

The importance of a leadership approach to a business leader: the case of Jack Ma

By Jessica Tannoury * 

* DBA Candidate, Faculty of Business Administration, Beirut Arab University, Lebanon

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the leadership characteristics that contribute to an institution's commercial success. The article uses Jack Ma and his leadership characteristics and style as a case since he is a model example of a successful Chinese business leader in many ways. The primary objective is to discover how business executives judge the success of their organizations and what lessons can be drawn from Jack Ma's experience in that particular area. As a leader, Jack Ma has demonstrated a wide range of abilities. He's an excellent communicator, an excellent problem solver, and a solid decision-maker, and he can bring people together for a shared objective. When compared with other executives in other organizations, Ma's behavior and attitude toward his organization and its people stood out in a number of ways. The article concludes that it's not one's genes or innate talent, but how one learns to be a leader matters. There are several examples of various leaders in the article that demonstrate that leadership skills may be taught and learned rather than passed down to the younger generation. The article also discusses various types of leadership. For instance, a leader who has an especially high degree of "charismatic effects" on followers is classified as a charismatic leader. Whereas someone practicing visionary leadership has the capacity to create and communicate distinct visions that give direction and focus to an organization's work. Extrovert leaders, self-confident leaders, charismatic leaders, and moral and ethical leaders are only some of the various thoughts and theories concerning leadership.

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I. Introduction

Leadership is about learning; it is not about your genes or the skill you have inherited. - Jack Ma

There is a great deal of interest in the concept of leadership. If we analyse historical as well as contemporary interests, diverse stakeholders have been found to be drawn to leadership ideas (e.g., researchers, academics, businessmen, policymakers, political leaders, activists, non-profit organisations). Organizations are reforming to become more flexible and adaptive, so leaders

must be open to ongoing change. It demands new leadership principles focused on vision, additional effort, dedication, and pro-action (Cooper, 2005). So, leaders must be imaginative, hopeful, charismatic, and transformative (Lane et al., 2009). Leaders must be able to identify, define, and solve challenges in an environment of rising uncertainty and risk. Devouring new ways to engage, motivate, inspire, influence, and transform is a constant challenge for today's leaders. Jack Ma is a good example here.

Ma Yun, born on September 10th, 1964, in China, is Alibaba Group's founder and executive chairman. Alibaba, one of the biggest companies in the world, is also considered one of the most successful and rapidly growing e-commerce companies. When it comes to his influence and his seat in global power rankings, in 2014 Forbes magazine ranked Ma the 30th most influential person in the world. As a result, he was named Entrepreneur of the Year in Asia in 2015. Throughout 2017, Fortune magazine ranked Ma as the world's second-greatest leader, with the magazine's ranking placing him at number two. Jack Ma's fortune according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, totalled \$39.9 billion in assets by the end of November 2021.

There is an obvious interest in Jack Ma's and Alibaba's rapid progress. What is it about Ma that makes him such a formidable leader? What are his leadership traits, talents, and what type of actions does he take? This article revolves around these very issues.

II. Leadership styles: A theoretical literature review

Numerous studies have been conducted on leadership. The majority of these studies have established a correlation between corporate culture and success and the style of leadership and attitude of leaders. Voon et al. (2011) examined the effect of styles of leadership on job satisfaction in Malaysian public sector organizations. They focused on issues such as advantage of compensation, autonomy, security, and workplace flexibility, and discovered a stronger correlation between transformational leadership style and job satisfaction.

According to Chung – Hsiung Fang et al. (2009), leadership style influences organizational commitment and job satisfaction, whereas work satisfaction influences organizational commitment and performance. Leadership is primarily cultural, accepting established views, customs, and values. According to Goh Yuan et al. (2005), a leader's family, clan, and tribe greatly impact his or her leadership style. The executive's transactional or transformational leadership style is substantially correlated with employee evaluations of the executive's innovation atmosphere, according to Lu Ye et al. (2011). Against this backdrop, this research explores the connections between organizational leadership and corporate ethics, therefore improving the quality of organizational life for both employees and the wider community.

