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Leading in positive

Juan José Brugera

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“A leader should be present, accompany others and communicate”



Juan José Brugera | President of Inmobiliaria Colonial Socimi.

A graduate in Industrial Technology Engineering from the University School of Terrassa, Juan José Brugera (Badajoz, 1946) has an MBA from ESADE Business School and a Diploma in General Management from IESE Business School. He has been the President of Inmobiliaria Colonial Socimi, S.A. since 2008 and was formerly the CEO from 1994 to 2006. President of Société Foncière Lyonnaise since 2010, he was previously Managing Director of Mutua Madrileña, Managing Director of SindiBank and Deputy Managing Director of Banco Sabadell. He has been the President of the Board of Trustees of Ramón Llull University (URL) and President of the ESADE Foundation, Panrico, Holditex and the Cercle d’Economia de Barcelona (2016-2019).

Throughout your extensive career, you have successfully led numerous projects and teams. How would you define your style of leadership? What qualities should a good leader have?

There are essential requirements that are always needed. The first thing a leader must do is define their strategy. Also, a leader must participate in it: defining and participating are two fundamental issues. The person in charge must encourage the team and get it to participate. From there onwards, each member contributes their beliefs and a proposal is prepared, backed by everyone.

Secondly, I would highlight the need to assume risk. That is to say, we implement a strategy, convinced that we read the cycle well, that we excel at what we do, and we assume the risk. We also observe changes and update the strategy because feedback is continuous here.

“A leader should their define strategy, assume risk and encourage the team through charisma”

Lastly, we must show empathy, both to those closest to us and to the organisation as a whole. Going back to the previous example, this is our strategy because we have defined it as such, based on excellence and good performance. To achieve this, you need certain qualities encapsulated in that beautiful Greek word, charisma. A leader has to lead a project with charisma so that the organisation follows behind. From my point of view, these are the main features that a leader must have and they are what I try to cultivate.

In these times of transformation and change, what specific messages must leaders convey to their teams?

Well, I would say that a leader should be present, accompany others and communicate. Now that on-site activity has been reduced (although it has not been eliminated), we must strengthen communication, since formal issues are now resolved digitally.

Our companies have workplaces in different locations and, therefore, to a certain extent we are already used to communicating remotely. If we wish to harness limitations as opportunities, we must improvise online communications that go beyond the purely formal. Nowadays, we must make an effort to go beyond formal meetings and seek another type of communication which makes up for the lack of on-site presence with a series of attitudes that are more open and communicative, etc. That is to say, we should accept our formalities, but continue to improvise. In the case of Colonial, we have workplaces outside Spain and this means that in many cases we cannot work face-to-face, but we compensate for this with informal online meetings.

How can technology help us to strengthen the qualities of a good leader?

Things have changed quickly: what was previously done on-site is now limited in many respects. But we must view these challenges as opportunities. Technology enables you to reconnect almost immediately without the need for formalities, where we used to discuss certain issues in person in a more relaxed manner before entering a formal meeting, we must now try to do this digitally. We have to continue to do this even if it means a change in style.

There is no need to travel, because with new technology you can be in several places at once and can arrange impromptu communication as we did previously when face-to-face. Therefore, I see digital

“Now that on-site activity has been reduced, we must strengthen formal communication with more open and communicative attitudes”

communication more as an opportunity than a limitation, without discounting face-to-face meetings when strictly necessary. For example, certain Board of Directors or Management Committee meetings can be held online. This enables you to avoid unnecessary travel, extend meetings or call up people whose opinion you require and are on a different side of the world.

What leaders or important people have inspired you throughout your professional career?

There are many benchmark figures in the business world, but rather than referring to a specific one I would like to highlight those who, as well as performing their leadership duties, show a strong commitment to society and business ethics in their work.

We should all bear these aspects in mind, but certain leaders stand out for these qualities and are ethical role models. Nor should we forget those who follow this leadership model but are not well known or are outside the media spotlight and yet work on a daily basis for the good of society.

