

3 Leadership Lessons Executives Can Learn From Famous Leaders

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Abstract

This is a peak at Carlos Ghosn, former CEO of Nissan Motor Corporation, Gordon Moore, the co-founder and former CEO of Intel Corporation, and Kōnosuke Matsushita, the founder and former CEO of Panasonic, who have been recognized as the most prominent and successful leaders today. Under Ghosn's management, Nissan became one of the world's largest manufacturers in the automotive industry. Under Moore's strategic leadership, Intel also became one of the largest manufacturers of computer chips in the world. The Japanese Kōnosuke Matsushita also created a 200-year strategic plan that was carried out by his successors at Panasonic efficiently and effectively. Now, these three companies are still the most admired in North America and the most profitable companies on the "Fortune 500" list. The first purpose of this opinion article is to decode Carlos Ghosn's mysterious method for implementing organizational knowledge. Next, we aim to show why and how Gordon Moore coined the phrase strategic turning point. Moore argued that all rules would change at the strategic turning point. Third, we aim to decode how Matsushita's leadership grew the Panasonic company and present his big leadership lessons at this Japanese multinational electronics company for executives and senior executives across the globe. This opinion article presents key insights for management scholars and practitioners to understand why Ghosn, Moore, and Matsushita owed most of their victories at Nissan, Intel, and Panasonic to their magic management practices and strategies. In this way, we have identified the DNA of Ghosn's knowledge management method, Moore's strategic turning point, and Matsushita's effective leadership which contain an important story for CEOs and management scholars worldwide.

Keywords: Strategic Turning Point, Humility, Wisdom, Knowledge Management, Management Consulting, Intel, Nissan, Panasonic.

Introduction

What can management scholars and practitioners learn from the best leaders? This key question has remained and the answer is evolving. To address this gap, in this article we aim to answer the questions management scholars and practitioners often ask: “What do they do that works?” To answer this, in the first story, we deeply analyze Carlos Ghosn's knowledge management method. Carlos Ghosn, born on March 9, 1954, is a businessman and former automotive executive, widely known for having dramatically fled house arrest in 2019 in Japan while awaiting trial on financial impropriety charges related to his tenure at Nissan when he was released from prison. However, with this financial scandal that followed Carlos's tenure at Nissan Motor Company, each company he has worked for, such as Michelin South America, Michelin North America, Renault, and Nissan, has been a great lesson in management and leadership. For example, Nissan Motor Corporation, under the knowledge management method of Carlos Ghosn, became one of the most successful automotive manufacturers in the world. This company is now one of the most admired Japanese companies in America and one of the most profitable companies on the "Fortune 500" list. In this study, we identify the key components of Carlos Ghosn's method for implementing knowledge management which can contain key points for management scholars and practitioners across the globe.

In the second story, we recount the experience of Gordon Moore's victories and failures to show how this industry leader managed threats and even turned them into great opportunities at Intel. Gordon Moore considered the strategic turning point and added tremendous value to the concept of

strategic leadership. He believed that the first responsibility of a manager is to protect his economic enterprise against the threat of competitors. Moore presents his view of the strategic turning point for any company that is considering transformation of some kind. The transformation can be a success or failure depending on the strategic turning points in the process (Burgelman, 1994; Emmerij, 2007; Cummings, 2015; Kristóf, 2024). In his opinion, the strategic turning point may be caused by competition, or it could be created by leaders of the organization to instill motivation, teamwork, and even better strategic management. Toshiba, as one of the Japanese giants of computer memory makers, placed Intel Corporation at a strategic turning point (Burgelman, 1991; Barsky & Tkacs, 2017; Jiang et al., 2023). Intel was forced to stop making memory chips and move to make microprocessors. This technology narrowed the field for traditional mainframe manufacturers. Moore argued that Intel is wallowing in an industry transformation in technology. The rapidly increased impact of laws and regulations placed Intel Corporation in a star position as opposed to the cash cow framework where it was before the strategic inflection point.

