many directions, from within and outside the national borders. There are many examples, a few of which are enumerated here. The cross borders impact of globalisation, social media and sustainability are three worldwide influences highlighting gaps in national leadership capability. Others within Thailand include, technology adoption rates; public accountability; resilience preparation; trust and confidence of employees; mental models and worldview of the common good; new communication channels; sharing of knowledge across traditional boundaries; and flexibility to respond rapidly. All these issues are being accentuated as Thailand prepares to join the Asean Economic Community (AEC) in 2015.

It is apparent that there is a need for new emphasis on collaboration and anticipation design that is only possible with higher utilization of existing staff and supporters. The pace and scope of radical shifts requires "many shoulders to carry the load." The conclusion is that future leaders in Thailand need to rapidly acquire these and other required leadership competencies and place them at the forefront of their activities along with the traditional and continuing needs for

visioning, strategizing and decision-making. *Such action will enable Thai organizations to flourish not die, in the face of any challenge.*

2. Approach

The research did not start with a hypothesis or a theory to prove or disprove. The findings were generated through non-directive techniques such as 'story-telling', Conversation Mapping and self-moderated group conversations. Participants contributed their insights anonymously, working with full transparency. Further, participants identified all the emergent issues, perceived consequences and forward directions that are reported in this paper. The use of story to generate research data follows research conducted by David Snowden[iv]. Holism rather than a reductionism epistemology has been used to shape the research[v]

2.1 The conceptual framework used to guide the research

The Future Leadership Project research presents a participant's exposition of the required future direction of Thailand's leadership capabilities. The work is based on three recurring fundamental factors – the current leadership capabilities in Thailand; the Challenges that will emerge in the coming years; and the new leadership capabilities that will be required. From the outcomes of analyzing these factors and the relationship between them we are able to postulate the leadership development programs that will be required. Sustainable leadership is considered 'as if' it is a system, in which changes to any one of the parts (categories) will have an impact on each of the other parts.[vi] This is not a 'do it once and your done' perspective. No, the process is a continuous one. The framework shown below is forever changing as new challenges emerge.

Diagrammatically the Conceptual Framework can be presented as:

| Redundant Leadership Capabilities | Transformational Leadership Capabilities | Sustainable Leadership Capabilities |

| Existing Leadership Capabilities | Future Challenges | Emergent Leadership Capabilities |
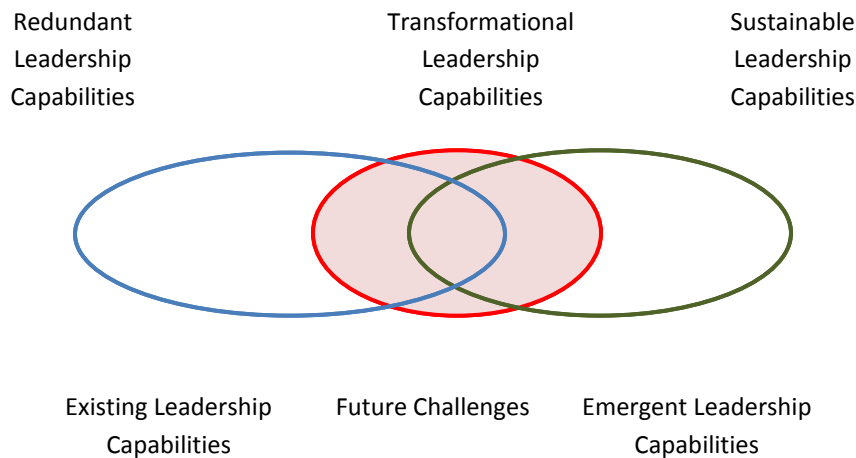
The Framework implies that we need to assemble data, which

- audits current leadership capabilities available and used by Thai enterprises and institutions;
- imagines and extrapolates the Challenges likely to be encountered by Thai enterprises and institutions in next ten plus years; and

- anticipates the leadership capabilities that will be required to guide Thai enterprises and institutions to a prosperous future through these challenges.

