INSIGHT | LEADERSHIP

Scaling Leadership Without Losing Its Humanity

A founder's reflection on 19 years of building CorporateDNA, and what it has taught me about leadership, growth and the impact that lasts

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When I founded CorporateDNA in 2007, I wasn't trying to build a large consulting firm. I was trying to answer a question that had followed me through my own corporate career: why do highly intelligent, experienced and successful people still struggle with the deeply human work of leadership?

By then, I had become one of PwC UK's youngest female directors at 30. It was an important milestone, but it also taught me something that has shaped much of my work since: achievement and leadership are not the same thing. You can be technically brilliant, commercially successful and highly regarded, yet still struggle to create trust, make difficult judgement calls, navigate competing priorities or have the conversation everyone knows needs to happen. That curiosity became CorporateDNA.

Nineteen years later, we have worked across 36 countries with organisations including Shell, Unilever, Heineken, Vodafone, Adidas and GSK. We have worked with Boards and CEOs, executive teams, high-potential leaders and thousands of women progressing through some of the world's largest organisations. Yet when I think about what scaling leadership has taught me, the lessons are less about scale itself and more about what must not get lost as you scale.

01
Leadership only matters when it survives Monday morning

The leadership industry can become overly complicated. Frameworks, competencies, diagnostics and models all have value, but the real test of leadership happens back in the flow of work. What does a leader do when somebody challenges them in a meeting? How do they behave when the answer isn't obvious? Do they escalate a problem or resolve it with their peer? Can they make a difficult decision without losing the humanity around it? Can they say what needs to be said when it would be easier to stay silent?

This is one reason we developed our 5H framework: Head, Heart, Hunch, Hands and Habits. Leadership isn't purely cognitive. We think, we feel, we use judgement and intuition, we act and, ultimately, what defines us is what we repeatedly do. For me, the measure of great leadership development has therefore never been what happens while we are in the room. It is what remains when we have left it.

THE 5H FRAMEWORK				
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02
Global leadership requires strong principles and enormous contextual intelligence

Working across 36 countries has taught me the danger of assuming that leadership travels unchanged. You cannot develop a leadership approach in London and simply export it to Singapore, Riyadh, Mumbai or New York. The human questions may be universal, but their expression is deeply contextual. How is trust established here? How are difficult messages communicated? Where does power really sit? How are decisions actually made? What is being discussed openly, and what is everyone carefully avoiding?

The longer I work globally, the less interested I am in arriving with the answer. I am much more interested in sensing the system before trying to change it. Leadership requires a strong internal compass, but it also requires the adaptability to read a room, a culture and a moment without losing your own identity. Strong principles and contextual intelligence have to coexist.

03
Don’t scale by becoming a smaller version of someone bigger

There is another lesson I have learned as an entrepreneur. When you are a boutique firm working alongside, and sometimes competing with, enormous global consultancies, it can be tempting to imitate their model. We chose not to. We couldn’t outscale them, nor did we want to.

Instead, we became increasingly clear about where we could be different: distinctive intellectual property, intimacy, agility and deep client relationships. Many of those relationships have lasted for years. Clients have moved organisations, countries and roles and taken us with them. One conversation has led to another business, another geography and another generation of leaders. Looking back, our growth has largely been the compounding effect of ideas, relationships and reputation. That is a very different way to think about scale.

04
Structures change faster than identities

Some of the most fascinating work of my career has involved organisations undergoing significant transformation. A new operating model is announced, businesses are integrated, reporting lines change and responsibilities move. On paper, the transformation has happened, but underneath the surface people can still be operating from the old world. They protect previous identities, defend functional territory, hold onto old decision rights and remain loyal to the team they came from rather than the enterprise they now lead.

This has convinced me that many organisational transformations are actually identity transformations in disguise. The question for an executive team isn’t simply, “What is our new structure?” It is, “Who do we now need to become together to lead it?” Until that question is addressed, the organisation chart may have changed while the organisation itself has not.