The third story particularly addresses the current research gap on Panasonic's unexplored and mysterious leadership by recounting the experience of Matsushita's victories and failures and showing how he has controlled events and turned threats into opportunities at Panasonic. Matsushita, born at the turn of the 19th century, suffered in his youth. In 1917, he decided to work for himself with only 100 yen in savings. He started school later than the other children in his location and began school in the fourth grade of Japanese primary school. His small company with little capital eventually flourished with his efforts. He believed in one key principle: “Adapt yourself and your business according to the command of the

market.” He also believed that you should treat the people you do business with as if they were members of your family (Matsushita, 2021; Kassemeyer et al., 2022). Without realizing that he came up with something that is well known today called “Customer Relationship Management.” He would contact customers to ensure that they were properly treated and really satisfied. He also, without realizing it, created what is known today as “Customer Orientation.” The key point for senior executives and leaders here is that customer-oriented business people are not selling-oriented but care about the customer before, during, and after the sale (Saavedra, 2016; Homburg & Tischer, 2023). He even came up with the term used by Ed Deming, “Total Quality Management,” who came to Japan after WWII. Matsushita felt that any waste, even a single sheet of paper, would increase the price of the product by a good deal (Jain et al., 2023). Another vital important idea he surfaced way before it became a management fad is the “Just-In-Time Inventory.” He argued that not having inventory in the warehouse is due to carelessness (Wakayama et al., 2012; Nakazono et al., 2014). If his customers were unhappy for any reason, he would immediately apologize to the customer. His motto was:

The mission of an artisan is to overcome poverty, free society from poverty, and gain wealth. Business and production are not for only enriching shops or factories, but for enriching the whole society (Matsushita, 2015).

In the next sections of the article, we analyze these three famous leaders to indicate how these leaders can provide the best leadership lessons for executives across the globe. First, we will look at Carlos Ghosn's unique method of knowledge management at Nissan.

Story One: Ghosn's Unique Method for Managing Knowledge at Nissan

In 1999, it was said that Nissan Corporation would become one of the most powerful and best car manufacturers within a few years. This statement was ignored at that time. Survival was presumed possible; in the middle, maybe; but it was not possible to achieve such unprecedented profits and produce cars that would get the best awards for the company. Despite these predictions, Nissan became one of the leaders of the world's industries. The four main factors that caused this to happen were:

- More income (by selling more cars)
- Less costs (reduction of costs by 15% over several years)
- More quality and speed (with attention and emphasis on product and management)
- Maximum alliance with Renault (finding ways to complement each other)

If you want to know how Ghosn developed Nissan and made it more profitable, you will find all the answers in his unique method for implementing knowledge management. Ghosn changed the minds of people inside the Nissan organization forever. He did this with awareness and initiative. Carlos Ghosn was not a leader who used his superior position as a tool to force people to obey him and rule over them, on the contrary, he came to the field by relying on the facts and intelligence he had in conversations with people (Snyder, 2014).

But how did he do this? The answer was that Ghosn's unique method for implementing knowledge management processes included simplicity, commitment, and aspiration (Manzoni et al., 2003; Melewar et al., 2008; Snyder, 2014). As a concrete example, this

method of knowledge management implementation, which our consulting experience with Nissan in Australia and the US also explains, has now infiltrated Nissan employees around the world, and can be summarized as:

- Set big but achievable goals
- Make the role and level of responsibility clear to everyone
- Be quick but be efficient
- Examine the growth and progress of work
- Evaluate work results based on reality

Simplicity for Knowledge Transference: The challenges that Nissan faced before Carlos Ghosn in making fundamental changes were very complex. Things like: a multi-cultural organizational alliance, inter-organizational teams with members who spoke different languages, and car production, purchase, and design plans that were not simple. To overcome these challenges and failures, Ghosn, first, considered "listening" an important factor in facilitating the knowledge transference process, aiming at preparing for change and implementing knowledge management and corporate success (Manzoniet al., 2003; Snyder, 2014). He taught employees and managers at Nissan to learn from anyone who had valid information to help Nissan and the alliance between Renault and Nissan. In our recent knowledge management consulting project in Nissan in Australia and the US in Adelaide, Melbourne and Los Angeles, we have also interestingly seen that employees and managers at Nissan now clarify and simplify complex matters for those around them, and in every meeting, they usually look for a point that everyone can agree upon.

Aspiration for Knowledge Creation: In Carlos Ghosn's knowledge management development method at Nissan, the next important component was "aspiration" (Yoshino, 2003; Millikin & Fu, 2005). Nissan has effectively been changed and innovated because managers give power and authority to employees at all levels by gathering information and creating inter-working teams (Blyton & Turnbull, 1998; Lee & Chen, 2022). Still, our observations at Nissan in Australia and the US show us big decisions for strategic changes are always made by ambitious leaders in the CEO's office.

