Key Competencies of the Effective Governance Professional

Over the last 20 years, organizations have realized that they need to effectively manage and retain high-quality employees in order to be successful. It is extremely important that organizations invest in their leadership capabilities because leaders play an integral role in motivating, inspiring and influencing talent management. One leadership expert defines leadership as “the process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.”

Leadership is a process that can be taught through developmental experiences. Although individual differences in effective leaders are important, there is substantial evidence to show that effective leadership is a process and individuals need to acquire certain important skills to maximize their ability.

Who are the next generation governance leaders (NGGLs) and what are the core attributes that distinguish them? In global academia and the corporate world, who are the NGGLs? Is it those who are powerful, extroverted or charismatic? Is it those who are humble, yet capable leaders?

There are thousands of definitions, concepts and leadership tools available in the form of research, books and articles. This article recommends several strategies that NGGLs can use to be effective in governance. It draws on several years of collaborative research with many institutions. It also argues that leadership is a holistic process and that there are five essential ingredients that create a successful NGGL. These five essential ingredients are:

1. Making the purpose personal
2. Top-level interconnected thinking
3. Demonstrating effective deliberation
4. Peer-to-peer mentoring-type learning (storytelling)
5. Practicing a high level of business improvisation

Governance practice has traditionally relied heavily on hard skills. To educate the NGGLs, a focus on soft skills is essential to promote emotionally and morally informed leadership. Based on experience with practitioners in the field, it is clear that emotionally and morally informed leadership is a result of good governance in the community of practice. Governance plays a significant role in bringing awareness to the importance of NGGLs. It is essential for the NGGLs to make their purpose personal, seek the truth, speak the truth, practice positivity and inspire independent thinking.

Noman Sultan, Ph.D., CISM, CGEIT, CITP
Has more than 16 years of experience in corporate IT governance, audit, risk and information security as a freelance consultant before establishing a dynamic consultancy firm that provides trusted and independent risk and governance advice while helping organizations enhance, align and transform their corporate risk governance strategy and deliver increased business value. This includes the design of corporate IT governance strategy, frameworks, and regulatory and audit compliance for large and growing organizations. He also acts as a trusted advisor to C-level management and board governance committees.
Making the Purpose Personal

Governance practitioners need a plan. Many practitioners describe governance, audit and risk strategies, and plans around yin-yang, yet they lack a driving purpose. The terms yin and yang originate from Chinese philosophy and describe how contrasting or contrary forces can be complimentary because they are interconnected through the universe and can give rise to each other.9

A successful strategy for NGGLs is to lead with purpose. To succeed in this everchanging world, having a strong purpose is an NGGL’s key strategy. Leading with purpose ignites core values, beliefs and emotional engagement and provides direction for NGGLs to serve as advisors for their respective organizations.6 Every organization needs a purpose to provide direction for its customers. Similarly, NGGLs need this, too. In a chaotic world, making purpose personal is a core competency for executive excellence.

Purpose is why companies work with, buy services from, stay with and trust the NGGL. It is also why they will share their success working with an NGGL with others and help the NGGL grow. A purpose that is inspiring allows quality practice to soar.

As an NGGL, it is important to measure one’s strengths and weaknesses and then adjust one’s outlook to accommodate one’s personal purpose. Practitioners should redefine their purpose every five to 10 years, so NGGLs will review their dreams, passions and aspirations accordingly. They refine and adjust their purpose and priorities as needed.7 One research participant shared his personal purpose, “To make the world a better place through sustainable governance. I can only do that through collaboration and sharing values with people.”8

Top-Level Interconnected Thinking

Interconnected thinking is an important trait for NGGLs. This type of thinking demonstrates an ability to identify a connection between different objects, concepts and points of view. This type of thinking allows practitioners to view business from multiple perspectives and combines different types of pragmatic information into a single, unified big picture or holistic view.9

Interconnected, or collaborative, thinking is the core proficiency that facilitates advanced skills in practitioners. It helps practitioners think holistically to solve business decisions and consider strategic implications. The notion of interconnectedness aids logical thinking because it allows practitioners to consider issues and resolve problems more broadly across professional, business and social contexts. In short, human beings are walking, interconnected machines.10 Interconnected thinking is like a mental muscle that can grow stronger in collaboration with the other key competencies proposed in this integrated framework.

