Developing Top Leaders for a Globalised Asia
Lessons from best-practice organisations in Singapore

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Human Capital Leadership Institute

The Human Capital Leadership Institute (HCLI) is a national centre of excellence that facilitates organisations in accelerating leadership development and strategic human capital management capabilities in Asia, for Asia. HCLI aims to develop global leaders to lead in Asia, and build Asian leaders for the global stage. The Institute does so by driving Pan-Asian research, creating cutting-edge executive development programs, and fostering rich networks between leaders in business, government, academia and consulting. Established in 2010, HCLI is a strategic alliance between Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, the Singapore Economic Development Board and the Singapore Management University.

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*Note: HCLI and CCL collaborated and contributed equally to this research and report.

Center for Creative Leadership

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that accelerates strategy and business results by unlocking the leadership potential of individuals and organisations. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit educational institution focused exclusively on leadership education and research, CCL helps clients worldwide cultivate creative leadership – the capacity to achieve more than imagined by thinking and acting beyond boundaries. Ranked among the world’s Top 10 providers of executive education by Bloomberg BusinessWeek and the Financial Times, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, North Carolina, with presence in Europe, Africa and Asia.

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The objective of this study is simple: to study five leading organisations in Singapore so as to uncover insights on how best to accelerate leadership development. Asia continues on a trajectory of explosive growth and offers exciting opportunities. China, India and other emerging economies are expected to continue to drive global GDP growth. One key challenge remains: How can organisations build the next generation of leaders to manage the rapid change and capitalise on growth opportunities that the region presents?

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) and the Human Capital Leadership Institute (HCLI) set out to investigate the most impactful practices for developing future top leaders in a fast-moving and complex environment like Asia.

While the need for leadership development is acute in high-growth Asia, most of the literature on this topic has been done in the West. Our research suggests that while common best practices do exist, there are also important East-West distinctions that should be highlighted. Our findings suggest that accelerating leadership development for senior leadership roles in Asia requires an appreciation for balancing and reconciling seemingly paradoxical practices.

About this Study
Five successful organisations with a strong presence in Singapore - British American Tobacco, CapitaLand, Olam, Singapore Prison Service and Unilever — were selected for our study based on being recognised as “best practice” organisations for talent and leadership development. Each were asked to nominate three types of leaders to be interviewed for our research: Future Top Leaders, Top Leaders, and HR Leaders.
We also sought to find out the type of leader needed to overcome challenges and seize opportunities in Asia. The following competencies were consistently emphasised:

1. **PEOPLE DEVELOPER** – A passion for developing others and the ability to think strategically about talent to ensure leaders are ready to fill key leadership positions.

2. **RELATIONSHIP BUILDER** – Having a genuine connection with internal and external stakeholders, and the ability to communicate, listen, and influence effectively.

3. **STRATEGIC ENABLER** – Having a macro perspective of the organisation and the environment in making decisions and empowering others to take on tasks that help execute strategies.

4. **NIMBLE ADAPTOR** – An ability to adapt to diverse situations including roles, geographies, cultures, and to embrace the rapid pace of change to uncover new opportunities.

5. **CONSTANT LEARNER** – An openness to learning from multiple sources such as superiors, peers, direct reports, and external stakeholders as well as from reflecting on experiences.

While we set out to better understand the key challenges inherent in doing business in Asia, our participants reminded us that challenges also came with opportunities. One participant described them as “two sides of the same coin”. We summarise the challenges and opportunities in Asia below:

1. **NAVIGATING THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT** – Each organisation mentioned challenges and opportunities brought on by multiple external stakeholders like governments, competitors, and partners.

2. **LEADING THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT** – Capitalising on opportunities requires changing and enhancing the way work is done: people, groups and functions need to collaborate, integrate, and align effectively. Organisations are also looking at ways to innovate through the expansion and enhancement of their services, products or operations.

3. **HAVING THE RIGHT TALENT** – Without question, the most critical challenge for these organisations is having the right talent. They are looking for individuals with the skills, knowledge, abilities, and experiences to operate in a fast-moving Asia.

### Profile of a Top Leader

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Organisational Practices for Accelerating Leadership Development

From an organisational perspective, the following are key practices for accelerating the development of future top leaders:

1. STRUCTURE CHALLENGING ASSIGNMENTS AND BUILD FEEDBACK PROCESSES — Rotational assignments are frequently used to provide experiences in different functions, geographies and roles - helping future top leaders develop a wider perspective while fostering effective support networks. At the same time, systematic processes are introduced to ensure frequent feedback.

2. PROVIDE TIMELY AND RELEVANT PROGRAMMES — Formal programmes are most impactful when the learning can be quickly applied on the job. To accelerate development, organisations in our study provide individual leaders with the autonomy to select programs on an “as-needed” basis.

3. RECOGNISE HIGH-POTENTIAL LEADERSHIP TALENT — The five organisations took pains to identify and recognise top leadership talent. They often provide these individuals with exposure to senior management, peer-to-peer forums, and pivotal assignments.
Individual Leader Practices for Accelerating Leadership Development

While organisational system and processes are important, the roles of individual leaders — and their supervisors — are critical for driving leadership development. The following six practices were consistently emphasised.

1. NEVER WASTE A CRISIS — Adverse situations and crises contributed most to the development of the top leaders studied. These difficult experiences tested and stretched their leadership ability, making them more resilient and confident.

2. PROVIDE AUTONOMY AND LET PEOPLE FAIL — One of the best things that supervisors can do for their subordinates is to step back, let them make decisions, and create a culture that embraces learning from mistakes.

3. INSTIL HUMILITY, FOSTER LEARNING — The top leaders in our study are future-focused. Instead of resting on their laurels, they show a strong commitment to learning from everyone — not just their superiors.

4. MODEL AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP — Role models are an important source of learning, and at the same time top leaders emphasise the importance of developing one’s own authentic leadership style.

5. BALANCE BREADTH AND DEPTH — Whilst top leaders emphasise the value of rotating talent in order to foster broader perspectives and inculcate strategic thinking, future top leaders also have a desire to develop a deeper understanding about the impact of their decisions by staying in their roles longer.

6. HARNESS RELATIONSHIPS — While relationship-building is important everywhere, it is especially critical in Asia. The leaders we spoke to paid particular attention to developing trust by building strong personal bonds with their direct reports and broad external networks with multiple stakeholders.
Conclusions

Many Asian philosophies emphasise the role of reconciling polarities and paradoxes. The yin-yang symbol, for example, highlights the importance of balancing opposing forces. As such, we thought it would be appropriate to summarise the insights from our study via 5 paradoxes below.

1. TO FOSTER LEARNING, EMPHASISE DOING — leaders learn most from challenging experiences, not from formal programs or books.

2. TO ACCELERATE DEVELOPMENT, SLOW DOWN — leaders develop faster when they reflect deeply and see the impact of their decisions.

3. TO EXCEL AT THE TASK, HARNESS RELATIONSHIPS — the best leaders focus on developing their people skills, and on achieving impact through others.

4. TO ACHIEVE-success, LEARN FROM failure — leaders learn and grow from their failures, and share their lessons with others.

5. TO DEVELOP GREATNESS, PRACTICE HUMILITY — leaders model humility and constantly learn from others.