



With the cooperation of:

Deloitte.

Positive leadership

Interview with Juan Luis Cebrián

September 2014
www.liderandoenpositivo.com



Technological support:
Laviniainteractiva

“A leader is someone who takes decisions for others, who faces problems and who is not afraid of making mistakes”

Juan Luis Cebrián, Executive Chairman of PRISA

With an extensive professional career, Juan Luis Cebrián, Executive Chairman of PRISA, knows more than most about the ins and outs of an industry as complex as the media industry. In his current position as the Chairman of the leading information, education and entertainment group in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, Juan Luis describes the profile of a leader, looks back over some of the challenges of his career and examines the revolution and transformation that technological advances have meant for media.



Juan Luis Cebrián, Executive Chairman of PRISA.

In recent years the media has been completely transformed. Technology has revolutionised how information is presented, how should companies and their leaders adapt to this permanent change?

Technological change marks a change in civilisation, affecting the media and everything else. Most affected up until now have been the world of finance and the globalisation of financial systems and markets which have virtually destroyed the actual economies of many companies in record time.

Therefore, technological change not only affects the communications media, but many walks of life such as education or the knowledge system, and we are just at the very beginning. Consequently, it is not easy to make predictions or give advice on how to adapt.

The media does not exist in a disintermediated world. I compare the evolution that we are going through with the invention of the printing press, although the digital revolution is more profound. The arrival of printing made it possible to freely interpret the bible and from there religious wars were waged, thus changing the world. It is a bit like what is happening now; globalisation boosted by digitalisation is something that we do not know how to control. In the case of the media, we are unwilling to

recognise that we live in a world bound to disappear as we know it.

It is now commonly accepted that innovation has become key to revitalising any activity, how is it possible to innovate in the field of leadership?

Innovation takes many forms. In the case of leadership, and thanks to digitalisation, the pyramidal structure of society (where there was only one ruler: a king, tribal chief, etc.) no longer exists.

Nowadays societies are star-shaped or network-like and, therefore, leadership is more diffuse and derives more from the will of others rather than a truth more or less revealed or agreed upon in codices or holy books. So it is not easy to handle.

Companies and enterprises currently lack role models or values that are generally accepted by everyone, precisely due to the enormous quantity of inputs that are received over the internet.

It is paradoxical that this is the moment when leadership is most necessary, because it is when most confusion reigns. People like to take their own decisions each day, but it also gets tiring, so they need social and intellectual role models to enable them to organise their lives.

We are at a time when the lack of leadership is the result of a change in hierarchical system (it is no longer as it was), and it will take us time to discover the difference between a true leader and a demagogue or a populist leader who takes advantage of the vacuum to get themselves noticed.

In an industry as complex as the media industry, what are the main characteristics a leader should have?

They are no different from those of any other industry. A leader is someone whose authority is acknowledged by others for a certain reason. I would not say that they have special characteristics, simply those attributed to them by others.

“Nowadays societies are star-shaped or network-like and, therefore, leadership is more diffuse”

Running a newspaper for so many years and then a large communications group requires very specific skills, which of them would you highlight as the most important or the most necessary?

Newspapers are businesses like any other and they behave in the same way. Human resources management in the media is no different than in any other company. What is true is that newspapers are, also, factories of ideas, and that does make them unique.

The confidence in a newspaper's editorial team -which forms the core of the activity of a newspaper- always holds up if professional values such as independence, transparency, or the defence of freedom of expression, are justifiable. Values that are a key part of this business, journalism. This is basic to maintaining people's confidence. From this stems a tendency for labour unions or representatives of the professionals to turn industrial disputes into conflicts based on political rights or freedom of expression, which is a manipulation that should not be allowed.

To sum up, what unites an editorial team or group of journalists is always an intellectual or professional project, which is the basis of that business project.

Since your beginnings heading large teams, how do you believe the figure of leader has evolved?

In the past leaders were charismatic, and that charisma was endowed upon them through a divine revelation or an illumination.

“Leadership has nothing to do with political stance or ideology, it is more a capacity to face reality, take decisions and deal with failure”

Today leaders attempt to base their leadership on popularity, which is somewhat arguable, since unpopularity is also a form of popularity.

Basically a leader is someone who takes decisions for others. And I believe that this has yet to be clearly understood. It is someone who deals with problems, who faced with a lack of definition, doubts or arguments, takes a decision (appropriate or otherwise) and is not afraid of making a mistake.