From a systemic perspective this means 'sweeping in' multiple and diverse knowledge, that has been gained by Thais' experientially. It is assumed that leadership is a phenomenon that is experienced by those who are led more than those who lead; therefore the audit of current capabilities should assemble the experiential knowledge of leadership as expressed by a widely diverse cross-section of Thai society. This can be accomplished using Systemic Thinking and Practice techniques such as Conversation Mapping[vii] and Story Telling[viii] activities.

Challenges can be extrapolated as long as the conditions pertaining to the basis of the extrapolation are carefully monitored to ensure they are sustained, as any change in the creating conditions will distort the understanding of the extrapolated challenge. Challenges can also be imagined, and the 'collective imagined wisdom' has proved through time to be a valuable asset for future planners. Both these forms of Challenge can be collected through the WindTunneling software[ix] in a manner that ensures the diversity and independence of participants.

Emergent Leadership capabilities can also be collected from those who proposed the Challenges by tapping their imagination about future leadership. Another source of identifying emergent leadership capabilities is by enquiring what leadership capabilities would be required to meet the nominated Challenges that are not currently available. These future leadership capabilities are being collected through the Conversation Mapping and Transformational Ideas techniques and others will be gleaned from WindTunneling activities. (For a theoretical discussion of Systemic Intervention see Midgley[x] and for the basis of collective wisdom see Surowiecki[xi].)

2.2 The research structure and process

The research is being conducted in three Phases. Phase 1 (reported here) was designed to identify the 'Gaps' in current leadership practices that are limiting the building of sustainable leadership capabilities. Phase 2 explores and develops strategies and programs to overcome the Gaps. Phase 3 aims to verify the findings of Phases 1 & 2.

Leadership in Thailand has a strong national cultural context. During the last half century the historical context has been subjected to external influences, especially in the business sector, from American and European consultants and the hundreds of Thais who have completed graduate studies outside the country. These dual forces have created unique leadership phenomena that are both a strength and weakness within Thailand.

To understand these current phenomena the Project adopted a systemic approach to data collection and the making sense of the data collected. The research engaged a diverse pool of Thai individuals with varied life experiences. Some of the participants are living temporarily overseas for study and work whereas some have never travelled outside of Thailand. Some participants have come from the professional sector, while others come from industrial or educational enterprises. This diversity of participants through their engagement with systemic thinking and practice methods helps to illuminate the intersection of an uncertain future with the current Thai leadership norms, tendencies, and practices. Munsch highlights this phenomena is his short article, *Participation, Diversity and Dominance[xii]*.

Participant's knowledge of sustainable leadership, based on their life experiences was collected in two major ways:

- Through participants' engagement in compiling conversation maps that focused on some aspect of leadership; or
- Through storytelling where each participant shared they're best and worst stories about their experience of leadership in Thailand.

In both these activities once the knowledge had been shared those contributing spent time in making sense of their collated information through identifying patterns of behavior that emerged from the whole data-set (known as a 'rich picture'). The emergent patterns were labelled and described, by the participants and became the basis for further exploration to cluster related patterns to describe categories of leadership that could be used to leverage improvement in the future capability of Thailand's leadership resources.

To give greater focus to the discussion about the future leadership needs. A second cohort of Thai nationals was asked to anonymously and transparently imagine the issues they expected would challenge Thai leaders and their capability to lead in the next ten to fifteen years. The WindTunneling software was utilised to manage this activity. Some of those issues are listed here:

- Escalation of 'social networks'
- Proliferation of 'virtual organizations'
- Emergent leaders with extensive International backgrounds
- English as the common language
- Greater exposure to the world
- Meeting international sustainability requirements
- Energy insufficiency
- More chaos from nature and politics
- More people in cities
- Finding time to address the long-term multifaceted issues
- Secrecy versus transparency
- Leadership succession in both public and private businesses
- Challenges to cultural icons
- ASEAN Free trade agreement
- Providing universal quality education
- Employment opportunities for all.

From the many issues submitted a diverse range of issues were chosen by the participants for their assessment as to the impact on Thai leadership and the probability of the issue's occurrence. From this process the six most significant issues (high impact and high probability) were used to identify where the current Thai leadership capability may be insufficient.

