



Metro Leaders

A new breed of men in business?

Praesta Partners is the UK's premier firm of executive coaches, based in London but operating both nationally and globally. We coach senior leaders including CEOs, main board directors and management team members and other key senior executives. Our clients range across several hundred organisations in the private and public sectors, including FTSE 100 and 250 companies, private equity owned businesses, leading professional services firms and all areas of financial services.

All of the Praesta team have had senior level business careers before becoming coaches - many were board members, CEOs, partners or managing directors of major organisations in their first careers. Thorough initial training, continual professional development and regular supervision are integral to how we work. As well as one to one coaching, we offer team and group coaching and board effectiveness reviews. We are also leaders in working with executive women.

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Saul Klein, the technology venture capitalist behind a host of successful start ups including Lovefilm, Firefly and Seedcamp, describes himself on Twitter as ‘Husband. Dad. Serial entrepreneur.’ He is a high profile example of a new breed of men in business life who are choosing to behave differently in the workplace and who are happy to express priorities in their lives that are different to their fathers’ and older generations’.

We have seen a growing number of this new breed in our coaching work¹ in recent years. They take having collaborative, relationship based styles of leadership for granted, have different assumptions about the nature of their authority and define their identities through multiple roles in their lives. Their leadership styles reflect their personalities, characteristics and values – for this group being authentic is a given. We have labelled this breed of younger leaders ‘Metro Leaders’. Some are comfortable with being open about being ‘different’ while others find it less easy and encounter some resistance from colleagues who still expect more conventional behaviour from male business leaders.

In order to get a clearer picture of Metro Leaders we interviewed twelve male business leaders over a six month period. Some were coaching clients of Praesta and some were not. All of our respondents were recommended to us by our colleagues or third parties as fitting our description of executives in their late 30s and early 40s who are leading in a more collaborative way, involving a lot of active listening, welcoming of challenge and notably less ‘hierarchical’ in style.

All of the cohort we interviewed have already been highly successful in business. They all operate at board, exco, CEO or managing director level – at, or close to, the top of their organisations. The businesses they work for are in multiple sectors and vary from venture capital backed to publicly quoted. In size, they span a consultancy with around 60 people to major units

1 Praesta Partners coaches around 450 individual senior executives a year. The overwhelming majority of our clients operate at board, executive committee or one level below Exco. Roughly two-thirds are men.

The defining characteristics of Metro Leaders

The key attributes of Metro Leaders we have identified are:

- 1 Attitude to authority** – they prefer to establish credibility than use the status of their position
- 2 Collaborative yet decisive** – they delegate and collaborate but expect results
- 3 Access to knowledge and information** – they recognise that access is not limited to the top
- 4 Ideas come from everywhere** – as above, the best ideas are not limited to those at the top
- 5 Comfortable with lack of omnipotence** – they acknowledge that they do not have all the answers
- 6 Comfortable having multiple roles** – they take their multiple roles in life for granted
- 7 Manage competing priorities** – they manage their time to suit their various roles
- 8 Present single identities** – they are the same person at work, at home and down the pub
- 9 Manage the whole person** – they manage staff as people, not employees

of multinationals with staff numbers in the hundreds in multiple locations. Being based on interviews with a selected group, our study is observational and qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, but is, we believe, nevertheless representative of an interesting phenomenon in corporate life.

Products of their time

Identifying what has prompted the emergence of this new style of male leadership is complex. The fact that the current generation of leaders in their late thirties and early forties are the offspring of the baby boomers who were themselves influenced by the 1960s might partly explain why they are less hierarchical than previous generations. However, we believe globalisation and technology are key drivers of the changes in attitude we have observed. Instantaneous access to information has changed the power dynamic between leaders and followers. Knowing more is no longer enough. Followers' positions have become stronger and they have less respect for hierarchy. This means that command and control styles of leadership are less effective – even if you could command, you certainly could not control the implementation of real time decisions in multiple time zones and languages.

‘Getting the right people into the right jobs and motivating them has always been fundamental to business, but complexity has increased due to globalisation and technology – email, Blackberry, more travel mean there are more moving parts...’

President, global publishing company

Working regimes have also been transformed by technology. Metro Leaders use technology positively – to bring flexibility to their working days, rather than allowing it make work the master of their time. They also accept that others can do the same – meaning that they are more inclined to judge by results than by compliance with traditional office routines.

Transparency – personal, professional and organisational – is also affecting attitudes. The proliferation of information, particularly via social media, means that reputations are open to wider scrutiny than ever before. It is much more difficult now for people in business to have multiple personas and much easier for failings as a leader or boss to circulate in the public domain.

‘Our personal brands are more visible. Your reputation follows you around. It is tougher to get away with being a big stick monster.’

