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# The Strength of Roots to Anticipate the Future

by Giuseppe Soda\*

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*Thus, astride our bucket, we shall face the new millennium, without hoping to find anything more in it than what we ourselves are able to bring to it.*

*Italo Calvino*

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**The long march of managerial culture in Italy will mark two important anniversaries in the coming months: fifty years of the SDA Bocconi School of Management and thirty years of *Economia&Management*. Two birthdays that can be considered in the family, one strictly linked to the other, not only due to the vision of the founder Claudio Dematté that unites them.**

This article reconstructs the foundational, and in a certain sense invisible elements, that have allowed that vision to drive the construction of one of the principal schools of management in Europe and transform the professional life, and more, of tens of thousands of people who have passed through the halls of the SDA Bocconi. This article is dedicated to the dream of Claudio Dematté and all of the people who worked with him in those unrepeatable years.

## SEIZING THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

In 1971, the School of Management (SDA) of the Bocconi University was imagined and founded by a group of young professors with the goal of giving Italy, its industrial companies, businesses, and institutions a place in which to train a competent governing class, able to guide development and face the great challenges of society and economy. If we look back carefully at that history, from the start that group of professors understood that the impact on the country and society would have been significant to the extent that it

went beyond the managerial class. The SDA was thus born as a school that was open to the whole world of business – independent of company size – and public and private institutions, able to dialogue not only with leaders and entrepreneurs, but also with professionals, talented youth, mid-level managers and clerical workers. In that initial vision, managerial culture, the values of competence, responsibility, and merit, together with the force of technical ability, represented the engines of social mobility and fundamental nourishment for development and growth.

The strict link with the spirit of the times, together with the continuous challenge for modernity and progress, are the foundations of the vision that led to the birth of the SDA, and twenty years later, to the *Economia&Management* project that extended the perimeter of action of that intuition well beyond the halls of the



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school. The people who over the course of these years have been involved with the SDA Bocconi courses and the articles and columns of *Economia&Management* have always recognized and appreciated the capacity to seize the time and challenges of the moment.

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## *SDA and Economia&Management were conceived as universes of creation of new ideas and techniques*

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Thus, when at the end of the 1970s the global economy showed the first signs of globalization, the SDA decided that it would open itself to the world, launching programs for the international market – starting with the Master in Business Administration in English – being aware that Milan and Italy would be able to meet that challenge and that such an approach would make our industrial system and institutions stronger and more competitive. When in the 1980s the wave of deregulation led to considering the public sector as having come to the end of the line, the SDA – like the Bocconi University itself – launched new programs dedicated to the training of decision-makers and public management, in local and national administrations, and in the health sector. At the same time, *Economia&Management* hosted contributions and reflections precisely on the transformations that were affecting management. In that same period, the birth of the internet drove an unrepeatable season of growth and the creation of new businesses and sectors, before the great delusion caused by the dot-com bubble. In those years, both the SDA and the magazine asked the question of how much technology would truly transform business models and enterprises. And then came the time of the dominant model of shareholder value and hyperbolic finance, followed by the critical reflection and affirmation of content around the themes of corporate social responsibility, business ethics, and sustainable finance. We thus came to the years of the digital revolution, that make it increasingly inevitable that the future leaders of private and public organizations will be exposed to the science of data, analytics, the management and organizational implications of robotics and artificial intelligence.

These are only some examples, among the many possible, that mark the constant determination of the SDA Bocconi and *Economia&Management* to be close to students, managers, entrepreneurs, and readers in the passages and crucial moments of the economic and social evolution not only of our country but also of the international context. Despite some errors in evalua-

tion, the School and the magazine were always driven by a constant tension, always seeking to ride the most advanced waves of transformation of society, the economy, technology, and sometimes even managerial fads, to make available to businesses and the community a dynamic platform of knowledge, skills, and innovative ideas. And it is precisely the capacity to seize the challenges of the times that amplifies the role of training and knowledge as a great force for transformation. A force that in the first place, acts on people, and then on businesses – of every dimension and sector – on institutions and the public administration. People, businesses, institutions, and agencies that are more prepared, since they possess knowledge and skills required by the great challenges of modern times, are also those that are better able to use resources and more rapidly and effectively reach their goals.

### ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE

Alongside the ability to face the challenges of the present, that original vision also included a precious seed anticipating the future. Today, in the economy that is shifting towards the value of environmental and social sustainability, the major leaders in politics, business, and global finance – including those from whom we might least expect it – are taking pains to indicate the primacy of responsibility towards future generations. In that sense, the SDA Bocconi poster dated 1973 seemed prophetic, where it said: “A school of management is useful for the community when it operates in constant tension between the need to prepare for the exercise of a profession and the need to produce constructive criticism in the search for fairer economic and organizational structures.” Affirming the collective identity of the School in the tension between the force of preparation and leadership roles and the need to observe the economy and businesses through critical thinking remains an extraordinary lesson today, representing a timeless vision.

The ability to seize the spirit of the times was not an obstacle to continuing to develop creative, original, and innovative energies. Thus, the School’s DNA does not include only the dissemination of knowledge, but also its creation. Actually, we could say that before being a location for spreading knowledge, the SDA and *Economia&Management* were conceived as universes of creation of new ideas and techniques. And the creation of new knowledge, the result of research activity, is a deviant activity per se: it is the exercise of an alternative to dominant thinking, strengthened by the rigor of method. Thus, the innovative effort to produce new managerial knowledge is always that of going further, seeking responses to the complexity of the present,

avoiding recipes founded on common perception or past experience.

At the same time, however, the research conducted at the SDA and hosted in *Economia&Management* – or, for some years now, its online offspring represented by the E&MPlus site – has always been conceived of as “influential,” focused on important themes, developed with the rigor and quality typical of academic disciplines but able to produce knowledge with a high impact on the relevant community. And precisely to avoid getting lost in the self-referential world of research done “by academics for academics,” the halls of the SDA and the pages of the magazine have represented a location for experience and experimentation of the ideas and knowledge produced. This is nothing revolutionary, of course: we owe to Galileo the idea that science must be based on experience penetrated by reason.

So anticipate, but without ever losing the compass that requires exercising a real impact on people and public and private organizations, because the view of the founders was that innovative energy should be channeled into areas that are relevant and concrete.

The need for a closer connection between businesses, institutions, and “relevant and rigorous” managerial research was strengthened with the passage of the years. The depth, precision, and rigor of the knowledge used to adopt decisions represent crucial elements for those businesses that require precise understanding of the profound and sudden changes in the economy, competition, and management and organization models. Secondly, they are necessary to elaborate and implement sophisticated responses to a complex world. Moreover, business decisions are increasingly processes with high knowledge content, but at the same time, the knowledge that nourishes them rapidly becomes obsolete. As a consequence, the continuous generation of new knowledge becomes a central process in the choices that managers and decision-makers are called on to make.

## A VISION OF LEADERSHIP

The history of SDA and *Economia&Management* is one of consolidation of professions and critical knowledge, creativity, and concreteness, generation and dissemination, spirit of the times and anticipation. However, if we want to find an element that has constantly been present in the history of the School and the magazine, it may be the idea of the continuous search for equilibrium between divergent forces, without falling into the trap of the reassuring simplification that inevitably ends up banalizing the complexity of reality. Adopting this perspective, it is entirely evident that the mark of these fifty years is that of a precise vision of leadership and individual and collective responsibility.

Leadership, whether in the corporate or political world, has the responsibility to show the way, to set the course. This function entails an innate capacity to take the long view, to aim for a long-term goal to be met. Setting the course means confirming a promise made to those who await indications on how, when, and why to undertake that journey. The more important the goal to be reached, the clearer the vision of the future and the awareness of the present must be. Understanding and thinking before acting is necessary to project choices on a longer temporal horizon, beyond the immediate future. This means worrying not only about decisions themselves, but also constructing the conditions for an effective implementation of processes of change, ensuring continuity at the same time. The vision of the SDA and the value attributed to knowledge take shape in a conception of leadership as the ability to manage the paradox of stability and change: protect the conditions that make continuity necessary, but at the same time act in a transformational way on culture and the dominant cognitive models in organization, producing a change able to meet the great challenges of the future. In this light, leaders are architects and agents of change at the same time. To do this, they