Commitment for Knowledge Utilization: Commitment to utilizing new knowledge has certainly been a part of large and small actions and activities of companies to sustain changes. However, we have consulted over 200 companies across the globe, and we have experienced that no corporation uses this concept as extensively and efficiently as Nissan. For example, in our knowledge management consulting project with Nissan in Australia and the US, we found that in the dictionary of Ghosn's Nissan, it is said that:

A commitment is a goal that must be fulfilled. The goal that must be implemented is shown with numerical values and a commitment is made. When this commitment is given, it must be achieved (Kostov & McLain 2022).

Figure 1 depicts this knowledge management method triad of Nissan.

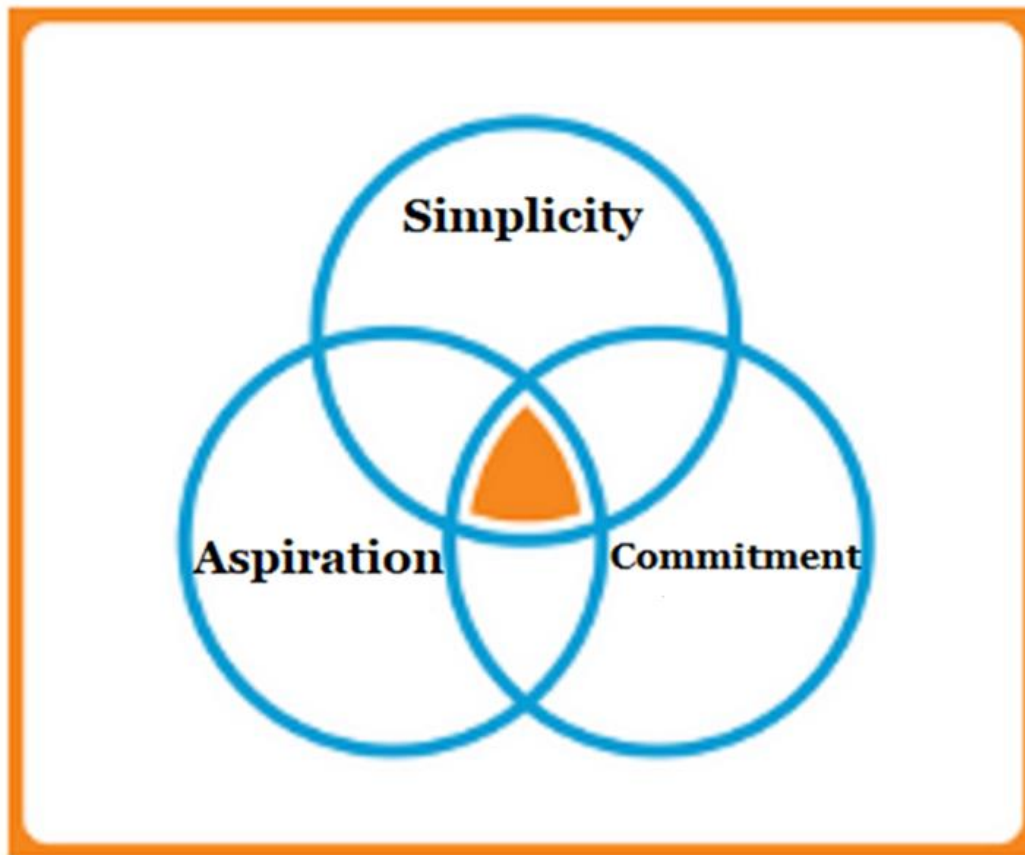


Figure 1: The Knowledge Management Method Triad of Nissan

The Impacts of Ghosn's Knowledge Management Method at Nissan

With the help of each other, Nissan employees dismantled the existing physical and cultural barriers from Europe to Asia and North America with a new spirit and an attitude of harmony and integration. The result of the work was a different company with a centrality in Japan, which contained the true meaning and concept of globalization (White, 2004; Haak & Pudelko, 2005; Birkinshaw et al., 2011). Ghosn intended to effectively manage organizational knowledge to revive and develop Nissan, but he achieved something more than that. Now,

new cars are also designed with the best ideas from different regions in a collaborative way. Communication plans are prepared with a commercial brand and an identity. Plans related to human resources are integrated and centralized and represent organizational standards, not regional ones.

