Leaders as Builders of Great Teams

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Abstract

Leading media companies is a daunting task. Difficulties come both from the market and from the company itself. It is not easy to find the proper balance between the demands of audiences, advertisers, owners, employees and regulators. Leaders in this industry need to be long-term oriented, have an ability to motivate, strong beliefs, be able to embrace change and eagerness to understand what the public wants. These attitudes allow them to create excellent teams, which at the end of the day is the most sustainable competitive advantage.

Introduction and context

The media industry is facing a fundamental challenge: it has to win the confidence of an ever more demanding public (Wolf, 1999; McChesney and Nicols, 2002). This task is becoming more difficult for two main reasons. First, new ways of obtaining news and entertainment are appearing all the time, and these also compete amongst themselves to become the people’s choice. Second, the public have a wider basis for judgement and a growing critical awareness: they compare the quality of products and services and detect errors, lack of originality and attempts to manipulate reality.

A critical understanding of the media can be traced back to the first newspaper publications in the seventeenth century. Renaudot, founder of the first magazine in History, La Gazzetta, relied on support from Richelieu to create the weekly publication which subsequently became a means of communication for the French Government. However, when the Cardinal died he was accused of being an usurer and doomed to refrain from practising his profession from there on.

The number of publications with the name Gazette and Mercury increased very rapidly throughout Europe from this point onwards, above all in France, Germany, Holland, Italy and Great Britain, before making the leap to the American Continent. Despite the popular success of these publications, criticism appeared immediately: Ben Johnson, in his comedy The Staple of News, assured all in 1625 that journalists, ‘with the aim of creating a sensation, will not stop before reporting any lie’ (Díaz Noci, 2000).

Other writers have perpetuated the same idea for over nearly 400 years (Sánchez-Tabernero, 1989): ‘It is the one great weakness of journalism as a picture of our modern existence, that it must be a picture made up entirely of
exceptions’ - wrote Chesterton in *The Ball and the Cross*. Proust explained that reading *Le Figaro* each morning allowed him to learn about all the misfortunes and catastrophes which had befallen the whole universe within the last 24 hours; and Claude Vignon, one of the characters in Balzac’s *Lost Illusions*, declared that all newspapers are but a shop in which the public are sold words of whatever colour they may desire.

Recently, new criticisms have arisen alongside traditional ones: that the media is leaning excessively towards entertainment; that there exists a greater propensity to be influenced by advertisers and pressure groups; that an agglomeration of like minds may silence the voice of the minority; and that there is a deterioration in the distinction between news and entertainment, as well as between editorial and advertising content (McChesney and Scott 2004; Lessig, 2004).

There is nothing new about the fact that famous journalists deliberately mislead the public, and report as news something which is purely the product of their imagination. Perhaps the most famous case was that of Janet Cooke of *The Washington Post* who in 1980 related the tragic story of Jimmy, an Afro-American child of eight years old with a terrible family background who was introduced to the world of heroin by his mother’s boyfriend. Cooke and the *Post* won the Pulitzer Prize for this story but were obliged to return it when Cooke confessed she had invented it.

While that fiasco was viewed as an isolated incident, an accumulation of similar incidents in recent years – involving journalists at prestigious media outlets like *The New York Times* (Jayson Blair), *USA Today* (Jack Kelley), *Slate* (Jay Forman) or *The New Republic* (Stephen Glass) – seems to suggest that managers of media companies are more concerned about audiences, advertising revenue and profit than about filters and control systems, or in short, about not letting the public down (Gamble and Watanabe, 2004; Gitlin, 2002). For many, these examples confirm the hypothesis that commercialisation really does imply a reduction in the quality of content.

If for the news media, the value of truth appears to have gone down in that last few years, the entertainment sector is facing even worse problems. In the field of news reporting, the truth has not ceased to be the ethical and professional reference point, and although cases of manipulation and distortion of reality are prolific nobody is attempting to justify the invention of facts or the telling of false facts.