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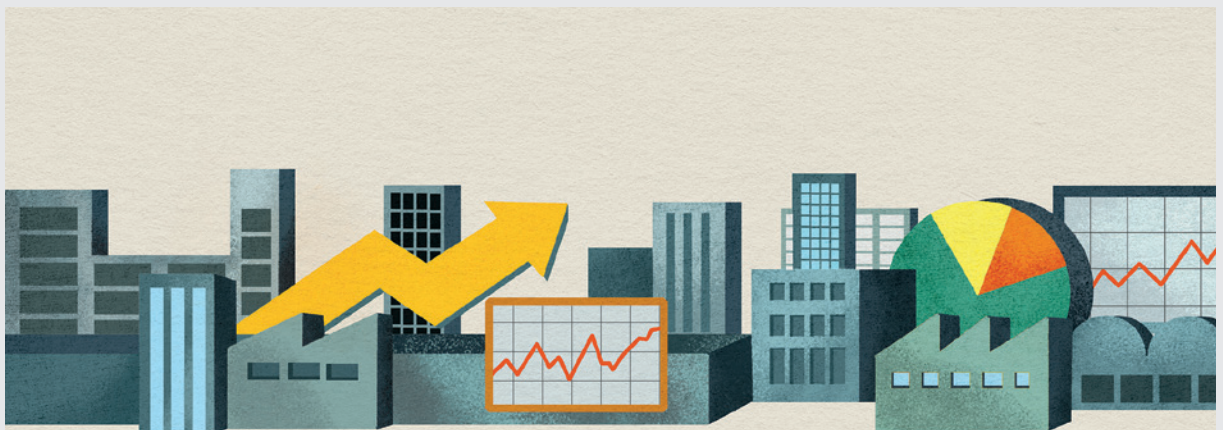
must be able to both construction new visions and fill them with meaning. Here the original visionary and cultural approach returns. Exercising leadership, independent of the role occupied in society, means making one's own contribution to attempt to avoid the determinism of choices generated by external, apparently uncontrollable forces, demolishing the inertia linked to the past, constructing and transmitting the idea of new possibilities and new directions.

### OUR COMMITMENT FOR THE FUTURE

Then came the *annus horribilis* of the pandemic, that changed scenarios and perceptions and overturned the consolidated knowledge of those at the helm of businesses and institutions. In this context, we discovered that even if we are able to manage data carefully, when conditions suddenly change, data is not there, or not necessarily decisive. We realized that trade-offs and unsolvable dilemmas exist – situations where the science of data undoubtedly helps us – but then many decisions are made on the basis of judgments, assumption of responsibility, and intuition. We have dramatically recognized that in conditions of uncertainty we need multiple perspectives, and that critical thinking feeds innovation and can favor the discovery of effective solutions. The pandemic has shed light on the need to have knowledge and useful tools to both

understand the situation being faced, and to improve the capacity for a prospective and systemic view of the evolution of the situation in order to have full knowledge of the consequences of one's own actions and those of others. In addition to all of this, it is necessary to develop skills for the transmission of knowledge, and also communication, relational, and negotiating skills oriented towards favoring the emergence of a context useful to reaching a common result, especially when the areas of decision-making consist of multiple actors and interests, that do not always converge. All without ever losing sight of the orientation towards results, the ability to measure and monitor outcomes. In essence, the virus has laid bare many weaknesses of leaders and others as well, indicating a core set of skills on which programs for training and the development of new knowledge must concentrate in the coming years, and that will be fundamental to help people and leaders responsibly face the complexity of the future. These skills shall not substitute those on which the SDA Bocconi focuses in its educational activities, but will enrich a detailed program in which the depth and breadth of skills will be entrusted to flexible paths constructed based on each person's needs.

Even in these unexpected circumstances, the path indicated by this original vision remains an anchor of salvation.



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