

# Taking the lead in leadership development

In discussion with the **Erasmus Centre for Leadership**

**Although everyone knows that leadership is a crucial aspect of business success, there is still little academic consensus about what leadership skills consists of and how they should be taught. However, the directors of the Erasmus Centre for Leadership hope to change that.**



For this shift to happen, Hannes Leroy, executive director and co-founder of the Centre, explains that: 'We are trying to get leadership development out of the more fluffy self-help realm where it typically resides into a more analytically driven curriculum.'

Although the Centre has only been open for 18 months, its directors say it has already generated a variety of new possibilities for education and research for the 13 faculty members affiliated with the Centre, their students, executives at local companies, and academic collaborators from all over the world.

RSM had long enjoyed a number of advantages as a home for leadership research, according to Leroy: a diverse international student body; close

contact with outside companies; and 'more leadership experts per square metre than any other leading business school' – but before the Centre opened, RSM lacked an office to co-ordinate the development of its leadership studies.

## Two missions

At the heart of the Centre's purpose are two intertwined missions: first, to enhance RSM's ability to train its students to be a force for positive change in the world; and second, to accelerate and integrate advances in scholarly work on leadership.

On the development side, Centre scholars are working to develop a more effective approach to moulding effective leaders. 'Many consultancies promise to develop clients' leadership skills, but they don't actually measure whether their clients really become better leaders in the end,' said Verena Ohms, operational director of the Centre.

Typically, the impact of such programmes are evaluated not by measuring their long-term impact but through participant surveys. 'Their effectiveness is rarely tested other than by means of "smile sheets,"' said Daan Stam, professor of leadership for innovation in the Department of Technology and Operations Management.

But to say that leadership development has not always been tested rigorously is not to say that leadership development is futile. 'The old mantra that leaders are born is not true,' Ohms said. 'We know that leadership skills can be developed, but the research is scattered, and we are aiming for a more holistic and scientific research approach.'

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# Taking the lead in leadership development (continued)

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Not only is leadership education possible, Leroy believes that leadership could eventually become a certifiable skill. He argues that the insights organisational behaviour scholars have gleaned over the past 100 years and the current scientific approach to studying the components of leadership development are leading to a point where leadership skill could eventually become a recognised credential, like Six Sigma or a driver's licence.

'It's going to be a long road, but I think an important one,' said Leroy, who is working with an international consortium of leadership researchers from a number of business schools to come up with accreditation standards for leadership development.

## A broad focus

The idea of leadership studies might conjure up a picture of earnest, grey-haired men sitting in boardrooms, but the Centre's work actually takes its scholars and students into a surprising

variety of places, from RSM artificial intelligence labs to the fjords of Norway.

Centre scholars study a wide range of leadership-related issues, including leadership development, authenticity, identity-based leadership (which focuses on team building), leadership for innovation, sales leadership, and servant leadership, which emphasises the importance of ethical stewardship.

However, although they encourage scholars to take a variety of perspectives, the Centre's directors want to make sure everything published by the group reflects the Centre's commitment to deep, rigorous scholarship. 'Leadership is often regarded as an art rather than a science but even art can be improved with rigorous analysis,' Stam explained.

At the same time as the Centre's scholars continue to work toward a tested leadership curriculum, they are also working on a variety of other projects focused on making leadership slightly easier, including:

- An app for measuring stress that monitors heart rate, to let executives know when they are calm enough to make a decision.
- Lessons on how to be your own executive coach. 'Not only do we want people to learn the basics of leadership, but we also want them to be able to practice these skills on themselves. We want them to be able to tell themselves, "If I have a problem like this, I know how to analyse it," and then go on to do so,' said Leroy.
- Balance Track – an extracurricular course that covers the scientific basics of stress and teaches strategies for building a more resilient life.
- The Positive Change Project – an undergraduate volunteer programme, advised by the Leadership Centre, in which a group of students advise small NGOs on how to solve some of the problems they are facing.
- Nordic Leadership Expeditions – a week-long challenge that builds leadership skills on wilderness expeditions, navigating by both a real compass and RSM's Leadership Compass tool, a system developed by RSM scholars to promote effective leadership.
- Port Executive Leadership Circle – an open programme for port executives developed by the Centre in collaboration with the Port of Rotterdam and the Erasmus Centre for Urban, Port and Transport Economics.

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- Conferences and seminars for practitioners, alumni, and scholars from other institutions. In particular, the Centre is building an advisory board of executives from major companies with Dutch roots, and who will advise the Centre on pressing practitioner concerns and new opportunities.

### Reframing the challenge

Beyond demanding more rigour, scholars at the Centre are defining leadership differently than back in the day when

the business leaders most studied tended to be those with roles near the highest point of the pyramid.

The Centre is getting underway in an era when flat, team-based organisations and more robust leadership research are leading scholars of leadership to look more deeply into the mechanics of how individuals generally affect organisations, regardless of where they rank. Organisations that understand and implement leadership as a top-down practice might be missing opportunities to foster and benefit from bottom-up

innovations and improvements. Centre scholars hope to achieve a rigorously data-based understanding of both the explicit and implicit ways in which leadership operates in organisations and affects members' performance.

Between working with outside experts and their own evidence-based leadership research, Centre faculty members are gaining a much more nuanced understanding of leadership, one sophisticated enough to integrate the idea that different kinds of demeanours, for example, might be more or less useful in different circumstances. For instance, Stam notes that leaders have traditionally been encouraged to be loud and confident, but if you want to get more ideas out of your employees, this might be the wrong way to go about it.

An analytical approach to leadership is also being instilled among BSc students, through a course called Professional Development & Mentoring. In the course, Centre scholars train selected second and third year students to mentor first years, partly through workshops in which each first-year student receives personal attention and guidance from an older mentor.

The questions being asked go far beyond the tactical. Students in the MBA and Executive MBA leadership course, for example, are pushed to define their personal goals for their careers, and to keep asking themselves what is it they really care about. They are being asked to think about leadership ethics as well as strategies – about the where to and why, not just the how, according to Centre directors. First-year students learn goal-setting as well as how ►



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to learn to work effectively and efficiently in teams – including remote teams.

'Ultimately, what we are trying to do is prepare our students to be a force for positive change – whatever that might look like,' said Stam. 'To me, it's about people becoming critical, heading into companies not just to make processes more efficient but to say, "this is all great, but why are we doing this in the first place?"'

Centre faculty members and graduate students are also working on projects that they hope will have some early practical application. Leroy, for example, works not only on studies about how

### **Beyond the executive suite**

In earlier times when leadership scholars focused more on the executive suite, such concerns might not have been top of mind, but that doesn't worry those at RSM. 'Leaders have a profound influence not only on organisational performance, but even more so on people's lives,' Stam said. 'If improving leadership isn't worth it, I don't know what is.'

Leroy acknowledged that advancing leadership development and research is an audacious goal, but like any good leader, he doesn't shy away from the task. 'This might take us a couple of decades to get done but that doesn't mean that it's not worth pursuing,' he said. ■

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to encourage leaders to share more of themselves at work, but also to find ways to communicate this authenticity to others without alienating team members, leading eventually to better performance. Similarly, Stam and Juan Pablo Madieto, an assistant professor in the Department of Technology and Operations Management at RSM, with other collaborators, are investigating how best to handle situations in which a new leader is brought in to lead an established team; a stressful and often expensive situation for many companies.