On the other hand, it is not at all easy to find an ethical reference point in entertainment content. The concept of ‘respect for human dignity’ has been mooted by many. But beyond this weak consensus – the application of this concept, that is determining whether something has ‘enough dignity’ or not - is proving difficult.
External problems and internal deficiencies

Problems perceived externally by the public nearly always have their origins in deficiencies in internal work practices within media companies. Media organisations with poor leadership and weak newsroom management may win the confidence of the public, but only for a short time. Industry leaders can play a crucial role here: they know that the public is fickle and changes their preferences according to whim, but they also know that if they maintain a level head, follow their own convictions and uphold professional standards they can build a consistent, solid brand capable of withstanding mercurial public tastes. They are aware, even though it seems contradictory, that automatically adapting to market demands as and when required prevents the creation of strong long-lived products and nearly always threatens long-term survival.

Talent is the raw material of these companies, and their competitive advantage comes from generating original, attractive media content that respects truth and human dignity. Therefore in order to achieve professional excellence boards of directors must direct as much effort into the ways in which they select, train and motivate employees, as they do into investments in new production facilities, negotiating bank loans, or improving distribution channels (Postman, 1986; Albarran, 2002).

Over the last few years the deterioration in working conditions in the media (more so in the news sector than the entertainment sector), has been the principal complaint amongst professionals who work in the field. Those who work in regional news are more severely affected than those who work in national news organisations. This problem has many symptoms, and indicative examples include:

a) Large differences in salaries. A few employees earn a great deal and a great deal of employees earn very little. Young people who take up their first post as interns or traineeships are prepared to accept a very low salary because the number of people looking for work in the field is far higher than the number of jobs available. A handful will eventually make themselves ‘irreplaceable’ and receive a significant improvement in their compensation. The others, especially once they have been with a company for more over two years and have barely progressed, will become de-motivated. To compound the problem, many companies now combine a fixed percentage of permanent employees with a significant percentage of interns or trainees which is replaced regularly. The high staff turnover that results makes the creation of a stable, solid workforce outstandingly difficult, which in turn undermines commitment and quality.

b) Abuse of the concept ‘collaborator’. Collaborators are defined as specialists who work sporadically on a freelance basis for a specific media company. However, there are occasions when such individuals work full-time yet do not have access to the same rights and protection as permanent members of staff. In this way the company reduces its staff costs and increases its flexibility, but also creates a group of professionals who are barely involved in the future of the media they are employed in.
c) Multi-employment. Deterioration in working standards forces some staff to have two jobs, or at least find supplementary ways of earning income to compensate for sporadic work. These people have their attention focused on how to earn a reasonable salary rather than on how to do the best possible job.

d) An obsession with outsourcing. Shareholder returns — irrespective of whether a company is publicly listed or not — are increased primarily by reducing costs. Many companies resort to outsourcing as a means of increasing efficiency and flexibility simultaneously. Entrusting an ever growing number of tasks to a third party means a company can pressurise suppliers to lower their prices because if they do not they can simply switch to another supplier. However, since no company exists to generate profits for another, the supplier inevitably passes these pressures back down the supply chain: it buys poor raw materials or low quality products. Due to their intangible nature, news and entertainment content is affected more by this than are more tangible activities. For example, it is easier to apply systems of quality control to car manufacturing than to the creation of fictional stories or current event coverage.

e) An obsolete pyramid structure. In media companies there are often too many rungs in the corporate ladder and an excessive rigidity in the flow of information, neither of which further creativity or the ability to make quick decisions. A recent study of the Spanish press (Zorrilla, 2005) highlighted that in the majority of newspapers there are at least six or seven rungs between the editor in chief and the most junior journalists.

Pyramid-like structures increase anonymity and an over-fragmentation of tasks and responsibilities. Media companies structured in this way can look like assembly lines: to increase productivity each employee’s function is strictly limited with the boundaries that are difficult to overcome. Climbing the corporate ladder becomes a game of chance: the most creative employees tend to be promoted up to the next rung, but as they had little experience of management, the company risks losing a good journalist or script writer or designer, and gaining a bad manager.

This type of hierarchical structure prevents group decisions being reached by a process of consensus-building, in which everyone has a say and in which analysis has been enriched by a plethora of ideas that come from many different perspectives. Rather, if managers try to instigate debate their suggestions tend to be interpreted as orders. In pyramid organizations managers rarely contradict higher status executives because this can jeopardise their own prospects (Magretta, 2002)

f) Poor internal communication. However paradoxical it may seem, in many media companies there exist isolated ‘islands of information’ to which only a small group of employees have access. This means that knowledge is fragmented, experiences are not shared and many employees do not know the real situation of the company nor the objectives it aims to achieve. These deficiencies relate as much to vertical flows of communication as to horizontal. In the first place, lack of communication nearly always has its origin in the fear held by
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management that their subordinates will misunderstand internal news or will filter information to competitors. Although these risks do exist, it is even more dangerous that the team do not know what is happening in their own company (Pringle and Gordon, 2001).