3.   Discussion of Findings

Project participants identified six broad categories of leadership capabilities, and their embedded competencies, from the collated research data. Each category is focused around a challenge that can be identified in different situations in all walks of Thai life. The way in which the risks and opportunities posed by these emergent challenges are managed will play a major part in shaping Thailand's wellbeing and standards of living. These aspects of leadership will also be critical in the implementation of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.

Examining how the existing patterns of leadership could manage the many complex issues emerging from both within Thailand and from wider afield identifies areas where new competencies, new processes and a new leadership culture are required. Some of these complex issues are already at the forefront of leader's responsibilities. Issues such as corruption, environmental protection, and universal education are well known. Other foreseen issues include:

- sufficient transparency that will enable people to judge the leader and their organisation's integrity
- up-to-the-minute knowledge of change and its impact in areas relevant to the arena of leadership
- interconnectivity that sees decisions in one situation having immediate and usually uncontrollable impacts on unexpected others
- separation between generations greater than the issues that separate many nations, and
- standing up and coming back after unexpected setbacks where uncertainty is the normal.

In all these circumstances some of the current fundamentals of good leadership will continue to be an essential part of the leaders set of competencies – visioning the future for those they lead; identifying strategic pathways that offer direction to reach the vision; and excellent communication skills to share a consistent message of why we need to do what we are doing. However, other fundamentals lauded in the past may now be dangerous and promote unnecessary risk to the survival of an organisation, diminish its performance or destroy confidence and trust in the leadership. Specifically we can refer to the culture of rigid command and control hierarchies; organisational silos to quarantine departments from each other; and separation of strategy, operations, risk and innovation as formerly advocated leadership principles, which will all escalate the problems associated with many of the emergent complex issues.

In this section of the paper each of the six categories is described and discussed using the material collected from the many participants. (The authors have made no attempt to interpret or infer outcomes that could be generated by the challenges. This is a matter for debate and further research in the coming months.) Some of the challenges have also been identified in other nations and where appropriate references are given to this wider work. However, while the challenges may sound the same they will impact and have unique consequences in each affected nation, in this paper we are only concerned with the way in which Thailand can respond through enhancing the capability of its pool of competent leaders.

The six gaps in leadership are:

- Leading to build resilience through uncertainty and ambiguity
- Leading with flexibility to improvise and innovate
- Leading conversations across generational boundaries
- Leading to restore and sustain confidence and trust in leaders and their institutions
- Leading into the future through continuous learning
- Leading simultaneously in both short and long term frameworks

Each category is discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Leading to build resilience through uncertainty and ambiguity.

When all the stories and conversations are viewed together the need to build resilience and appraise uncertainty stands out above all other required sustainable leadership competencies. Any business, community or government that cannot withstand discontinuities to its supply chain, productivity or markets, and rebuild from negative circumstances, will struggle to survive in this era where change is a daily occurrence not something that appears slowly over say 10 years. The idea that something is without risk is nonsense, the claim that we know all we need to know about our enterprise is dangerous, and the dependence on someone else's best practice to solve our complex problems is a recipe for failure.

Both the stories and the focused conversations reveal how many Thai enterprises, projects, and schemes have disappeared because there was no resilience capability. There was a total failure to appraise plausible future events, as both planners and implementers proceeded on the conviction that tomorrow will be the same as today.

Michael Useem[xiii] is reported in the McKinsey Quarterly's October 2012 Monthly Newsletter in an article on Future Leadership as saying: *" . . . being able to comeback from setbacks, and maybe above all, on being very good at reading the increasingly ambiguous and uncertain universe we operate in . . .is essential for organizational survival "*. He goes on elsewhere in that article to reiterate that the core capability of the new generation of leadership is building resilience – *" . . . the leadership quality of standing strong, coming back from adversity, being focused on a better place ahead even if it looks terrible now, all these facets we tend to sum up in the word 'resilience'. These are the vital elements . . . for anybody with responsibilities for just about anything . . ."*

The data in this study strongly supports the extensive studies Useem and his colleagues have completed in other parts of the world. Participants sharing their good sustainable leadership stories referred to the competency of appraising uncertain situations and noted the following competency were essential to its development:

- Good listener
- Interacted with wide range of people with different knowledge and experience of the situation
- Intellectual humility (they didn't claim to know everything)

- Explored outside the usual boundaries
- Used imagination to generate conversation about what might be
- Always created options rather than committing everything to one solution
- Have an appetite for risk taking
- Trust their intuition
- Display a sense of urgency

The resilience of strategies and programs is not accidental. Resilience requires the intentional engagement of an organization's sustainable leadership exploring plausible future circumstances through both extrapolation and imagination. Appraising potential strategic risks from unexpected sources and directions is the competency that enables strategies and programs to have built in the ability to bounce back from adversity.

3.2 Leading with flexibility to improvise and innovate

One of the emergent themes from the collated data set identifies the capability to improvise as almost a universal trait of Thai people. Referring to recent natural disasters stories revealed a deep capability to 'make do' in the most adverse situations. However, these same stories revealed that this capability was used only after the disaster was well established and was of short-term duration, rarely being the basis for longer term and innovative change. This action reinforces the perception that Thais tend to be more adaptive than creative in crisis.

Many reasons are advanced for why this apparent national trait to 'make do' is not currently recognized as a characteristic of leadership. One reason argued in Thailand is that the deeply entrenched dependence on a hierarchal decision-making process severely limits flexibility among directly affected people. That is, the first response is always, 'someone else will fix it'.

In stable and predictable circumstances the respect for hierarchy brings a high level of order and control to any situation. However, if the circumstances are uncertain or ambiguous, as the world has become, the inflexible leadership model threatens the capability of an enterprise to survive and prosper. Similarly the capability to build an innovative culture in an organization is severely curtailed by this inflexibility.

Innovation requires the free flow of ideas, some of which need to be outside the usual mindset of the organization and its mental model of the future. Hence sustainable leadership needs to support several organizational models simultaneously – the more traditional control and command model sitting beside an egalitarian model that enables the diversity of experience in the organization to have unfettered interaction.

Participants in the research process identified the following competencies as contributing to the sustainable leadership capability to be flexible, able to improvise and to innovate:

- Considered ideas as more important than materials
- Open mind to the new and different
- Judges ideas on their quality to improve not who thought of them
- Takes learning from failures of innovative ideas as well as from successes

- See no end to learning or imagination and no limit to creativity
- Have optimism in the face of adversity
- Encourage others to experiment.

For many in Thailand, flexibility is seen only as being able to adapt but it means more in this context. Therefore, it will take a very deliberate process by leaders to 'let go' and move into a space where ideas are not directly managed but are encouraged to circulate, to cross pollinate with other ideas and generate options rather than solutions to manage emergent issues.

3.3 Leading conversations across generational boundaries

The President of Israel, Shimon Peres is reported in the McKinsey publication referred to earlier, to clearly articulate the leadership category of the imperative to generate conversations across generational barriers. Peres is quoted as saying; " . . . *Today the separation between generations is stronger than between nations. Our children say, "Please don't impose upon us your arrogance – the world you created, wounded by war, corrupted by money, separated by hatred and don't try to build artificial walls between us and other young people." The young people were born in a new age, for them, modern communication is what paper and pen are for us. They can communicate much more easily and don't feel all this hidden discrimination that we were born with . . ."*

In the research behind this paper the collated information suggests that there are two distinct arenas of conversation going on everyday in Thailand. On the one hand older persons, often in positions of responsibility, are conversing about what they are doing and how this will advance their organization or the country. On the other hand, there are millions of conversational interactions between young people using the technology empowered social media where they are having a parallel conversation about what would be good for the organization and the country. However, these two conversations rarely integrate. The vocabulary used and the way ideas are expressed are increasingly barriers for the cross pollination that will be essential for effective sustainable leadership into the future.

The initiative to address this situation must be with those who currently have power to enable change, to open up new channels of interaction and sharing across the actual or imagined generational divided.