A leader's behaviour directly affects employee trust and satisfaction, according to Podsakoff et al. (1990). A leader's style is defined by a set of consistent conduct. Now more than ever, firms need leaders who can navigate a complicated global landscape. Leadership styles can influence organizational electivity and performance (Nahavandi A, 2002). Organizations, governments, and other social units have been attributed with their success or failure based on their leadership styles, according to Oladipo et al. (2013).

For instance, in a manufacturing company, Jeremy et al. (2012) noted, that leaders inspire individuals to discover their full potential and pursue goals with enthusiasm and honesty. Additionally, a poll they carried out discovered that the relationship between the boss and the employees had a substantial impact on employee satisfaction.

It is worth noting that the available literature on leadership focuses mostly on major industries and big companies, and largely demonstrates that leadership style, work engagement, and job happiness are all interconnected.

III. Leadership attributes of Jack Ma: Traits, skills, and behaviour

A. Jack Ma's Traits

Firstly, Ma is an inspirational and a visionary leader. Fundamentally, visionary leadership has been defined as the capacity to create and articulate compelling visions that give meaning and purpose to an organization's activities (Nanus, 1992; and Sashkin, 1992). Ma had established his unique personal vision to "create a marketplace that connects the world's small and medium-sized businesses engaged in global commerce" (Saikia, 2016). Later, under Ma's leadership, Alibaba grew to be a giant e-commerce company with hundreds of millions of customers worldwide. "Alibaba made the ambition of Chinese enterprises exploiting the internet to conduct business globally a reality" (Clark, 2016). In this way, Jack Ma's vision is evident in both his creativity (his ability to generate new ideas) and his commitment to innovation.

Second, Ma is a charismatic leader. In general, a charismatic leader is a leader "who has an unusually strong 'charismatic influence' on his or her supporters" (House, 1976). In fact, Ma has been dubbed "Jack Magic" because to his charisma and charm. His ability to "persuade and charm" aided him in attracting talent and finance to his firm, as well as enhancing his personal reputation (Clark, 2016). It has been argued that since he constantly appeals to people's emotions, Ma's charismatic power is founded on emotion (Clark, 2016). Ma is a great and fun-loving boss in this aspect, capable of putting his employees at ease and making them enjoy their time at work. As a result, his staff see him as a leader.

Ma, on the other hand, is an extroverted leader. According to studies on the five-factor model, extrovert leaders tend to be sociable, confident, active, and

have a high level of positive affect, whereas introverts are internally focused and have a low degree of positive effect (Watson, 2000). Aided by his extroverted nature, Ma achieved success only when "the task he was doing was something he was enthusiastic about" (Clark, 2016).

In addition, Ma is a self-confident leader. In principle, a number of theoretical studies of charismatic leadership have identified a leader's self-confidence as a significant predictor of leadership success and as a precursor to charismatic attributions (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Shamir et al., 1993). Ma would also have a strong self-confidence profile as a result of his high charismatic leadership profile. "We intend Alibaba to be one of the world's top ten websites," Ma asserted forcefully on the inaugural day of Alibaba's operations. "We wish Alibaba to be everyone's business partner, and we want to establish a business that will endure for the next 80 years!" (cited in Erisman, 2015)

Furthermore, Ma is an inspirational leader. According to the definition, inspirational leaders should increase their followers' identification with their work as well as their sense of involvement in the work itself, resulting in more favourable opinions (Sosik, 2006). In practice, Ma has inspired others via his tenacity, and despite his failure, he has developed himself into an ideal role model for success. Ma never gave up despite being denied 30 times by different businesses and ten times by Harvard University when he applied for jobs or a place for study. "If you don't give up," he replied, "you still have a chance", and that the "biggest failing is to surrender" (cited in Clark 2016). Ma is also an aspirational leader who motivates his followers by creating goals for them to reach by encouraging them to pursue their dreams. As his staff have often reported, he inspires them with his ideas, attitude, and managerial style.

