



Complex problems require both personal and hierarchical leadership

28 October 2024, 11:34

Thomas Vandenhaute

Besides knowledge about products, processes, or materials, circular project success also depends on personal behavior. There are other conditions that influence the progress of a circular practitioner: organisational structure, company culture and informal influences also play a role.

Even if you're not a decision-maker, you can influence your circular project success

Learning through our own (circular) experience, we found out that leadership is often associated with personal characteristics. Intrapreneurship, facilitating collaboration, progressing in tough conditions, making things happen is what makes companies progress successfully: great people make great organisations. Without these qualities in your team, it's impossible to be at the forefront of circularity, or other domains for that matter.

Personal leadership is more than just hierarchical leadership

Successful personal leaders manage day-to-day interpersonal issues, without losing track of the project. They see, understand and react to dynamics between people. On a circular project level,

outcomes are often less predictable. People collaborate and find out whether their ideas are effective, or not.

It's tough, if not impossible to change the entire context. As we discussed in this previous article, [the only thing you can easily change is your behaviour](#). If your co-workers and team members are not (re)acting as expected to your interventions, it's time to take a step back and ask a few key questions:

- What is the context driving this behavior?
- What's the common thread between all these events and situations have in common?
- What can you change or adapt to generate different and better outcomes?

Spotting and seizing the right moment

These days, organisations are facing a lot of internal and external pressure. Projects that aim to create circular products and services also add to this pressure. They encourage the creation of new business models, new product designs, and new capabilities.

Sometimes, the pressure on an organisation is so intense that it needs to change pretty quickly to relieve that pressure. Circular project progress is made in small steps or big leaps. It's important to know when a big change might be coming. Frontrunners are great at seizing that moment and making the most of the window of opportunity: when existing structures are changing (voluntarily or otherwise) due to organisational changes.

In the aftermath of the covid pandemic, lots of issues (including a ship blocking the Suez Canal) disrupted the component supply from the Far East. Companies producing mechatronic systems all experienced this crisis. Some of them saw this as a chance to ramp up the supply and sales of spare parts from discarded appliances. Some intrapreneurs quickly scaled up the harvesting process to support sales (through dynamic pricing based on delivery time). Once the supply chain was back up and running, these temporary operations were made permanent and generated extra revenues. Was it a top-down decision that made this happen? Or rather a handful of highly motivated people who knew about parts harvesting and took the plunge?