05

Scale the system, not just the individual

Our work with more than 6,300 women at Shell reinforced another important lesson: you cannot “fix the women” and call that a diversity strategy. Women do not simply need more confidence. They need sponsorship, visibility, critical experiences, access to opportunity and organisational systems that allow talented people to progress.

That experience changed how I thought about leadership development more broadly. Developing an individual without examining the environment around them has limits. If thousands of people become better leaders but the organisational system continues rewarding yesterday’s behaviour, sustainable change is unlikely. I increasingly think about leadership at three levels: the individual, the collective and the system around them.

For women in leadership specifically, I describe this as needing to raise the floor while lowering the ceiling: develop the individual while simultaneously removing the organisational barriers above them.

06

AI is making human judgement more important, not less

Perhaps the most interesting question in our work today is what leadership becomes in the age of AI. AI can already provide extraordinary amounts of information, analysis and recommendation, but the leadership question is increasingly what happens next. Do we accept the recommendation, challenge it or ask a different question? What context might the technology not understand? When should we trust the answer and when should we interrogate it? And ultimately, who takes responsibility for the decision?

This is why I believe the next frontier is not simply artificial intelligence. It is collective judgement. No single leader has sufficient perspective for the complexity organisations now face, and no single AI recommendation should remove the need for human discernment. The advantage will increasingly come from leadership teams capable of bringing different perspectives together, disagreeing well and exercising better judgement collectively. AI may increase our intelligence; our challenge is to make sure it also increases, rather than diminishes, our judgement.

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07

Boards have taught me that governance on paper and leadership in practice are very different things

Working with Chairmen, Boards, Group CEOs and executive teams has reinforced something I have seen repeatedly over the years: good governance is about far more than structures, committees and decision rights. Those things matter, but some of the greatest risks in a boardroom are often human ones. Is there enough trust to challenge one another? Can somebody put the uncomfortable issue on the table? Are people representing the interests of the whole enterprise or protecting their own territory? And, perhaps most importantly, is the conversation happening in the room the conversation that actually needs to happen?

My executive board governance work has made me increasingly interested in the gap between governance on paper and governance in practice. A board can have impeccable processes and still struggle if challenge is suppressed, difficult issues are repeatedly deferred or the informal dynamics around power prevent people from speaking candidly. Equally, challenge without trust can quickly become destructive. The strongest boards I have experienced are able to combine clarity, challenge and collective accountability.

This is also why I have never seen psychological safety and accountability as opposites. At the most senior levels, leaders need both. Psychological safety means I can tell you something difficult without fearing that the relationship will be damaged; accountability means that once we have had that conversation, something actually changes. Safety without accountability can create comfort, while accountability without safety can create fear. The real work of a high-performing Board or executive team is creating the conditions for candour and consequence to coexist.

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08

The founder eventually has to learn to lead less

There is one lesson that has been much more personal. The qualities that help you build a company are not necessarily the qualities that help you scale one. As a founder, you become accustomed to being close to everything: the clients, the ideas, the quality, the relationships and the decisions. For years, that proximity is an advantage. Eventually, it can become a constraint.

Scaling CorporateDNA has required me to ask a different question: how do you allow other people to carry the DNA of something you created without trying to control every expression of it? That transition is still a work in progress, but I increasingly believe one of the biggest transitions founders have to make isn't learning how to lead more. It is understanding where they need to lead less, while remaining very clear about what should never be diluted.

09

From building a business to building something that lasts

My own definition of success has changed over these 19 years. Growth matters. Commercial performance matters. Building a global business matters. But they are no longer sufficient measures for me. I increasingly think about impact, pipeline and legacy. Did we genuinely change how somebody leads? Did a Board become more courageous in the conversations it was prepared to have? Did an executive team move from functional interests to collective accountability? Did people become bigger because they worked with us? Did a woman gain access to an opportunity that changed the trajectory of her career? Did an idea continue travelling through an organisation long after we had left?

After nearly two decades of CorporateDNA, one belief has become stronger rather than weaker: the future of leadership will require us to become more human, not less demanding. Perhaps the real work of scaling leadership is learning how to do both.