How can practitioners gain this competency? The foundation of this higher-level thinking is self-awareness. Self-awareness enables one to become an emotionally and morally informed leader. Self-awareness can help practitioners attune to their inner signals, allowing them to recognize how their feelings affect them and their work performance. In addition, highly self-aware practitioners know how to accurately assess their limitations and strengths. They exhibit a growth mind-set in learning where they need to improve and welcome constructive criticism and feedback.

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aware practitioners are attuned to a wide range of emotional signals, they listen attentively and appreciate other perspectives. This allows practitioners to thrive in diverse backgrounds and other cultures. Furthermore, social awareness ensures that practitioners communicate effectively and easily empathize with others, whether it be with their peers or with those at a higher level in the organization. Social awareness helps align people’s values and creates a social infrastructure that drives the practitioner’s governance and leadership in a more collaborative and humanistic way. During interviews with practitioners, one of the leaders described how higher-level thinking needs to originate from sound social values:

“I believe and practice that governance decisions already occur on a daily basis in all areas of my organisation, not just in the boardroom. And these decisions should not always focus on issues such as strategy, finance and selection nor the compensation of senior management. As a responsible leader, I make clear decisions, which guide the functioning of a human system and its many interconnected and interdependent segments within its environment. Additionally, in my practice I proposed that a collaborative redesign of governance structures and processes by all relevant stakeholders be essential. Traditionally, the design of governance processes and control systems has been almost exclusive to industry experts such as economists, auditors and lawyers, who respond to negative situations. Therefore, I always seek to support the alignment of individual employees’ values and beliefs to those of the organisation in a way that leads to peak performance of the organisation while also achieving a peak working experience for its stakeholders.”

**Demonstrating Effective Deliberation**

Today’s practitioner must demonstrate deliberation—that is, the ability to understand and accept that the most efficient route to one goal may not be linear and may appear completely illogical. In the deliberation process, the practitioner should welcome new ideas and concepts and also find analogies to arrive at collaborative and creative solutions.

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Effective deliberation further drives a practitioner’s knowledge based on mutually understood values and principles. This acknowledges deliberation as an original and transformative process, one that invites each professional to deliberate in a dynamic, interconnected way that moves beyond bargaining, compromise or consensus. It builds both respect and care. It moves beyond rationality and includes the emotive, affective qualities of social beings that help them relate to each other as they engage in acts of deliberation. As one researcher notes,

*Deliberation is not ‘the aggregation of interests.’ It requires a thoughtful examination of issues, listening to others’ perspectives, and coming to a public judgment on what represents the common good.*

Astuteness enables practitioners to assess any situation correctly in a highly complex and multidisciplinary environment, and allows them to make informed and prudent decisions. Both multidisciplinary experience and peer-to-peer mentoring are methods used to aid astuteness. It is common for the astute practitioner to move between one representational configuration and another, while maintaining congruence between acting norms and opportunities. In this regard, astuteness drives the practitioner to think...
holistically and practice balanced leadership. Here is an example of the importance of astuteness gleaned from interviews with practitioners:

Practitioners require business literacy and technical competency plus a third dimension. This third item is the situational political astuteness that allows a leader to make business-appropriate information technology use and governance decisions that enhance or set business directions as well as follow them. I believe and have seen in my experience that effective collaboration is the most suitable way to develop this hybrid (business and technical competency) and further in-depth communication steers the practice of deliberation. The core outcome of collaboration to complement soft skills through deliberation is astuteness. For me, astuteness means to have the capability to apply both soft and hard skills and demonstrate it in the choice of the best decision in the appropriate situational context.17

Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Type Learning (Storytelling)