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that Ma is recognized as a humble and down-to-earth person. There has been a shift in the type of roles that a leader must play. Owens and Hekman (2012), for instance, shifted the role of humility in a leader from peripheral to core. They argued that accentuating leader's humility was important for successful leadership. Throughout his life, Ma has stayed exceedingly humble, despite his enormous success, and early failures. This philosophy of modest leadership is arguably present in all aspects of Alibaba, including recruitment. Ma acknowledges that your employees should possess higher technical skills than you. If they don't, it's likely that you hired the wrong person (Montini, 2014). He is reported to be quite open to discussing his own faults. He admits that he is unsure about the effective manner to run his business, and that he's still experimenting. Furthermore, Ma promotes a sense of informality at work by requiring employees to have a nickname, rotating them among products and regions on a regular basis regardless of their knowledge, and allowing them to make recommendations in management decisions if they like (Clark, 2016).

Finally, Ma is a moral and ethical leader. In today's business and academic circles, the term ethical leadership has become a catchword. According to Brown et al. (2005), ethical leadership is defined as "the exhibition of normatively suitable behaviour through personal acts and interpersonal interactions, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). For him, it's not about the money. He is of the opinion that making money nowadays is pretty simple, however, making sustainable money while being socially responsible and changing the world is extremely difficult. Jack Ma's moral leadership is bolstered by his dedication to 'live' the company's six principles ("*Customer first*," "*trust*," "*integrity*," "*teamwork*," "*embrace change*," and "*passion*") in all actions, at all levels of the organization. Ma is a strong believer in morals and honesty, who has said in the past that he would rather shut down his company than to pay a bribe.

B. Jack Ma's skills

First and foremost, Ma is an excellent communicator. Several scholars have stated that effective communication is essential for effective leadership (Awamleh and Gardner 1999; Den Hartog and Verbarg 1997; Frese et al. 2003; Kirkpatrick and Locke 1996; Riggio et al. 2003; Shamir et al. 1994; Spangler and House 1991; Towler 2003). Throughout his professional life, Ma has always spoken freely and without notes. His communication approach is incredibly effective since his messages are simple and easy to comprehend. Many of his views, whether from his own speeches or from media sources, are widely disseminated on the Internet and in print. He is continuously seeking to make an impact on young people as well as potential company owners and entrepreneurs.

In addition, Ma displays exceptional problem-solving abilities. Problem solving and invention are highly valued skills in the software development and technology sectors, and are particularly important for executives and new entrepreneurs (Dyer et al., 2019). Thus, through "questioning, observing, and experimenting with events that challenged the established quo," Jack Ma learned "the most important components of life," according to the New York Times (Clark, 2016). He combines scientific, analytical, and collaborative techniques to solve problems and to achieve success.

Further to the two skills mentioned above, Ma is an excellent decision-maker. According to Bass (1990), leadership style, management decision-making style, and motivation are all important characteristics of managerial effectiveness. In practice, Ma's approach is straightforward: he seeks out problems and makes data-driven judgments. His decision-making process is evidence-based and technologically sophisticated. As a result, in 2017, Alibaba invested \$15 billion in building next-generation technology, which has become a standard for global corporations making judgments (Sadnan, 2019).

In order to accomplish a goal, Ma connects people together. In addition, he has the capability to adapt his strategy according to situation at hand. Similarly, the habit of goal setting has prompted Ma to set high performance criteria. To date, this idea has "demonstrated greater scientific validity" than every theory or approach to job motivation, according to (Locke & Latham, 1990). Thus, the model promotes and demands that leaders take into account both their employees and customers.

Ma's adaptability has certainly paid off. There is rising attention in a variety of talents that appear to be crucial for flexible and adaptable leadership. Effective leadership necessitates the capacity to detect and respond to changing conditions and crises, among other things (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). As demonstrated by Jack Ma, adaptability begins with an open mind, and this can be clearly seen in his practice. His willingness to confess when things aren't operating well and making changes as a result shows that this is the kind of person he truly is. Throughout his career, he shifted from an authoritarian (Chinese culture and empire mentality) approach to a more democratic one, depending on the market and the company's demands.