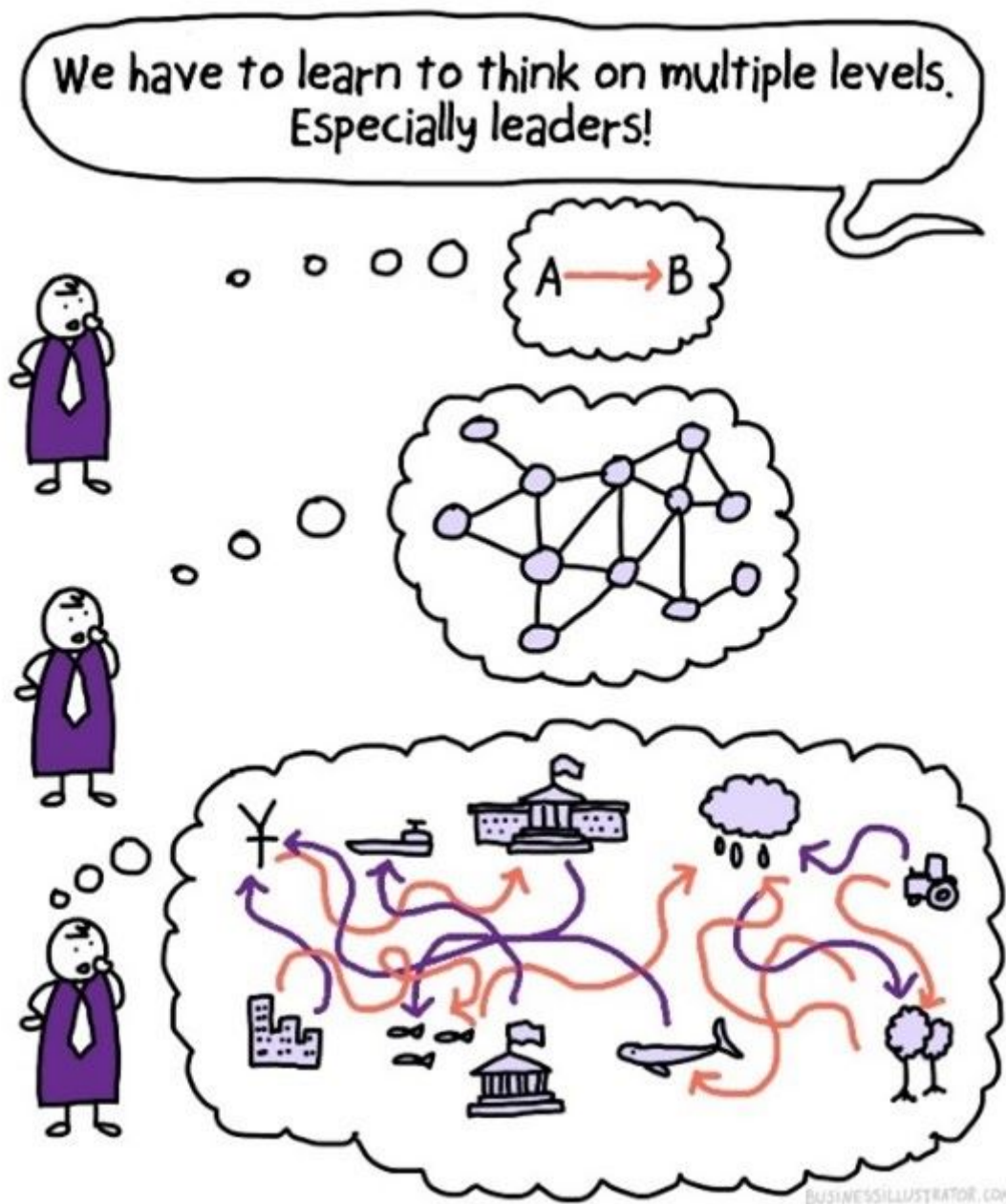
To each his own perspective

Top management usually has a helicopter view of the organisation and its environment. People in this position have a broad view and the responsibility to look forward and prepare for changes. As a result, they have a good sense of potential directions. However, their position means that they can't see all the details.

At the **operational level of an organisation**, it's the opposite. They experience lots of details and practicalities every day. People in those situations see opportunities, challenges, and risks in a different way.

Middle management is caught between these two perspectives. They need to adopt both, which can be tricky. People in this position play a vital role and influence many people. They work closely with people from different teams and should 'translate' and transfer information, both up and down.

They can spot the common ground between the top and the bottom. It's their job to flag these up to the top team and then pass on the info so that it gets back to the operational level. The more people are engaged and trust each other, the easier it is for middle management.



©Businessillustrator.com

Right person, right place, right time

Responsibly overachieving

In every organisation, you find people that always deliver when they're asked to, even exceeding expectations. They take responsibility seriously and are highly sought-after for project teams.

But this comes with a warning. You do not want them to be overloaded or eventually burnt out. They need to be protected against themselves. Frontrunning companies find a way to optimally fit these profiles in their circular projects. These key people are free from day-to-day operational tasks as much as possible. When they're trusted and free to build their own job content, they thrive.

They'll go out looking for tasks, projects, and initiatives. It's helpful to create good conditions and a periodic review process to keep in touch and collectively define how circular progress can be scaled.

Every circular practitioner has a leadership role, even if they're not in one.

Other profiles are also highly valuable when exploring circular initiatives. Some are more open to new ideas or see more opportunities in circularity than others.

Some people have more or less influence in different departments than others, regardless of their position in the company. If you want to get your message across, you might want to find the right person to send it to, so that it's passed on through multiple channels.

The key is to build a small, high-performing team with a good mix of skills and drive. This is more important than having a team with the right prior 'circularity knowledge'. Well-balanced teams can build up this required knowledge and expertise very quickly.

Many parts add up to a greater whole

One thing is for sure. One action might not result in direct effect. The repetition of actions and communication increases the chances of success. In the end, the indirect effects of all those actions are in general larger than the direct effects.¹

This is why a 'baby steps' approach fits in with this logic. Identify actions you can take in the short term that you can do yourself, without requiring anyone's permission. The key here is to generate interaction and open discussion. This is crucial to generate those indirect effects. The more people you get involved, the more actions they take and the greater the impact on the organisation.

Not only formal structures and collaborations lead to successes in circular projects. Alongside informal and low-profile actions are helpful and crucial to make circular progress. No single person from top, middle or operational level can handle all change, knowledge, action ... Some are better and effective in the existing formal structures, while others are flourishing more in low profile roles and their informal influence. We'll need all of them if we want to make the circular economy a reality.

This article is the third of a four-part series of articles on the relation between a person and an organisational structure, and how this affects their circular journey. In the first article, we highlighted [the importance of adapting your approach](#) and leadership to the type of challenge ahead. A second blog discussed the [benefits of embracing discomfort](#) and accepting certain feelings.

At Sirris, we help people in all kinds of roles in companies to get to grips with the challenges of the circular economy

We'd love to know if this information was helpful for you. Send us your feedback, reflections, suggestions, cases or examples.

[Get in touch](#)



Support from VLAIO.

Sources

- Illustrations: Virpi Oinonen from Businessillustrator.com.
- 1. Jan Rotmans, Mischea Verheijden, Omarm de Chaos, De Geus 2021

Authors



Thomas Vandenhaute