The experiential knowledge or learning that Aristotle called practical wisdom18 enables people to make ethically sound decisions. Peer-to-peer mentoring fosters the transmission of practical wisdom at different levels of leadership practice. Peer-to-peer mentoring is one of the most desirable practices for NGGLs to adopt. For instance, practitioners should not only practice effective deliberation of collective wisdom and decision making, but also transmit practical wisdom in the form of experiential learning and stories through peer-to-peer mentoring. In relation to the NGGL, each practitioner should be considered a peer mentor who has experiential knowledge as an expert, fostering transmission to other peers. Here is an interesting way to encourage mentoring gleaned from practitioner interviews:

Recent technological advancement removes geography as a barrier to accessing the wisdom and knowledge of others. No longer are people bound by physical location to dictate who they can seek out for help and knowledge. I devised a strategy to use social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn as the learning tools that provide peer mentorship playing a much more significant role in both personal and professional problem solving, especially [in] our global internationally dispersed organization. In my experience, there is no statistically significant difference between those participants using peer mentoring in a face-to-face manner or virtually. In fact, my organisation used peer mentoring in both face-to-face and virtual settings, leveraging distance collaboration technology as needed.19

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Practicing a High Level of Business Improvization

Business improvization is the core ability to create and implement a new or unplanned solution in the face of an unexpected problem. Business improvization provokes spontaneous behavior and out-of-the-box thinking (collectively or individually) to strengthen the leadership process and significantly impact practitioners to consider new ways of thinking in the current practice.20

Recent research suggests that improvization is critical for innovation in daily practice. Improvization fosters innovation and influences organizations to view governance as a strategic asset rather than a check box cost center. Research shows that the capacity of governance practitioners to improvize can be developed and enhanced.21 Focused effort in two areas can help develop these improvization competencies. First, a culture that recognizes and
views governance positively can be built. Greater levels of improvization come from practitioners who display a positive attitude toward dealing with and accepting complexity and are motivated to change governance practice within their respective organizations. They also display a higher level of objectivity in making decisions. This results in the governance professional building a culture of collaboration and interaction with leaders and key stakeholders to discuss value-based governance strategy and its associated issues. Second, it is important to value governance practices and tools that facilitate improvization.

Based on research in management circles, governance practitioners with greater improvization attributes are more likely to use a value-shared governance approach. Practitioners who embrace a value-shared governance approach are more likely to have high levels of improvization compared with practitioners who use a more traditional compliance-based governance approach. A value-shared governance approach results in a higher level of risk understanding and constant interaction between stakeholders and governance professionals. Business improvization can foster a risk-aware culture and is a requirement for NGGLs.

**Aligned Governance With Leadership**

NGGLs are emotionally and morally informed, willing to expand their vision and be open with themselves, and are patiently determined to reach their inner potential. They serve the common good through shared values while balancing their practice based on reflection and reflexivity. They also foster practical wisdom for others through problem solving in a collaborative and dialogical way.

Governance is a framework around which enterprises can redefine roles. It is the set of all activities that guide the proper function of a human system and its many interdependent parts within its environment. It resets the needs of stakeholders in terms of trust and fairly shares progress and well-being for the overall common good. For a morally informed NGGL, a virtue ethics approach, which means incorporating character traits or habits that emphasize key elements of ethical thinking, is intrinsically motivating. It is essential for NGGLs to adopt a virtue ethics approach as they reflect upon and implement governance practice, especially since governance practice is so often deontological and associated with legal duty and legislation.

Research and practice indicate that leadership can be taught. Awareness among governance practitioners is growing around the idea that all the mystical qualities that once defined leadership are not actually inherent, but are eminently teachable. With regard to ethics, one chief executive officer (CEO) said,

> Ethics is what I do: everything in day-to-day life. It is the norm that guides every judgment call that is made in this organisation: it is in my core values and in almost all activities I do, such as hiring staff, drilling every IT business-related process, etc.

Ethics-based leadership is also essential for the NGGL.

**Endnotes**

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