Managing Director, global technology provider

The characteristics that make Metro Leaders ‘different’

It is important to stress that the characteristics that define Metro Leaders build on traditional leadership traits. All of our interviewees mentioned the importance of setting vision, of competence and mastery of the detail of their businesses, of being exemplars of hard work and of delivering strong results. Metro Leaders know that getting the basics right is as important as ever.

We observed a number of characteristics that we believe define Metro Leaders. The first is their **attitude to authority**. They are clear that changes in the workplace brought about by the trends mentioned above mean that establishing credibility to lead is preferable to using the authority bestowed upon them by their positions. They therefore place great importance on the quality of the relationships they have and on influencing skills. Demonstrating their own personal commitment, being trustworthy, open, genuine and sincere, are essential elements of their behaviour. These qualities stem from deep rooted attitudes and beliefs – meaning that it is difficult to adopt this style of leadership without truly believing in it. Many commented that the title on your business card brings something, but not enough, and that it can be easily squandered. The interviewee quoted below summarised this particularly eloquently:

‘...short term it (authority) comes from your position in the hierarchy, but that only lasts about ten minutes. From then on it is not about what you know or being the best at what you do anymore, credibility comes from your ability to have insights, to see connections and to influence people....’

Director of Strategy at a UK food retailer

Having a delegating and **collaborative yet decisive** style of leadership is how Metro Leaders establish their credibility. Like their predecessors, they appreciate the need to hire very smart people. They observe that the greater complexity brought about by globalisation means that hiring smart people they can trust is even more critical than ever. Once in place, colleagues are given authority and ‘space’ to operate with short, open lines of communication. Colleagues’ involvement in decisions reflects the relevance and quality of their input, not their place in the hierarchy. Open and frank debate is critical to how Metro Leaders work. They welcome challenge and some put formal mechanisms in place to ensure that their position in their organisation does not dissuade staff from openly debating and challenging them.

Metro Leaders recognise that **access to knowledge and information** is no longer confined just to those at the top of organisations. ‘Need to know only’ is anathema. They believe that good **ideas come from everywhere**. Their style involves high levels of transparency and active listening to others, irrespective of their position, which would look anarchic to a generation of managers used to clear lines of decision making.

‘In the old style of management the senior person made the decisions; in this more modern style, the ideas come from everywhere’.

President, global publishing company

Acknowledging that good ideas can come from everywhere requires humility and being **comfortable with lack of omnipotence** – things Metro Leaders are entirely at ease with.

'...I explained that the top team does not have all the answers, that we have blind spots and that there is an opportunity to raise issues and contribute to decision making...'

UK Managing Director, US consumer credit company

Despite their humility and desire to involve more people in ideas generation, Metro Leaders are clear about the need to set direction. They are decision orientated, firm about their expectations of others and understand that they are under at least as much pressure to deliver business results as their more hierarchical predecessors. Encouraging collaboration and seeking multiple inputs to decisions do not equate to being overly democratic or 'soft' on people.

'I fight against being 'collegiate' a little – there needs to be a bit of edge and you need to remember that people are looking to you to make decisions...I am collegiate but then operate as a benevolent dictator once decisions have to be taken'

CEO, European quoted technology business

Metro Leaders are **comfortable having multiple roles** in their lives. Their roles outside the office are as important as their work. This applies to their roles as husbands and partners, fathers and sons.

This is not to imply that previous generations of business leaders were not good and loving husbands and fathers. Although the extent to which our interviewees are open about it with colleagues varies, they all see being actively engaged with families and/or partners as being integral to their lives

and how they want to live them. These are not optional extras, or ‘nice to haves’. One Metro Leader described how ‘the job description for men has changed’ to include a broader range of contributions with less emphasis on merely being the bread winner than previous generations. Another summed this theme up with the following comment:

‘Being more involved in family life is now part of the job description of fathers...I commit maybe 30 to 40 per cent of my time to “the other job”

CEO, e-commerce network company

Once again, technological change is having an important influence. Metro Leaders use technology positively to help juggle their roles. One interviewee recalled how being able to check and send some emails in the morning allowed him the flexibility to attend a meeting at a potential school for his daughter – a meeting he speculated his father’s generation would not have been able to justify in their schedules. They also appreciate that technology benefits others too – so are more inclined to judge people by results, to be relaxed about working remotely and supportive of part-time and flexible arrangements.

These men are typically clear about how they intend to **manage the competing priorities of work and home**. They often have targets for what they are trying to achieve such as having breakfast with the family 3 times a week, not travelling for work on a Sunday or cooking dinner a certain number of times a week. They are pragmatic and realistic that given the nature of their business roles they will not always be successful. Nevertheless, as one Metro Leader said ‘if I make 80 percent of the time I am doing ok’. There is an interesting contrast here with many women we coach who worry more about the 20 percent they miss.