Now, it is time to start our second story in the next section and analyze Gordon Moore as one of the best leaders of all time and the co-founder and emeritus chairman of Intel Corporation.

Story Two: Gordon Moore and the Myth of Intel's Strategic Turning Point

At the beginning of the computer industry, it was established in the vertical method (Dochy et al., 1999; Alsultanny, 2010). In this way, every computer company treated others like the owner of a row of houses on the street (Timothy, 2005). All the sellers would be found and would offer a complete computer package to a potential buyer. The potential buyer also had all the technology at his disposal, without having the right to choose other people's products. A major shortcoming was that customers had to rely on the seller company for a long time after choosing the first one. The vertical method continued for a decade. After that, microprocessors arrived, and the construction of a personal computer based on this technology created a tenfold transformative force.

With the placement of microprocessors in the computer industry, the costs decreased dramatically and made the personal computer a suitable tool for work in the office and at home. Over time, this transformation also cast a shadow over the entire industry and made it horizontal. In the horizontal method, no company owned everything. The customer got the right to choose and buy different parts of the computer and several ready-made application software from different manufacturers and stores. Therefore, since the 1980s, the computer supply process has changed from vertical to horizontal. First, personal computers, then large, shared computers, and finally the entire industry became horizontal. For the last years of this decade, large companies that worked in a vertical method were also forced to reduce their workforce and rebuild their organizational structure, and at the same time, new actors entered the field (Frone & Blais, 2020; Torgaloz et al., 2023). With the

progress of this relocation process, the companies that were victorious in the old vertical system gradually faced failures. On the other hand, this transformation provided a great opportunity for some newcomers to excel, and Compaq was accordingly placed on top of the "Fortune 500" list.

Intel's Strategic Turning Point and Its Important Lessons

Over time, Intel took the leadership of the microprocessor market and Microsoft took the leadership of the operating system market. Five critical laws learned could be a strong reflection of a strategic turning point for all organizations:

- Follow the Boston Consulting Group market share and product performance model and be honest about your product's placement along those parameters.
- In the hyper-competitive world, only the emergence of new and outstanding technology will provide key opportunities.
- Push-pull pricing will only work if demand and supply are in your favor.
- Inertia drives up costs, be relentless in keeping costs down.

In the early 1980s, Japanese memory makers entered this field and seized the semiconductor market in one decade. Intel decided to raise the quality and reduce costs. In 1981, Intel's second product, the microprocessor, was used in the personal computer manufactured by IBM (Zhang et al., 2024). Intel established several new factories in strategic locations. By the Fall of 1984, everything changed, and with intense competition from high-quality, cheap, and mass-produced products in Japan, Intel fell behind in the memory chip field. Because of

this failure, Intel was losing its revenues to the competition.

Leading a company through a strategic inflection point is like marching in unknown territory. On occasion, the rules of business are unfamiliar or not yet formed. Organizations must work hard to overcome this stage. For example, Gordon Moore expressed that:

When we chose and advertised the slogan "Intel, the microprocessor manufacturer" in 1986, we wanted to show that we planned to be number one in the industry (Malone, 2014).

Peter Drucker once argued that a key activity is the complete transfer of resources from previous businesses to new businesses including the organization's ideas (Maciariello, 2018). Human capital including ideas, knowledge, skills, and experience was placed at the forefront of Intel's success (Diez, 2014; Shipton et al., 2016; Rafique et al., 2024). Gordon Moore allocated resources to build the corporate culture by moving resources to achieve strategic goals. From his point of view, corporate strategy is formed from such key actions instead of following traditional methods. Traditional strategic planning is less consistent with the real world of the organization. Strategic actions are the steps that Intel has taken and indicate their long-term desire and goal which is based upon intangible capital such as human resources.

Reaching the strategic turning point provides visible and effective strategic steps (Watson, 2003; Rusko, 2014). Managers can react on time or earlier to increase positive and lasting success. Doing the right thing and pursuing a strategic goal is very difficult but Moore led

the organization with a clear and simple, strategic direction.

To apply engineering principles in the workplace, Frederick Taylor once talked about the best way to lead and manage (Taylor, 1997), and many organizations still espouse these beliefs today. However, it is not easy to get people to think about the best way unless they see a clear and attractive path. Today, we are faced with an unclear future, yet people are expected to accept new and unprecedented missions together and work hard in an uncertain environment. Continuous improvement is very important as organizations attempt to secure their future. Senior leaders find it difficult to have direct contact with their employees but providing encouraging speeches to individuals, groups, and departments can help improve strategic initiatives. Intel showed adaptive behavior to continuously improve (Johnston, 2015). Any organization like Intel that has a dynamic culture and can deal with constructive discussion while controlling disturbances is a capable and adaptable organization.