In particular, organisations tend to hide negative information concerning financial performance, audience numbers or levels of audience satisfaction, advertising revenues, brand success, and so on. However, secretiveness about such issues can give rise to alarming rumours, which are far harder for management to control, not least because they are often the last to hear them.

The problems found in vertical communication flows often have other causes: employees' eagerness to 'protect their position' or make themselves indispensable; lack of trust in co-workers; insufficient opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences; and above all, the absence of a leader capable of integrating individuals and building teams.

The results of a survey of executives in Spanish communication companies do not inspire optimism (Jiménez and Sánchez-Tabernero, 2005). Only eight percent of companies have a public document available to all employees that defines the working practices and professional conduct required by the company. Only twenty nine percent of firms have a written document outlining the promotion process for personnel. Over 50 percent of the companies have no publicly available documents describing the internal organisation, the evaluation system, or company rules and regulations.

Although the problems described above affect some companies more than others and vary from country to country, after analysing dozens of communication companies in the Spanish market, we have only found a very few examples of excellent management of teams. The reasons include the usual difficulties in human relations, the economic pressures on the sector described above, and a shortage of theoretical recommendations on 'best practice' or on ways to evaluate current human resource policies.

The fundamental contradiction here is that there has never been so much pressure to treat employees as mere productive resources, yet it has never been more risky to do so. There is a strong pressure to respond to increasing commercial pressures, especially for public companies which must publish their results every three months. However a growing number of competitors are ready to seize the opportunity presented by low quality media products generated by employees disenchanted with their company.

The media industry needs leadership to resolve this critical dilemma. It needs people who are capable of reconciling economic efficiency with high staff motivation. Such individuals will achieve short-term success, but are also committed to protecting the future of their companies.
The Attitude of Leaders

Leadership comprises both innate and acquired components. Most leaders possess a natural ability to motivate others. However, and critically, most also an internal conviction which compels them to behave in such a way that their colleagues follow them: it is not possible to drag others behind you if you do not yourself believe the goal is worth it. Innate characteristics, such as persuasive ability, cannot increase employee commitment to an unclear or uninspiring goal. Conversely, deficiencies of personality can be overcome if the overall goal is perceived as being worthwhile.

A good leader therefore will lack neither conviction nor large projects. If a goal is worthwhile, it will also be worth waiting for. A good leader is patient because he or she knows that the best achievements require constancy, the ability not to be defeated by the first few hurdles, and the persistence to keep trying for extended periods.

The art of leadership appears to be strongly linked to peaceful change without ‘collateral damage’, and an aim of achieving dynamic stability (Abrahamson, 2000). Good leaders try to harmonize change with permanency: they are not simply ‘rebels’ or anarchists, nor do they tremble at the slightest adversity. Rather, they try to build a ‘loyal opposition’. To instigate successful change they observe their surroundings and promote imitation. They try not to forget the past, and innovate on a small scale to begin with.

In some ways, organizations find change as difficult as human beings do. In general, they tend to be fearful and conformist. Good leaders know they must combat the dangers that lie in wait for anyone attempting change: disappointment, cynicism and despair. This is why they concentrate on forming the capacity for initiative and innovation. They propose changes which rely on communication skills and endeavour to develop confidence and loyalty. They promote freedom rather than control, because to force change and to allow oneself to become carried away by impatience can impede change (Semler, 2000).

In their eagerness to generate support for worthwhile projects, good leaders tirelessly look for horizontal communication as much as for vertical, and listen more than they speak. A leader must have dialogue with employees and consumers because value is often created outside-in, that is by involving others in the creation of ideas and solutions (Magretta, 2002). This approach can have its pitfalls, above all if the customers or employees consulted are dissatisfied, but this ‘necessary evil’ will ultimately strengthen both the input and the character of the leader (Smock, 1998; Steel, 2000).