Metro Leaders understand that, if misused, technology can allow work to become the master of their time. Several spoke of limiting email time at weekends and while on holiday - not letting contact with the office disturb

their families' routines. One interviewee mentioned that he rarely uses his laptop in front of his children during the week and is too busy coaching his son's football team at the weekend to be in contact with his business. Several disclosed that they feel their intense involvement in family life helps them keep perspective and remain grounded, and thus contributes to their effectiveness as leaders.

We gained a strong impression from the cohort we interviewed of the importance work and family play in their senses of identity. This was often clear from the responses to our question that effectively asked them to write their interim obituaries – 'what would you like other people to say about your life to date when you are 60?'

Without exception, the Metro Leaders we interviewed mentioned aspects you would expect from any successful business person - comments such as 'made a difference', 'left businesses in better shape than when I arrived', 'made a lot of money for clients', and 'made enough money to be comfortable and for people to say I have been 'successful''. Many also mentioned, with equal weighting to success, factors concerning their teams – 'created a band of brothers', 'developed his people' and 'had fun'.

But the majority of the senior leaders we interviewed also mentioned some aspect of their family lives. A number of interviewees commented that they were not prepared to let their success be achieved at the cost of their relationships with their families. They want to be integral players in family life – not absentee husbands, partners or fathers. Others gave this an even stronger emphasis:

'Years ago people thought their job was their status, but I would prefer people to see my family unit than to hear about my job'

Co-Founder and Managing Director of an IT consultancy

The significance of our interviewees' comments is not that they are substantially different to those that older men would have given in answer to the same question. The difference was nuanced yet clear – Metro Leaders feel

they have a choice, to be involved in roles outside work in a way that their fathers did not. And, either overtly or covertly, they are exercising that choice. Metro Leaders manage their multiple roles but present single identities. They are consistently a whole person - the same 'in office' as 'out of office' with no distinction between their business personas and their personal personas. One Metro Leader summed this up as:

'I went from being a ski bum to being an investment banker and I like to think I haven't changed...I try to be the same down the pub as I am in the boardroom – maybe a bit more structured, but basically the same person'

CEO, European quoted technology business

The attitudes to their own identities influences how Metro Leaders recruit, lead, manage and retain talent. One interviewee spoke of how he builds personal relationships when hiring new staff, believing that the generation of talent in their 20s and 30s is attracted to an organisation as much by its people and senior leaders as by its corporate reputation. They believe they need to be seen as a person as well as a compelling leader. To do this they must be accessible and interact with people at all levels in the organisation. They appeal to people's hearts as well as their heads and this involves revealing something of their own hearts too. It also means making an effort to get to know their people and being present and visible in multiple locations.

The same Metro Leader quoted above gave an example of how he manages the whole person. When he realised that a Chinese colleague was responding to his emails at 3 o'clock in the morning Beijing time, he actively discouraged him from this diligence and commitment to the company, explaining that a senior executive who was not sleeping would not be able to perform in the way he wanted. This attention to being a caring boss appealed to the heart of his colleague and generated great results through improved loyalty. Others talked about the importance of responding to key events in peoples' lives and making sure they take the time they need for important moments in their lives.

'I am conscious of their (his team's) whole lives, not just their working lives – I manage the whole person'

President, global publishing company

Senior leaders being true to the whole person rather than being 'good corporate men' is not necessarily wholly positive for companies. Whilst Metro Leaders want challenging and successful careers, they are not prepared to compromise the other roles they have to achieve them. A very strong theme of our interviews of Metro Leaders was that they are much less prepared than previous generations of men to be geographically mobile. Many have wives or partners with their own careers of equal importance and consider it unreasonable to move location at important times in their children's education.

Metro Leaders' broader attitudes to their employers are similar to their views about location. They expect their jobs to be interesting and challenging and for roles to build their credentials and to support their CVs. They believe they have more choice in how they develop their careers than previous generations. They are no longer expected to pick one company and stay with it, complying as necessary, for their entire career. They believe the development of the knowledge economy and changes in technology mean there is a wider array of opportunities and more mobility. Greater appreciation by employers of cross sector experience and the growth in private equity backed business were also cited as reasons for the current generation of men having much greater choice about their careers than in the past. Metro Leaders take advantage of this choice to find jobs that they are committed to but that fit the needs of their whole person too.

Our work at Praesta with hundreds of senior leaders certainly does not suggest that management styles favouring more collaborative, less hierarchical behaviours are the only show in town. Indeed, the current position is that there are still at least as many Alpha Leaders in the senior echelons of business as there are Metro Leaders. But this more modern breed that we have portrayed here is growing and gaining greater confidence. We speculate that in the next decade there will be more Metro Leaders at the top of organisations and that the corporate world will be the richer for their influence.

Acknowledgements

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