Finally, in the next section, Kōnosuke Matsushita, a Japanese industrialist and the founder of Panasonic, will be reviewed to present the important lessons of leadership for business leaders.

Story Three: Responsibility, Humility, and Wisdom for Impactful Leadership at Panasonic

Management knowledge, beginning with globally well-known author and management consultant Peter Drucker, grew and then flourished the profession of management. In the 1930s, Kōnosuke Matsushita was the first person to talk about the management of human resources in organizations and considered humans to be the greatest asset in

the world. Kōnosuke Matsushita has written more than 40 books in the field of management and an article has been prepared about his thoughts and experience in the field of management and leadership, mostly from his work at the Panasonic company. Matsushita is recognized as the "Father of Japanese management."

Japanese electronics giants such as Panasonic and Sony in Japan came into the field of global competition at the beginning of the 1980s (Teo, 2019). At that time, there was a shortage of electronics in the market. The managers of "Hewlett-Packard" argued that the quality of Japanese-made electronics is much better than American products. As a competitive inflection point, the Japanese seized the entire electronics market in two decades.

But how did this success story at Panasonic begin? Kōnosuke Matsushita began as a laborer in a cement company first, then found a job at an electricity company. In 1910, he started his business (electrical business) and entered an industry that began flourishing. He worked at Osaka Electric Company and in three months, he was transferred to the newly established branch of the company and was promoted from the job of assistant to software engineer, and he received a salary increase. His job required heavy physical work, he had to climb electric poles and drill screws into the ceiling to install electric lights and this took a toll on his body.

He finally went back to school at the age of seventeen, failing to compete among his colleagues, he ranked 175 among 380 people and was asked to leave the school. Personally, Matsushita believed that the reason was his inability to write. This did not deter his success, however. During the years he worked at the Osaka Electric Company, he gained knowledge about electricity, which

would create four industries (production, transmission, consumer electronics, and industrial electronics) and create jobs for millions of people. At the age of sixteen, he was entrusted with the administration and management of employees. This was a new start and the pivotal focal point in his success in the future.

Thus, at the age of nineteen, he was responsible for large and complex projects. While working at Osaka Electric Company, Matsushita rubbed elbows with very important people (Ono & Ikegami, 2020; Kikkawa, 2023). While this was a highlight in his career, he lost his mother in 1913 which devastated him. It took him three years to forget this tremendous sorrow and he eventually married in 1915. Two years after his marriage, Matsushita was promoted at his job due to his hard work coupled with his business skills. He felt that he needed to love his work to become motivated. He once noted that ***"I was unemployed for a long time. This work was soulless and devoid of gravity. I said to myself, what is the benefit of staying in a job that I don't like?"*** He left that company in 1917.

Matsushita was a real magnanimous leader. Similar to Marshall Goldsmith's Feedforward Exercise, he created professional activities and got to know thousands of people in various business settings (Valcour, 2021; Goldsmith et al., 2024). Matsushita's entrepreneurial efforts also helped him to more effectively control his destiny. As a leader, he challenged the status quo and encouraged people to innovate, change, transform, and create. In June 1917, the dark days of Matsushita's life ended. He started his own small business in the field of screw making with his four assistants (i.e., his wife, his wife's brother, and two friends) with the pitons of his only savings of 100 yen. He had to teach his

coworkers the screw-making trade. His small working quarters were only 14.5 square meters in size. The company prospered throughout 1918.

The Key Leadership Lessons from Panasonic

Kōnosuke Matsushita made his debut in the 1960s and 1970s when Panasonic became a brand name in major cities around the world. From tape recorders to televisions and radios, Panasonic became a household name brand. Many factors developed the main principles of Panasonic's success: high customer satisfaction; low cost; a loyal workforce; innovative marketing, and; a powerful marketing plan. Panasonic was able to very quickly adapt to the current market conditions (Gutierrez, 2013; Matsushita, 2015).