A commitment to self development is a crucial characteristic of good leaders. They have convictions, courage, optimism and fierce resolve, have developed a habit of effort, and tolerate frustration. They are self-depreciating and tenacious (Collins, 2001). They have a realistic understanding of their limitations, but their eagerness to address these means they avoids the sterile vacuum of self-determinism that dictates character deficiencies can never be found.
Change leaders establish participative organisations where hierarchy is limited. They do not seek to be indispensable and therefore do not keep important information to themselves. They look for a degree of egalitarianism and cooperation predominates. This ‘democratising’ tendency means leading without a dictatorial or abuse of power – it could be termed a strategy of confidence, which insists on promoting a solid culture (Coutu, 2000). To a large degree, this form of leadership means to provide inspiration, give direction and to unite professional hopes and wishes.

This leadership style tries to balance a degree of ‘intolerance’ about anything that might threaten fundamental company values with an enthusiastic search for innovation. The leader listens to ‘cynics’ because they can coldly dissect problems. They also pay attention to ‘enthusiasts’ who are always ready to collaborate. But they worry above all about the silent majority, those who will not speak unless asked.

In one way or another, good leaders communicate to their employees that the company is beginning anew over every day as a result of their contributions. They make a great effort to build confidence (Waldroop & Butler 2000) through rectifying mistakes, accepting criticism, keeping promises, tolerating errors, recognising the achievements of others and knowing when to allow others to take the lead if necessary. Such leaders stand out due to their ability to delegate and to look for a successor. They realise that they cannot do everything nor can they be over controlling micromanagers (Pringle and Gordon, 2001). They also know that they need their employees and customers to achieve change, which is why they encourage team work and build coalitions.

However, risks lie in wait for the leader who is the instigator of change. These can be summarised in six main points:

1) Taking on too many projects over a too long period of time and insisting that their subordinates do the same (inadequate prioritisation).
2) Approaching tasks in an overly objective and rational manner, and imposing this approach on the entire organisation. As a consequence indispensable subtler activities can be disregarded such as lobbying, consensus building and negotiation (extreme rationalism).
3) Attempting to subjugate others by encouraging in-fighting for power and control (keeping control by dividing subordinates).
4) Focusing on what may go wrong instead of considering how things may improve (paying more attention to threats rather than to opportunities).
5) Attacking authority and the established conventions head on (failing to consider other options).
6) Trying to achieve too much in too little time (excessive hurry).

A study of the ten most successful, longest lasting communication companies in the Spanish market from 1980-2003 showed that in all cases there were one or more leaders capable of motivating employees (Pérez Latre and Sánchez-
Tabernero, 2003). Of the examples analysed, which included print, audiovisual and interactive media firms with different sizes and varying ownership structures, there was one common factor - a committed management team with long-term objectives, which involved employees they trusted the most, resulting in the creation of a culture of confidence and optimism.

When interviewed, nearly all these leaders confirmed that their achievements derived from the quality of their teams – although some also referred to favourable circumstances and luck. What is clear is that none of them considered that personally had been primarily responsible for their company’s success.

These leaders shared other traits: an eagerness to know what the public want that led them to view consumer data or market research alone as insufficient. They demonstrated an active disposition to observe, listen to and analyze the likes and preferences of individual customers. Quite a few dedicated time to reading customer letters and emails, others asked for a résumé of complaints received or some occasionally took telephone calls from readers, listeners, viewers or internet users.

Of the companies studied, ‘wonderful ideas’ were not a decisive factor in the change process. The points of departure were nearly always existing concepts that were adapted through tried and tested processes over a long period of time. Thus good leaders are not necessarily product and service innovators, but rather through their tenacity and ability to motivate employees they achieve small advances which are valued by the public. Many dominant market positions are based on these victories which are perhaps not dazzling, but are constant and effective.

Creating an Attractive Mission

Leadership is not only based on courage and good intentions, it also requires a deep understanding of the intrinsic nature of one’s own professional activity: the rules of the game, and the explicit and implicit norms commonly accepted by the main protagonists (suppliers, distributors, employees, competitors, regulators, etc.). This knowledge allows others to be guided towards an attractive and obtainable goal (Katzenbach, 1998).

