

Nomadic leadership and strategy: lessons for business

By Nigel Nicholson

The nomads battle through winter, but every member of the tribe works hard. What can a cultural exploration teach business executives about their own seasonal, economic world?



This summer's travels turned into a field trip about culture, strategy and leadership, through the eyes of the mountain pastoral nomads of Western Mongolia. After crossing the Gobi Desert for eight days in two 4x4s with the 'Captain', we headed up into the Altair Mountains to camp in the autumn pasture area close by a family of Kazakh nomads. They had never experienced close contact with Westerners, so it was a two-way cultural exploration.

The Captain is my good friend and inveterate adventurer, Anthony Willoughby. Some years ago we undertook a similar field trip, camping out with a Maasai group under Mount Kenya, who has set up The Nomadic Business School in the Mongolian capital in Ulan Bator, to explore what we can learn from these and other people. On this trip we camped at around 2,400 metres in a vast valley (a glacial floodplain) under the shadow of the snow-capped peaks of the Chinese border. Our methodology was to observe and have conversations with the groups. We also used Willoughby's 'territory mapping' technique. It is a visual-medium method he has used over many years, where both tribal and business groups are asked to draw how they conceive the risks, returns, threats and opportunities facing different people.

Hunter, gatherer, winter

The people living in the Western mountains of Mongolia are famous for their recreation of hunting with tamed golden eagles, but their predominant occupation is pastoral – herding yaks, goats, sheep and cows, with the aid of camels and tough little horses. Their life is extremely hard, but not unremittingly so. In the lush early weeks of autumn, we found them riding the range to look after their livestock, playing music in their gers (yurts), feasting and celebrating the arrival of new children in the family. At this time, many of the young men can be away for days on end to harvest the hay needed to forage their animals through the long winter. The winter is their chief time of hardship, when the temperature falls to -30 degrees Celsius. They huddle in the warmth of the gers whilst provisioning their animals through the bitter weeks.

The seasons govern their way of life. Although winter is hard, they say it is the season they feel most at home. It is the time for the most intense sense of belonging and community through the long winter hours in the warmth of the ger (yurt). They aver that the toughest time is the transition between seasons – especially from autumn to winter, and winter to spring pastures. This is a trip of 150 kilometres, much longer than the migration to and from summer pastures, and it is the time of greatest hazard through uncertain weather – storms and floods. The ger has to be dismantled, packed on to vehicles, and with horses and camels, the nomads drive their large herds of animals on the long trek.

What ties the nomads together?

The governance model and cultural form that sustains this way of life is one of highly distributed leadership among the men and women. Everyone knows what they are doing and why, without being asked. It is intensely cooperative. We witnessed some rare moments of conflict, but these were rapidly negated by active and warm peace-making. In this culture people continually express physical intimacy with each other. The young men affectionately play wrestle, lean against each other on the grass when taking a break. They cuddle, play with and teach their children. The patriarch of the clan is a benign, non-intervening and dignified presence. Everyone works hard.

This experience prompts thinking. What parallels can be drawn from the way the corporate world organises its work?

1. Economic cycles resemble seasons, and yet we fail to have anything like the nomads' awareness of them – to be ready to endure hard times without panic or complaint. Interestingly, this is less true of family firms than many others, thanks to their multi-generational long-term horizons.
2. Like the nomads, our chief difficulties come at times of transition – firms suffer many fractures when growing fast (springtime) as when facing a sudden downturn (winter). We talk a lot about living in times of constant change, yet we seem very ill-prepared for even predictable shifts in the seasons of the business climate.
3. Many of our metrics and incentives are designed to separate us from each by comparison so we lose sight of our common purpose and values, and the chance to enjoy what unites us in our community.
4. Our organisational designs, division of labour and leadership models are often based upon the presumptive need for control. Managers lose confidence in themselves as leaders because they are encouraged to execute strategy, but not to contribute to it. It results in workforces being unable to engage and feel committed.
5. We are terrified of failure and try to protect ourselves through authority, accountability and intolerance of errors, not least through performance management systems that undermine confidence, trust and initiative in equal measure.

It would be an absurd and romantic delusion to imagine we can return to environments where the challenges are so recurrent and basic. We inhabit a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). Cultures, as evolutionary anthropology help us to understand, are experiments in living to reconcile human nature and environmental challenges. The latter keeps changing, and human nature has many sides to it.

What can business people learn from the nomads?

The Mongolian nomads have created a highly robust social system to keep them strong, unified and adaptable in the face of great hazards and hardship, by bringing out their spirit of intense cooperation. To cope with our VUCA world, we have cultivated an overwhelming multifaceted illusion of control that plays on all our anxieties. It rests on the assumption of

the supremacy of rational forms and processes, in which emotions and imagination are sources of disturbance. We are obsessed with feeling good about ourselves (which we often don't) and not losing control (which we often do). Maybe it is time to challenge our presumptions and explore new ways of organising, with virtues, values and vision at the heart.

When the nomads and other tribes drew territory maps for Willoughby they exhibited three cardinal qualities: clarity, purpose and agility. Corporate maps are more muddled and contested, suggesting it may be time to rediscover what it means to function as communities in a seasonal economic world. Perhaps we can rediscover a shared sense of purpose, clarity and agility by letting go a little and removing the barriers that prevent us from trusting ourselves, and each other.