Lesson One: Put Customer Orientation at the Center of Your Current Leadership

Matsushita loved competition and strived for perfection. He believed that competition leads to success, continuous improvement, and progress. Matsushita was a humble leader who said:

The path that they have in front of them is not acceptable. The Japanese nation is still far behind America and European countries. Many Japanese families still do not have access to electrical appliances such as washing machines, and our company's mission is to help people get useful electronic household appliances as soon as possible (Matsushita, 2021).

In 1961, Matsushita developed his very famous 200-year strategic plan in small chunks of five to ten years each. He said:

The goal of quadrupling sales is not a test for fame or profit, but rather to fulfill the duty we have as a producer to society (Matsushita, 2015).

The main reason why this strategy was so big and famous is because all employees focused on the daily grind, the near future, and the projected progress forthwith (Girod & Bellin, 2011; Shibata, 2011; Rodrigues et al., 2022). The managers talked about how the strategic initiatives will help them keep their jobs, and hire their children, and grandchildren. It was an epic event for Japanese employees. One never surfaced again.

Lesson Two: Develop Innovation to Win

Matsushita asked the chief engineers of the group how many people live on the earth. He said 2 or 3 billion people. Matsushita told him that all these people need similar basic electronic components in their homes and we will provide them. With innovation, cost reduction, and the creation of new products, the first five-year strategic goal was accomplished, and the company met its profitability target.

In January 1960, at the annual meeting of Matsushita's directors, he said that he wanted Panasonic to be the first company in the world to reduce working days from a six-day to five. In today's global business environment, BCG's 2024 Most Innovative Companies such as Tesla, Apple, and Toyota also follow this leadership lesson and want to be the first company in many things in the world (Manly et al., 2024). Matsushita argued that workers should be given a chance to enjoy their life. Panasonic became the

envy of employees all over Japan. His idea of growth and prosperity from an economic point of view began with his view as an economist.

If we cannot make a good profit, it means that we have committed some kind of sin towards society. We take society's capital, society's people, and society's materials and use them without generating profit. This means that we are consuming valuable resources that could be better used elsewhere... If many people in Japan do not make profits, the land will quickly fall into poverty (Matsushita, 2015).

Lesson Three: Consider Humility as a Key Factor for Your Current Leadership

Furthermore, Matsushita emphasized group wisdom improvement while maintaining humility (Dahlgard, & Anninos, 2022; Ray, 2023; Rego et al., 2024). Now, this leadership lesson is also implemented as the key factor of leadership development in top Japanese companies such as Hitachi, Mitsubishi, Sony, and Toyota (Ikegami et al., 2024). Matsushita particularly believed that:

- A humble person will never be reckless or self-righteous.
- A humble person will pay attention to the ideal mission.
- A humble person will listen to others and do what is right. Even though he was introduced as a famous person.

In this way, Matsushita also stated:

Youth means courage overcoming fear, desire for

adventure, and lack of interest in comfort and convenience (Matsushita, 2021).

In Conclusion

This article uncovers three stories of three famous leaders. These three stories present the best leadership practices that can now be immediately applied to improve performance and limit the gaps between success and possible failure. For example, in the first story, we present this important lesson for management scholars and practitioners that the components of simplicity, commitment, and aspiration are among the best practices for knowledge management development. Nissan's calculated risk-taking was also a sign of this company's action and effort in its revival. Now, by showing the transformation through bold action and the production of new products, Nissan seeks to develop and conquer the hearts and minds of customers. Another story for executives to use when considering lessening the gaps between success and possible failure is to understand the strategic turning point and become a more strategic leader. In the second story, we particularly, indicate that the strategic turning point is a pivotal time for an organization. Intel took into consideration its strategic turning point and survived the challenges faced by its competitors by focusing on microprocessors. Intel became one of the largest semi-media manufacturers in the world. The key success factor for Intel is they fell forward over and over again. There were enduring periods of confusion, trial and error, and chaos. This is tantamount to a strategic turning point and organizations must deal with the messy middle when engaging in change efforts. There is also some overlap between success in today's business world and Matsushita's view of leadership. In this way, the third story highlighted that Matsushita embodied a unique leadership

style and added tremendous value to leadership development in today's corporate world with digital transformation and global competition. Panasonic, one of the largest Japanese technology companies in the world exists in an era of champion breeding and teamwork. Matsushita took many risks, reflected on both success and failure and learned the trait of listening carefully to learn from other business executives. Matsushita had both wisdom and humility, a great trait that many leaders now and in the future can embark upon in today's hyper-competitive business environment.

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