Along with other distinct features, the media industry is characterised by the fact it directs its messages towards five distinct groups simultaneously:

- a) the public, who seek to learn about the news or to be entertained;
- b) advertisers, who want to reach a particular target group and to prevent any adverse comment in the press which may be detrimental to their commercial interests;
- c) employees, who will object to content that contravenes their professional standards and ethical convictions;
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d) owners, who would like their media organisations’ newspapers, magazines, radio programmes, television channels or web sites to support other companies they may own;

e) regulators, who normally treat those who are comment positively about them favourably and tend to ‘punish’ those who criticise them.

Other industries lack such complexity in terms of stakeholder groups. Cars, furniture, houses and computers are designed and produced basically to satisfy the demands of their respective users. On the other hand, the leaders of media companies must find a balance between these conflicting demands and understand the value of delivering to each different audience.

Without full understanding of how media companies function, it is not possible to find a coherent strategy that will motivate employees in the long term (Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001). One of the main conflicts is the difficulty in reconciling company objectives with the goal of profit maximisation. This problem becomes aggravated when a leader assumes that the majority of the public want ‘trash products’. This dilemma as clear as it is discouraging: low quality content reduces employee commitment, as well as bringing other adverse consequences. However if media firms adhere to high professional standards and supply something which the public is not interested in, there will also be adverse consequences.

Fortunately, the contradiction between quality and profit yield does not exist, or at least, not to such a grave extent. Rather, because of their appeal to human curiosity, ‘trash products’ are the best way of introducing something quickly into the market, although very rarely do they survive for a long period of time.

In this way, it is understood that to lead implies to relinquish. Excellent executives know that if they focus on quick wins today, they cannot construct the barriers which will allow them to protect their market position. However, to lead also means knowing that the success of ‘trash products’ increases above all when there is a lack of attractive, quality alternatives. A high level of consumption does not necessarily mean a high level of satisfaction (Anderson, 2004).

The mission of each media must be adapted to the nature of its activity. Referents which cannot be ignored exist in the news sector, such as respect for the truth, privacy and the good reputation of people. In the entertainment sector, the core ethic consists of respect for human dignity, and as a result, avoiding content that generates hate, violence, sheer self-interest or any other type of moral degradation.

The most prestigious news organisations rely on leaders who can act decisively when faced with strong competition. They can be change agents yet maintain the identity of their companies. They can interpret the present and contextualise recent history. They have discovered new narrative genres, which are enjoyable and truthful at the same time. In short, they have gone beyond
the call of their mission, which consists of providing comprehensible, interesting, useful, and relevant content for the public.

The news carries out a function of social cohesion. It integrates people into their communities, it generates interest in problems away from home, it opens the mind to new perspectives and far away events, it facilitates the necessary context to help us understand the world we live a little better (Gamble and Watanabe, 2004).

News industry leaders set out to achieve their public function and make a profit at the same time. They do not see an incompatibility between the two objectives. Economic stability allows them to face external pressures, which otherwise could force one to leave behind the demands of the public. And interest in providing a service to customers favours good brand reputation and reader, listener or viewer loyalty.

In the entertainment sector, leaders are aware that the stories they tell influence society. They could help people to be more generous and tolerant, or on the other hand, they could incite unsupportive, selfish and violent behaviour. For this reason, they never justify certain content simply because the public wants it, in the same way that poison would not be supplied indiscriminately to whoever asked for it.

Not only do they try to avoid products and services which may cause harm, but they also attempt to use products which have a positive effect on people. Their talent serves this purpose: they manage to motivate their colleagues to devise worthwhile and attractive material. In addition, they strengthen the value of their brands and differentiate themselves from those who choose the easier method of attracting public attention.

Excellent media companies, irrespective of whether they are dedicated to news or entertainment, are difficult to displace. The leaders of these companies know that to protect their position they need to build a large professional team, strengthen their identity, respect professional standards and drive innovation. And, above all, they remember at all times that the principle reason their organisation exists is to serve the public.

**Building an Excellent Team**

The mission identifies the destination we want to arrive at. But this goal can only be achieved if a group of people are prepared to follow the path towards it. As a result, the key aspect of the leader’s work is to build the best possible team in order to develop achieve the goals that have been identified, realise the selected project.