Finally, Ma has a profound effect on people's lives. Charisma and transformational leadership theories stress the necessity of leaders who have the ability to inspire positive leadership attitudes, a willingness to work together toward a common objective, and personal involvement in the job (e.g., Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Ma places a significant priority on the strategic importance of his employees. The first thing he does is keep track of the trajectory of his customers, so they may use their knowledge and experience. Global Intelligence (GQ), which includes characteristics like flexibility, attentiveness, curiosity, empathy, alignment, cooperation, and integration, is critical to his success as a global leader (Omaira & Sugam, 2018).

C. Jack Ma's behaviour

Alibaba places great importance on the well-being of both customers and staff (Matteson, 2014). When it came to making decisions, Jack Ma was known for including his staff. It is believed that people-oriented leaders care deeply about their employees' connections with each other, and they demonstrate this concern by establishing a warm and welcoming atmosphere (e.g., Beatty, 1988; Katz et al., 1950). As an example, he used to arrange yearly entertainment events, such as the Talent Show party, which he attended with his staff and truly liked. Every new employee would meet with him, and he would hold frequent staff meetings. The most significant aspect of his BBS Internet system was to let his employees to express their opinions and engage in informal conversation with one other (Alibabagroup.com, 2015).

Remarkably, the management Grid's classification of Jack Ma is as follows: Ma is a member of the rock band "Team Management". Team management, according to the Blake & Mouton model (1962), is the most effective leadership approach. There's no better way to show your employees that you care about what they think of your leadership than by having them praise you for it. In light of the aforementioned, Blake and Mouton say that Jack Ma's most effective approach is one that places a high value on people and tasks. In Ma's leadership it is visible that empowering employees, cultivating trust and respect in them, as well as providing them with a sense of autonomy, are the most important factors in creating a great work environment. As an example:

1. High Concern for People:

Ma is a team leader who inspires his followers by making them feel like they're part of a larger community. As CEO of Alibaba, he resigned, handing the reins up to Jonathan Lu. In the words of Ma and Alibaba, "the consumer always comes first". As a loving father, an inspiration, and a group leader all in one, he is adored by his Alibaba colleagues. And, he appears to have complete confidence in his employees.

2. High Concern for Production:

When Ma realised, for instance, eBay's growing influence in China, he came up with ideas that countered eBay's growth. As a result, Tmall (a business-to-consumer company) and Taobao.com (a consumer-to-consumer company) were designed to attract customers by providing e-commerce services akin to that of eBay. Ma's high concern for innovation and production is also reflected on the Chinese Alibaba.com's huge R&D investment, which is estimated to be 15 billion USD. This is particularly interesting at a time when there has been a lot of hype about "big data" (Parker, 2018).

IV. Critical and reflective thinking about Jack Ma leadership

In the preceding section, it was highlighted how Jack Ma possesses a diverse set of characteristics and talents, as well as leadership abilities, which all contribute to his success in business.

In addition to his many accomplishments, Jack Ma, like every other individual on the earth, has his share of weaknesses and failings. In terms of strength, he had an inspiring personality, and he was known for always motivating his staff at the job. As a result of his great communication abilities, he chose to work as Chief Executive Officer in his company for a long time rather than simply staying as its president. As far as his weaknesses are concerned, it can be argued that he kept himself mostly really warm and passionate, which may be a hindrance when it comes to being strict and making a choice as a

business leader. For instance, because of this sort of tendency, in participatory leadership situations, in which people are encouraged to provide input and establish a democratic decision-making process, a diluted corporate strategy might be expected since no one has a clear idea of the course the organization has to take (Bealer et al. 2014).

Another problem was his overconfidence in his people, which isn't always a good thing when it comes to management. There are disadvantages because the closer managers grow to their subordinates, the fuzzier the lines become between when the boss must be the boss and when the boss cannot be the boss (Kanter, 2003).

From a personal standpoint and analysis, operating in a very relation-oriented style may interfere with the leaders' ability to influence followers, as well as undermine respect for the rules and processes. Because of this, while effective leaders must be transformative, they must not sacrifice their charisma for the sake of their effectiveness inside the company. They also must keep an appropriate level of power gap between themselves and their followers.