The problem is that nowadays, in Spain and in the rest of Europe, making mistakes generates a lot of fear. That is why there is such a lack of leadership. Everyone wants to do and say what is politically correct. Why isn't someone who cheats the taxman called a thief, which is what he or she is? Because political correctness, the norms of social education and the recurrence of elections (whether political or in companies or regulatory bodies) have led to an excess of formalism in human relations, often causing a lack of sincerity and truthfulness.

Are there any leaders who you particularly admire?

In the world of politics there are very strong leaders, regardless of their ideological positions which, in many cases, I do not share.

For example, Margaret Thatcher's leadership was very strong; or Fidel Castro; Lula Da Silva, who is an amazingly gifted leader; or Felipe González, who has a considerable capacity for leadership.

Leadership has nothing to do with political stance or ideology, it is more a capacity to face reality, take decisions and deal with failure. A leader is a conductor of people; someone who must truly understand that successes are collective and failures are personally attributable to the leader. There are very few people like that.

In light of your extensive career

During your career, what are the major challenges that you have had to face?

I am not particularly keen on making such classifications, of what I liked most or the least, especially because after more than half a century in the profession there are many stories and many challenges. Although undoubtedly, the founding of El País and its establishment and consolidation, not just as a newspaper, but as an institution that would serve the interests of the community and its readers, is one of the biggest challenges of my career. But it is an ongoing challenge, not a transitory challenge, one that persists over time and still prevails.

Journalist, writer, member of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, recipient of numerous awards and prizes in Spain and abroad... In a profession as vocational as yours, how do you also become a manager of people and run a communications group without losing sight of the fact that it is also a business that has to be profitable?

Journalism requires teamwork, as do nearly all jobs in the 21st century. Therefore, generation, creation and people management pertain to all sectors. In terms of the intellectual task of thinking or generating ideas, forming teams is relatively easy if the intellectual connection or complicity of thought, of ideas or actions between people, is heeded.

I do not believe in a merely mechanical- or organisational-type of leadership, not even under the usual rules that the training courses of various business or psychology schools put forward as to how groups should behave. But rather it has more to do with an

intellectual complicity, which makes it easier and also more necessary to harness permanent stimuli of that type.

At a time when society is highly sensitive to values such as the transparency and honesty of its leaders, how should those responsible for large companies change? What should certain political and economic figures do to win back the trust of that part of society?

Spanish companies in general and, of course listed ones and those in the IBEX35, have a degree of transparency that is sufficient in relative terms. There is always room for improvement, but when compared to other organisations, political parties, trade unions, religions or NGOs, the most transparent organisations are probably the listed companies. In fact one might also say that sometimes, they are excessively transparent.

Transparency cannot exist in absolute terms; nothing can exist in that way. The law, as it was created, is a restriction of liberty itself. You must therefore exercise a certain amount of care when calling for absolute transparency. If everyone told the truth at all times there would be no families, marriages, companies, governments or political parties; the world would be in chaos. Transparency itself must be subject to the same limitations as other important rights and values.

What message would you like to convey to the young people who are preparing to lead their own companies in the future?

I think it is bad to prepare yourself to lead. What is more important is to prepare yourself to do what you are going to do well. Because doing things well is a way of preparing yourself to lead.

In my personal experience (in dealings with writers, artists, persons from the world of culture, etc.), all the people I've met have agreed that in the end a job well done is fundamental, and requires many hours.

“Transparency itself must be subject to the same limitations as other important rights and values”

Firstly, what I would tell young people is that they need to work hard, because the culture of effort is disappearing in many areas of our society. There is not enough awareness that if we do not all make an effort we lose the ability to produce, create or advance.

Second, that effort must be directed or oriented by just a few, those who must take decisions, but they must have the consensus of their teams. This is not necessarily based on immediate popularity, but rather on the ability to take decisions, even though at times these are difficult; to know how to explain them; to try to reach a consensus to the extent possible, and, in short, to involve the group in the successes and know how to assume responsibility for the failures.

Contact

CONFEDERACIÓN ESPAÑOLA DE DIRECTIVOS Y EJECUTIVOS - CEDE

World Trade Center
Moll de Barcelona, s/n Edificio Sur 3ª planta
08039 Barcelona (Spain)
Tel. +34 93 508 83 20
Fax. +34 93 508 83 21
Mail: info@directivoscede.com