One of the most striking differences in behavior that deepens the gulf between generations is the different usage of communication media. Young people exploit the speed of Facebook and Twitter so that information is literally, simultaneously available to thousands whereas older generations use more personally directed sources. Younger generations do not hesitate to use Google or other browser apps to check out strategic information, enabling them to quickly cross-reference every claim made by a leader. Older generations do not do this but are happy to accept the word of the leader. However, often the nuances and intent of an issue are lost in the sledgehammer approach of a Google search leading to major misunderstandings and deterioration of mutual trust. Further, older leaders often claim that this behavior by younger people is an example of a 'no accountability' culture that distracts from cross-generational conversations.

The recurring theme in the research, from older participants, is that young people do not have enough experience to make responsible contributions to leadership and decision-making. Yet in most circumstance only the young people have the daily face-to-face encounters with the new world being created and recreated hour-by-hour by science and technology. Rapid change as we experience in every facet of life has not decreased the value of long-term experiences and knowledge, rather it has increased exponentially the value of recent and continuous experience of the change phenomena. The sustainable leadership challenge is to build partnerships between the generations to enable exploratory conversations that benefit from the different perspectives each can bring.

Participants in the research process identified the following competencies as contributing to a sustainable leadership capability that enabled cross-generational conversations:

- Intellectual humility, appreciating no one has all the knowledge about the changing world but everyone had some knowledge
- Diversity of perspectives is strength not a weakness
- The past is not a good foundation for understanding the future
- Historical hierarchy can limit essential organizational communication
- Creates opportunities for younger people to practice leadership skills in meaningful (real) situations
- Treats all with dignity.

The development of this sustainable leadership capability may be particularly difficult for many institutions in Thailand. The highly valued cultural phenomenon of respecting and revering age and position is a significant part of the national psyche. Young people as well as older people sustain this respect. The respect has served the country well and is entrenched in the belief system of many. However, its current form is causing a split between the generations and a significant challenge faces all Thais to develop a means by which respect can live beside change and where ideas and not people are the critical engine for future prosperity and wellbeing. One could say that traditional hierarchical leadership is the 'elephant in the room' that no wants to acknowledge and address.

3.4 Leading to restore and sustain confidence and trust in leaders and their institutions

This category has some close connections with the previous category since the breakdown in communication between generations is one of the underlying factors that has led to a global collapse in confidence and trust of leaders and their leadership practices. Restoring trust is a challenge being confronted by all levels of business, government and community organizations. In this case there is value in looking at the negatives – what led to the breakdown in trust and confidence over recent years.

The stories of bad experiences of leadership are riddled with references to inconsistent messaging:

- changing the story to suit the audience
- wanting to pass responsibility for failure on to others

- avoiding meaningful assessment and accountability for projects and programs, and
- striving to remain aloof from the difficulties faced by frontline people because of inaction or inappropriate action by their leaders.

In Europe and USA it is convenient to link the collapse in trust and confidence to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) it appears to have been well under way before 2008. It is more likely that the GFC brought the issue into clear focus, not just with those most affected by GFC but everywhere including Thailand. As a result the trust and confidence behaviors identified by our storytellers were given greater emphasis. Groups who do not enjoy trust and confidence in their leadership display high levels of uncertainty and fear of change, often leading to an absence of forward planning.

Trust and confidence are a sustainable leadership capability that is exclusively in the hands of the leader; trust and confidence cannot be learned out of a book. Together they are attributes that emerge out of the interaction between people, the effectiveness of their communication, their completing promises, and their transparency and consistency. Those who experience another's leadership give this capability to them. Trust and confidence are continuous indicators of the health of an organization's sustainable leadership and the viability of the organization's performance.

Participants in the research process identified the following competencies as contributing to a sustainable leadership capability that enabled trust and confidence to be re-established:

- Consistency around the messages they conveyed in public and in private
- Transparency in their dealings with others and their representation of the organization
- Evidence of continual learning about the organization, its environment and its short and long-term performance
- Listen to others at all levels of the organization
- Accept responsibility for both the successes and failures in organizational performance
- Links all they do back to the higher purpose and shared values of the organization
- Encourages teamwork and treats everyone as equals, enabling all to grow through personal relationships
- Suspends judgement while new ideas are explored

Re-establishing trust and confidence throughout an organization will require a deliberate change in the culture of accountability. Any continuance of a 'them and us' attitude is likely to thwart attempts to improve the situation. Finding the model that accommodates respect and equality will also contribute to the regeneration of trust as a much wider group becomes responsible for providing leadership. That is, the broadening of the sustainable leadership capability will be as important as ensuring processes and activities are transparent and accountable.