I don't want to leave out those who try to follow this path but, due to adverse circumstances, cannot achieve their goals as a result of a change of shareholders or any other kind of setback. Many CEDE members are in this situation and I would like to let them know that they are role models for me.

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Now we're going to talk about female talent and women's role in executive positions. What are the key ways in which companies, regardless of their size or industry, may be able to attract and develop female talent?

I feel that the best way to attract female talent is to show the example of an organisation that got rid of inequality years ago. I work at a company where almost 60% of staff, 50% of the Management Committee and 40% of the Board of Directors are women, in the latter case as required by law.

The key is to invite women to form part of a company that does not consider promoting or assigning responsibilities to individuals based on their gender, but based on their ability. In summary, the best example to promote female talent is to invite a woman to work at an organisation where gender inequality is not practised.

It is true that in the past this was not the case and, therefore, there are gaps that must be filled. I positively value all the advances we have made in this regard. Based on my personal experience, no gender discrimination has occurred at the other companies where I have worked or the company I have been at for the last twenty years, both as CEO and President. People have been promoted based on their contribution to the organisation and their ability to assume responsibilities, regardless of their gender.

We're going to move on to another completely crucial issue, sustainability, which is another of the great challenges that companies must tackle in the current environment. How can leaders convey the importance of sustainability to their teams and stakeholders?

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Based on the belief that the people who run the organisation are committed not only to sustainability but to all the issues encompassed by what we now call ESG, which used to be called social responsibility.

In the area of sustainability, again I'll use the specific example of our industry. Colonial is the leader in all matters relating to the creation of sustainable spaces. We have made significant investments to reduce the carbon emissions of our buildings, have adhered to the Paris Agreement to reach zero emissions by 2050 and are constructing the first wooden office building in Spain, specifically in Barcelona. That is to say, we can convey the importance of sustainability based on the belief that it is an unavoidable obligation and that, in the future, companies that do not meet these targets will be left out. There are already many companies that evaluate doing business with you based on whether you are classified as sustainable; if you don't have a good classification from rating agencies, you don't attract investors. Apart from this commitment and the fact that society is moving in that direction, a company would not have a future and leaders would not have an adequate strategy if they did not drive the company towards the highest possible sustainability standards.

In our case, we will also require that our providers have a green rating and we have already issued green bonds. In addition, in terms of the tax and financial trajectory, this is the future. I am happy that this is the case and would even say that it should speed up. But, as we saw previously, once again the most important thing is to lead by example, and our company leads Europe in sustainability ratings.

The new generations are once again the most negatively affected. What positive message can we send to them?

Firstly, we should be very honest with them and tell them that we older people, who are in charge of society in one way or another in our different areas, have not been able to solve the problem of people gaining access to the job market, especially university graduates. We are doing it wrong. Therefore, they need to work hard to obtain qualifications and training, be the best and excel, so that we can take them on here.

As I said, we still have work to do. We as players should all open our eyes and clearly see that it is a huge failure that young people who have finished their university or vocational training studies cannot join the job market. At Colonial we have schemes for university graduates whom we make an effort to train. Some have been able to stay at the company and others have been able to expand their CVs in order to access future employment more easily.

Nevertheless, I'm concerned that, as a society, we are unable to solve such a significant problem. So I would advise these young people to train, to garner experience in any way they can, through work experience and as interns, and to seek to access the job market in that way.

In terms of training, where are we failing?

There is another problem in Spain which we businesspeople do not talk about enough: the fact that there has been a disconnect between what universities offer and what businesses demand. We should ensure that those who go through university, or through vocational training and then university, graduate with very broad knowledge and specialise afterwards. That is to say, it should be normal for someone to get a business administration degree at twenty-one or twenty-two, but it should be a general degree in order for that person to subsequently seek opportunities to fit in with the country's economy and the working world and specialise once they have found the right opportunity. This is more similar to the British model and the German dual training system model. We should do this because, to repeat what I said initially, there has been a major disconnect between what universities offer and businesses demand.

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