**By Invitation**

**In a storm-tossed world, who’s going to steer your ship?**

The past year saw many leadership transitions in countries and the corporate world. Much hangs on the vision, values and policies of those taking over in these volatile times.

**Terence Ho**
For The Straits Times

Imagine yourself on a storm-tossed ship, trying to navigate treacherous waters with limited visibility. Who would you prefer at the helm? A steady, conservative builder like former German chancellor Angela Merkel, or a charismatic and charismatic leader like British Prime Minister Boris Johnson or US President Donald Trump?

The question of leadership is as old as human civilization. It is in focus particularly during leadership transitions, when much hangs on the vision, values and policies of those taking over. The past year saw such transitions, with new heads of government installed in the United States, Germany, Japan and Russia.

**Leadership for Luck?**

Where risks and opportunities abound, a single mistake could undo decades of good work, while a judicious move could see fortunes swiftly made. Is success, then, a matter of leadership or luck? What leadership traits, if any, are needed to take a successful country or organisation forward?

The impact of leadership is often evidenced in squandered resources, lost or untapped talent, under internal or incompetent leaders — or, conversely, new initiatives, solidarity and growth under capable and committed leaders.

In the rise and fall of companies and institutions are also structural forces such as demography, technology, geopolitics and societal change. While in the task of leaders to respond to such changes, the future is difficult to predict — the best laid plans may be mythology to economic shifts in the operating environment.

Time and chance also matter. "I would rather have aегор who was lucky than one who was good,” said Aristotle. In such a case, perception is as important as action.

**The demands on leadership will continue to evolve as organisations mature.** A company or country in the start-up phase needs to build systems and processes, mobilise resources and win the confidence of stakeholders.

In an age of pluralism and social media, leaders are also expected to have a deep understanding of the global village, with a broad appeal. Two further ingredients are key in the Vietnamese context: Leaders would do well to harness collective wisdom and to heed the whims of the people.

**Harnessing collective wisdom**

One has a monopoly of wisdom or expertise. The complexity of large organisations today means that the top are unlikely to have an in-depth understanding of every area of operations, even if they have been through hours of daily meetings. So it is important for leaders to consult widely.

Much attention has rightly been devoted to improving diversity within organisations and management teams, but these efforts will achieve little in an environment that fosters group think. Leaders who shut down at meetings, or who selectively internalise flawed advice, will have less opportunity to harness the view of others and to make better decisions.

By contrast, those who create safe spaces for people to speak up can harness diverse perspectives to address complex and ambiguous challenges.

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