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Interview with Ismael Clemente

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“Nowadays, managers need to be athletes, capable of performing throughout the entire match”



Ismael Clemente | Deputy Chairman and CEO of Merlin Properties

Despite being dubbed a leadership role model, Ismael is modest and friendly, conveying empathy, approachableness and transparency in all his responses. Today, after more than 20 years as a professional in the financial sector, he has become the “new real estate sector wizard”, as Deputy Chairman and CEO of Merlin Properties, one of the leading real estate companies listed on the Spanish stock market (on the IBEX-35 index), engaged mainly in the acquisition and management of tertiary property assets in Spain and Portugal. The school that he attended pointed him in the direction of ICADE (the law faculty of Universidad Pontificia Comillas) in Madrid, where he received a grant to study Law and Economics. He has worked at Garrigues, Bankers Trust REIB, DB Real Estate and RREEF, as General Manager. A fan of the beautiful game, Ismael Clemente considers that a good leader should be like a great athlete, capable of improving stamina and capacity for work through training, without forgetting about the human aspect, and of course, ongoing training to face the challenges of an increasingly digitalised and changing environment.

How do you believe the leader figure has evolved throughout your professional career? What qualities do leaders need now that they did not need a few years ago?

My professional career has not actually been so extensive. I consider myself to be new to this kind of executive position with public prominence or visibility.

Based, therefore, on my brief experience, I believe that leaders nowadays have a higher degree of education than they had some years ago. To use a footballing metaphor, it is like comparing Pelé to Messi. Both are exceptional with incredible qualities, but Messi is also a tremendous athlete. In other words, these days footballers cannot just be good sportspeople because

they are good at dribbling; they also have to be athletes capable of performing throughout the entire match. The same is true of managers. In the past, it was enough to have charisma, be intuitive, possess a certain knack for empathy. Today, however, you have to add a good education to all of this. Academic, university training. Not just any type of training will do. A manager, particularly one at a demanding company, must be a highly trained professional.

If you could create an ideal leader or executive, which three qualities would you choose?

Tied in with what I mentioned earlier about training, good training calls for the development of two very important, standard qualities, namely, intelligence

and capacity for work. Apart from that, a manager who has strong leadership skills must be a very good psychologist, since we live surrounded by people and we must be capable of identifying their needs and seeing whether we are able to help them. We have to develop the ability to empathise with situations involving a certain degree of stress or pressure. Negotiations are not always a walk in the park; sometimes things get tense, and you must be able to know when to increase the pressure and when to ease off so that a cordial atmosphere is always maintained.

As a third quality, I would say balance. A strong character, but one that also strikes a balance between boldness and prudence. Turning again to the footballing metaphor, if you try to lead or be a good manager by defending alone, your company will not go down in history or achieve great things. On the other hand, if you are crazy and spend the whole time attacking with all the players minus the goalkeeper, if there is a counterattack, you will end up conceding a goal and losing the match. Basically, knowing when to attack and when to defend, and how to transition between attacking and defending, is very important.

To this end, it is essential for managers to be balanced individuals, with no need to show others that they are daring or "alpha males", who always want to do the toughest thing yet, since they will ultimately be in for a rude awakening. Nor is it good to be the typical manager who wants to protect him/herself the whole time and not get his/her feet wet. I don't know whether there was some advantage to this some years ago, but it doesn't get you anywhere today.

Is there a leader you especially admire? Could you explain why?

One of the professionals who has fascinated me the most and given me an enormous sense of peace is Amancio Ortega. He is a businessman who has had to become a leader and who, in turn, knew perfectly well how to create the conditions for transitioning to a professional manager, Pablo Isla, who is also a spectacular person and leader.

In a constantly changing environment such as the current scenario, what qualities should companies develop to adapt to such a volatile scene?

Well, as my children would say, a great deal of care must be taken. The only way to manage the change currently experienced by the business environment is by incorporating an appropriate workforce.

"A manager, particularly one at a demanding company, must be a highly trained professional"

When you join a company and see how it is organised, the layout, the organisation chart, etc., you realise straightaway whether it is an old-fashioned or modern company. If it has a more old-fashioned model, managing change is tricky. If the company's managers are only concerned about their professional category, the mobile phone that they can get, the high-end company car that they can attain, then that company suffers from what I call business sclerosis and usually ends up failing sooner or later.

Nowadays, things must work differently. Workforces need to be younger, albeit in attitude. The physical years could be there, but you can also have a mind that is well equipped to deal with the changes that we are experiencing. If you have a workforce that has adapted to this, it is relatively easy to navigate change. If you don't, these changes will hit you like a storm.

In the field of management, leadership, how is confidence maintained within the team when these changes arise?

I believe that the only way is by implementing a certain sense of fairness. This is something similar to what happens in negotiations. You can be a hard-line professional, but if the other party knows that you are fair, that you are defending what can be defended, and that once you start achieving partial agreements that bring you closer to the total agreement, you actually fulfil each of those partial agreements, then they will respect you.

It is exactly the same at a company. If you are as demanding of yourself as you are of other people; for that matter, if you demand a little more of yourself than you do of others, the team understands that you are a fair leader and has your back when necessary. On the contrary, if your team sees that you are a crackpot and that you are asking everyone to make sacrifices that you do not then apply to yourself, you won't be able to gain their loyalty.

“One of the main leadership qualities is balance, i.e. a leader must have a strong character, but one that also strikes a balance between boldness and prudence”

What are the main leadership training requirements? What technical and emotional aspects must executive training emphasise nowadays?

This is more or less what I had mentioned earlier. Good leaders, good executive or management professional leaders, must work on their stamina, their capacity for work, on a daily basis, because it is very difficult to manage staff and demand that they perform if you are not the first into the breach.

Regardless of your function or responsibility, you have to develop your capacity for work, resilience, training. Education is very important; you need to undergo constant training. If you look at digital evolution, for instance, if we do not make the effort to at least understand, albeit in the abstract, what the different technologies are for, we will never be able to apply them to our business. I'm not saying that you have to study an engineering degree at this point, but you should at least try to understand what each type of technology is for and apply them to your company's day-to-day business.

What would you tell young people who are finishing university and are about to enter the job market?

I don't feel very qualified to give advice to anyone, but I joined the working world relatively recently, or I like to think that it was relatively recently.

What I would recommend is that, during the first years of their professional career, they find a job in which they will receive training, rather than one in

which they will be comfortable. In other words, during the initial years of your professional life, it is very important to learn things, and to do so, it is important to be in a demanding professional environment, and demanding employment environments are, by nature, uncomfortable. If you seek comfort in the initial years, you will not complete your university education with work experience.

What I mean is that if you finish your university studies and immediately try to get a job in which you will be handling abstract issues on a mobile phone, negotiating million-euro agreements or making an impact, you are on the wrong track. It is very hard to make an impact when you are twenty-one years old. In order to make an impact, two things are required: someone who needs your impact and your ability to make one. Your ability to make an impact is perfectly obvious at this point, but I am unsure as to whether the company will be interested in the impact that you are capable of creating at this point in time. So, first of all get your education, work, be patient and try to design a long-term strategy for your professional life. Admittedly, that strategy will last, as experienced generals would say, the time that it takes to receive the first 100 enemy bullets. Once the war begins on the battlefield, the strategic vision changes due to tactical adaptation, but the objective remains the same. It is the same in life. Once you have that clear idea, you must create a career plan, which will deviate from its course and suffer all kinds of unexpected twists and turns, but it will ultimately take you where you wanted to go.

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