Being overtly critical of political establishment could be considered Ma's one of weaknesses also. While this would not be the case if he were a political activist or, for instance, a journalist. However, when a business leader cannot satisfy the political establishment he or she is dealing with, that might result in a situation that might not be so favourable for the business that he or she is leading. In 2020, when Ma voiced his dissatisfaction of the Chinese financial management system, he disappeared for more than two months. While he might have been right as a Chinese citizen, but from business point of view, publicly criticizing an authoritarian government and not realising that it could hamper your business can be considered a weakness.

V. Lessons learned from Jack Ma Leadership

In my view, Jack Ma is a deserving individual who serves as an inspiration to many people, particularly those who aspire to be entrepreneurs. He is a great example that achieving success is not straightforward, and there are a variety of obstacles that might prevent an entrepreneur from succeeding. Individuals and enterprises may benefit from studying Jack Ma as a role model, whether in terms of leadership style, personality, organization, leadership advice, and even his quotations. Doing so may help them achieve their goals more quickly.

It can be learned from Jack Ma that the key to managing an organization and its people sustainably is to integrate transformative, charismatic, and visionary leadership styles. Apart from defining suitable organizational goals, combining two or more leadership styles is beneficial as far as maximizing employee capabilities is concerned. A peek into Jack Ma's leadership style is

sufficient to demonstrate that adopting a particular style based on a single behavioural characteristic might be counterproductive.

These arguments are mainly based on findings of a research by Hede (2001), in which he drew from already available theories of leadership and proposed the Integrated Multi-Style Model. Its primary differentiating feature is that it recognizes that a leader's or manager's performance is decided by their multi-style pattern across numerous behavioural aspects, not just one.

In my own situation, I should reassess my supervisory activities, since integrating a more transformational approach will provide workers more flexibility, allowing them to contribute their creativity to the company and complete tasks in their own unique way. Brooks and Seers (1991) assert that managerial techniques can have an effect on employee commitment. The critical nature of commitment in the hospitality industry has been well established and discussed by a number of researchers, who suggest that certain leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Van et al., 2014), authentic leadership (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004), supportive leadership (Mahdi et al., 2014), and servant leadership (Mahdi et al., 2014), can positively influence employee job commitment (Van et al., 2014).

I gained as much from the example of his dedication, effort, vision, and optimism. Nobody can dispute the immense motivation that Jack Ma wields on many individuals. Ma as a successful business leader and a visionary has always had had a positive influence on me, even before I began writing this paper. As it is evident now, he has had several, often bad, experiences since he was a child, and most of them involved failure and rejection. He does, however, continue to have an optimistic outlook, which drives him to be a warrior. As apparent in his speeches and interviews, he believes that bad situations in life provide necessary possibilities for progress and success. Ma's idea of utilizing setbacks to furthering one's development is particularly useful.

I feel that we, Lebanese people, must adopt this optimistic and persevering attitude to overcome the current crisis. In addition, I also learnt from Jack Ma that, at times, there is need for shifting leadership dynamics, of being adaptable and having an adaptive mindset as our environment is continuously changing. For instance, when things did not go according to plan, Jack Ma shifted his leadership style from an 'autocratic' one to transformative. Adaptability, on the other hand, is inextricably linked to situational leadership.

According to Hersey (1984), the essence of Situational Leadership is the recognition that leadership does not come in a "one-size-fits-all" package. Leaders must be adaptable to shifting conditions and external forces. This experience would be advantageous for me, particularly as I work with real clients. Additionally, COVID-19 has increasingly stressed the need of adaptation, especially in the hospitality business. For instance, this ability may assist me in

re-analysing the new chances that may arise as a result of post-COVID-19 client behaviour.

Finally, I argue that anyone looking for a role model for successful entrepreneurship and a business empire building should thoroughly read Jack Ma's biography. His humble origins and meteoric climb to the top demonstrate the huge potential that the market offers to those willing to recognise an opportunity and work on it. Jack Ma and his successful enterprises show that to reach the summit, you'll need an ideal concept and execution, as well as a great deal of effort and perseverance.

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Notes on Contributors

Jessica Tannoury is a DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) Candidate, Faculty of Business Administration, Beirut Arab University, Lebanon.

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