3.5 Leading into the future through continuous learning.

Larry Fink the CEO of BlackRock, one of the world's largest asset-management firms and in 2011 named the CEO of the Decade by the *Financial Times* describes his personal approach to leadership as "I'm still a student". One of the clearest demarcations in the research data is that between those whose see leadership as continuous learning and those who consider learning is for others, they know. The latter group do not usually claim there is nothing they don't know; just they know all they need to know to provide the leadership the organization needs.

Admitting to not knowing has been seen in many spheres of leadership as a weakness and perhaps when challenges rarely changed this may have been defensible; it is not defensible today in a world of rapid change at every level of every sector. With the level of interconnectivity between nations, businesses and communities virtually borderless change in any one place or situation has an impact on every other situation. While Larry Fink's world is that of 'big international corporations' his words are valid for everyone offering leadership: " . . . *it is imperative that all of us worldwide take the time to be a student. That's the most important lesson I've learned watching other firms. They (leaders) actual forget that their job has to evolve and change all the time, and that what worked in the past will not work in the future. In my opinion, if you're not a student, you're probably going backwards (and taking others with you)"[xiv]*.

The facts are that no one can know all that is necessary to provide the breath and depth of sustainable leadership required in times of rapid change. The call for continuous learning is also a call for team leadership. The development of the model that sees sustainable leadership as an emergent quality of the whole group not the responsibility of one person. With change having so many different contexts and diverse content, any group is now dependent on the learning, the knowledge and the wisdom of everyone in the organization.

Participants in the research process identified the following competencies as contributing to a sustainable leadership capability that enabled continuous learning to be the powerhouse of effectiveness and efficiency:

- Awareness that change outstrips a person's ability to know enough
- Argues complex issues[xv] cannot be understood from a single perspective
- Creates sessions for all to share knowledge equally
- Encourages and supports a range of learning activities
- Exposes themselves and other leaders to diverse and contentious information.

The need for continuous learning issues a challenge to Associations seeking to support leaders. One of the most valuable contributions they can make is to improve and extend the learning opportunities available to the leaders they serve. A similar responsibility falls on all institutions of learning to identify whether what they offer is the type and quality of learning that will enhance the capability of leaders. Participants in the research claimed much of what is offered by Institutions as appropriate learning opportunities was actually based in the past and not in the future, based on old paradigms of leadership not ones appropriate to a rapid changing complex world.

3.6 Leading simultaneously in both short and long term frameworks

An interesting aspect of the research was the late emergence of the concept of time[xvi] and its influence on the sustainable leadership capability of organizations in Thailand. Most of the initial data in the study was collected from Thais temporarily living and working outside of Thailand particularly in Australia, USA and Europe. The later data was collected in Thailand. Although in retrospect it is apparent that the ability to manage both short and long-term timeframes was appearing as a weak signal in early data it became a significant emergent theme when all the data was collated suggesting it weighs heavily on the experience of participants in Thailand.

According to the storytellers and Conversation Mapping participants the time management issue is the tendency to deal with the immediate situation to the exclusion of the longer-term. This is reported as a mindset that carries the general philosophical perspective that the future will look after itself (a Mai Pen Rai position). The challenge from this notion is that the future may well be tomorrow. Not engaging with the forward consequences of today's decisions can have repercussions very quickly.

As a group of senior leaders meeting to review the early outcomes of the research highlighted, both the previous category 'learning' and this category 'time' are factors of influence in all the categories. How a leader uses their time, how they accommodate different timeframes, and how they engage with other people's time is a sustainable leadership capability that will be reflected in every leadership activity.