The best executives know that content is generated by the heart of communication companies. They waste no effort to ensure that heart never skips a beat, and keeps to a regular rhythm. They achieve this by paying employees adequately, establishing training and professional development
programmes, providing information about company plans, recognising success, tolerating mistakes and creating the space to allow for innovation.

The best quality pages in a newspaper or broadcast programmes produced by a group of professionals conceal hours of work, an abundance of creativity and a good dose of talent. There are also doubts, occasional mistakes, and frequent discussions about how to approach a story or how much time or space it should occupy. But each decision is based on a desire to provide the public with attractive and useful content which promotes human values (Herman and Chomsky, 2002).

The construction of an exceptional team requires wise decision making in five essential areas: a) the selection criteria; b) the creation of training programmes; c) processes that have been designed to motivate staff; d) the appropriate organisational structure and finally e) adjusting the team composition as necessary.

When selecting their team, leaders must avoid one classic error - the selection of people to solve specific and immediate problems. This is something which over-values specific experience at the expense of other skills such as an ability to collaborate, talent, industriousness, being in tune with the company objectives, communication skills, honesty, optimism, and common sense etc., which have more value in the long term. Leaders must also avoid the strategy of mediocrity which involves surrounding themselves with talentless employees of limited aspirations in order to make themselves indispensable. To the contrary, good leaders look for people with initiative and leadership potential who do not simply unquestioningly accept instructions 'from above' and will challenge their bosses when necessary.

The training programmes depend on available resources and other internal aspects of the organisation. However, regardless of the situation, good leaders will ensure that all employees are able to continue to learn: by studying, by performing different roles and tasks at work, by attending courses and seminars or via whatever other methods are cost-effective.

Poor leadership can result in processes becoming routinised and to priority being given to comfort over efficiency. For example, in a recent study on the Spanish daily press, Zorrilla (2005) revealed that in 51 percent of companies journalists have done the same type of job for more than three years, and in 33 percent of companies they never or nearly never change departments. Managers and employees prefer to maintain a status quo which guarantees preservation of news sources (which are nearly always based on personal relationships), above the possibility of creating new professional challenges for journalists.

Motivating a team is achieved through several integrated actions: a fair salary, an attractive career path, interesting work, accessible managers, pleasant working conditions, and good information about company objectives. However, some individuals will maintain, for various reasons, a critical attitude towards their company, even in the most favourable working conditions.
this reason, one of the selection criteria consists in selecting employees whom it is possible to motivate.

As Pérez-López (1992) points out, human motivation can be classified into three types: extrinsic, intrinsic and transcendent. The first refers to what employees receive in exchange for their work (salary, bonuses, prestige, recognition...), the second is derived from job satisfaction, and the latter is a consequence of discovering that the task carried out is useful to others.

Leaders know their people and discover that what motivates some leaves others indifferent. For this reason they do not manage their team with fixed rules applicable to all: they share the idea that each person is an individual, who deserves special attention, and for this reason they are open to exceptions, providing that these do not harm others or generate internal confusion.

Executives with a great ability for leadership establish organisational systems with limited hierarchies. They are not afraid of dialogue or for someone to dispute their ideas, because they do not try to impose their own criteria but to select the best option for their organisation, (Collins, 2001). They are conscious that the commitment of their team is only possible with flat structures, open communication flows and delegation of responsibilities to those who occupy the lower part of the pyramid.

The last step in the construction of a successful team consists in establishing a suitable dismissal policy. Perhaps this aspect is the main touchstone which measures the courage of leaders. On one hand, they do not lay off some employees when the economic climate becomes complicated. They look for creative solutions - such as how to launch a new project, or reduce costs, and they accept temporary reductions in benefits because they value preservation of an outstanding team to which they have dedicated a great deal of time and effort. Yet at the same time, they do not tolerate the existence of lazy, slack individuals or those who dedicate themselves to creating a negative internal atmosphere. They sense that these employees constitute a serious threat to the motivation of the entire team, because they work little and receive the same reward as other colleagues who put in maximum effort and contribute much more to the company.

The discipline of leadership is based on convictions, character and knowledge. Convictions serve to create an ambitious and useful goal for society. A strong character prevents the adoption of easy solutions or being overcome by the short-term successes achieved by rivals. And, finally, knowledge ensures that the right priorities will be set - to choose an attractive project and to build an excellent team, capable of putting theory into practice.

**Bibliography**