It is interesting to note that time does not often appear in recent research about leadership in developed countries other than the footnote that there is never enough of it or in some version of Benjamin Franklin's statement 'time is money'. However, it is a recurring theme in developing countries, especially those with a strongly entrenched culture that has not been neutered by modern management theory and practice. Hence as with the issue of 'respect' Thailand will have to develop its own unique method of sustainable leadership's time capability. This is not an easy task as the pressure that Globalization and Connectivity are making 'time' in Thailand like that of the rest of the world; and thus in conflict with its traditions.

Participants in the research process identified the following competencies as contributing to a sustainable leadership capability that accommodated multiple timeframes simultaneously:

- Maintain a close link between strategic and operational
- Consider people a long term investment
- Search for future consequences of their decisions
- Move easily between the 'big picture' and immediate problems
- Take 'time out' to reflect on the demands of their immediate activities.

This research project has highlighted how time is a sustainable leadership capability that will be utilized differently in every situation influenced by and influencing the other leadership capabilities being used.

4. Participants' Conclusion

"Sustainable leadership, as with every other aspect of life, is dynamic and will continue to change as the context (environment), the knowledge and experience of people, the interconnectivity of Thailand into the global community and the complexity of issues to be resolved changes. Doing nothing is not a survival option for any enterprise. Change is hard, but we believe we can have confidence that Thai leaders will make the sacrifice to learn new capabilities to advance their work".

Endnotes

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[iv] Snowden, David J. (2000). The art and science of story. *Business Information Review* 17 (4): 215–226

[v] Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. London: Routledge.

[vi] *'as if'* is a characteristic of Soft Systems Methodology, see Checkland, P and Scholes, J. (1999) Soft Systems Methodology in Action, Chichester, Wiley and Sons

[vii] Conversation Mapping is a structured avenue to dynamic conversation. It works when the conversation is in business, government, community, NGO or education. It works when our intention is exploratory or evaluative. It works whether our purpose is learning, strategic, innovation or just sharing different perspectives. Conversation Mapping is great fun as well as serious business. It lets people listen and talk, by reading and writing through our fingertips. It happens in real time or over time, among people wherever we live. And it is fast because Conversation Mapping capitalizes on the fact that we can capture information through reading faster than we can by listening, and on the fact that all participants can talk at once without being rude or confusing. Conversation Mapping protects every contribution, no matter when it is made in the conversation, holding it for reflection and re-consideration when the ongoing meaning and learning from the conversation is being assembled. Conversation Mapping is egalitarian and lets the quality of the ideas speak not the person who made them. Anonymity works to limit the negative consequences of hierarchy. We can say what needs to be said, what we want to share and this nourishes a culture of imagination and innovation. New breath comes into the organization with the freedom of speech and the time to carefully consider other perspectives. Conversation Mapping enables all of us to create unique meaning from the 'rich picture' created by the whole conversation. It works on the principle 'all of us are smarter than any of us'…especially in today's complex world.

[viii] The Experiential Learning people gather everyday about a situation (especially complex issues) is embedded in the stories they tell about their experiences. Generally people know more than they can write or directly recall with much of this untapped knowledge being incorporated in their favorite stories. Sharing stories about the same issue reveals many new patterns of meaning, which provide insights that can be leveraged to improve the complex situation.

[ix] WindTunneling is a software program based on Systemic Thinking principles, created by Future Insight Maps Inc

[x] Midgley, G. (2000) Systemic Intervention, Philosophy, Methodology and Practice. New York Kluwer Academic Press

[xi] Surowiekcki, J. (2005) The Wisdom of Crowds. Toronto, Anchor Books,

[xii] http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.istr.org/resource/resmgr/abstracts_-_barcelona3/munsch.chantal.pdf

[xiii] Professor Michael Useem is Director of the Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

[xiv] McKinsey Quarterly - Monthly Newsletter**,** October 2012, *Leadership in the 21st Century*

[xv] For explanation on how 'complex' is used in this context see Snowden, D. & Boone, M. *A Leader's Approach for Decision Making*, Harvard Business Review, November 2007

^{xvi} Time is used in the sense that everything that happens in the current timeframe has consequences for future timeframes. A change issue today has to be managed today but also the future consequences of the change and our response to it has to be managed in terms of amending strategies, medium term plans and possibly the vision of the organization's future.