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ANCHORING LEADERSHIP IN EVIDENCE

ASEAN Perspectives on Insight-Led Action

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FOR

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Introduction

For years, the corporate world has been swept up in a "Big Data" fever, which came with the promise of automating organizational decision-making, reducing human error and achieving a strategic edge in this Information Age [1], [2]. Hailed as the "new oil" and "new gold" [3], [4], [5], [6], big data has been commonly framed as a replacement for human input in effective decision-making. This fever was accompanied by a belief that mass analytics alone could automate success and eliminate the need for intervention, with "data-backed or evidence-based decision-making becoming common buzz words. However, current developments are showing that data alone is insufficient.

Historically, great "Ages" were defined by a single material but highly dependent on others to survive. For instance, in the Iron Age, ore needed the carbon of the furnace to become unbreakable steel, an additive without which it shattered under stress. Similarly, the copper of the Bronze Age was useless for weaponry without tin. Today, we must acknowledge that if data is the new gold, we cannot escape the truth that pure gold is too malleable for the heavy lifting of leadership as it easily warps under pressure. In the precision-obsessed world of analytics (e.g., Krumholz [7]), a single misplaced zero or omitted digit would not simply skew a graph, but can forge a catastrophic weapon of mass misdirection, disinformation or misinformation. In leadership, just as gold must be alloyed with materials like copper and zinc to make it functional, raw data must be guided by human intuition and active listening for strength and utility. This is how modern leaders are surviving volatility, as indicated by insights from the 2025 Asia Corporate Excellence & Sustainability (ACES) Awards. From a comprehensive dataset of over 200 participants, a thematic analysis was conducted on 76 select leaders, 62 of whom were specifically from 7 ASEAN member states. Within this cohort, 42% explicitly identified evidence-based decision-making as a cornerstone of their success, pointing toward a redefinition of "research" as a comprehensive outlook involving environmental scanning and "getting the facts" before acting. By anchoring leadership in this broader definition of evidence, ASEAN executives are moving from reactive management to predictive, culturally attuned excellence. Figure 1 shows the main terms the executives employed in reference to analytical, data- or insight-driven decision-making



Figure 1: Key terminology employed by 2025 ACES Award participants regarding research and evidence-based leadership.



NOTE: The visual suggests that this leadership model is an alloy requiring the 'hard' and scientific metrics of dashboards and analytical insights to be tempered by the 'soft' research of active listening, and contextualization. This process begins with a rigorous diagnostic foundation which ensuring proper and contextual understanding of issues.



The Diagnostic Foundation: Understanding Context Before Acting

A defining characteristic of effective leadership in the region is the commitment to rigorous diagnostic process, indicated by the desire to deeply understand problems and their context before attempting to solve them. Rather than applying generic global solutions, leaders prioritize localized diagnosis grounded in primary research and immersion to understand the granular realities of their markets and their workplace environments. One leader, the co-founder of a Vietnamese social enterprise dedicated to environmental protection and reducing plastic waste, reflected on how the founder tackled environmental challenges using an evidence-based approach.

She started with analysing the plastic waste issue in the global scope and breaking down into the local challenges when her team work toward that problem. She then worked on creating raising awareness campaigns in the local context both online and offline in different communities in Vietnam and in ASEAN region

This highlights a crucial capability of translating macro-level insights into actionable, context-specific interventions. This diagnostic foundation allows leaders to bridge the gap between global trends and local realities. It also allows for contextualized and effective solutions that consider the cultural sensitivities of the societies within which the solutions are being applied. For example, the HR of a Filipino healthcare facility revealed that the founder had to navigate challenges associated with leading a multinational closure without labour disputes during her tenure as an admin and HR, in an environment marred with potential risks of labour disputes, non-compliance with local laws, and reputational damage. They noted that *“this complex undertaking involved not only logistical and legal hurdles but also the emotional and cultural sensitivities of employees across multiple countries.”* Navigating this situation successfully required a clear contextual understanding, which was only made possible by gathering insights regarding the situation, showing the centrality of evidence-based problem-solving. Similarly, another participant, the co-founder & managing director of a Thai Healthcare and Medical Services organization echoed these sentiments, noting that one their biggest challenges was launching a sexual wellness clinic in a society where open conversation around sex, STIs, and hormones are still considered taboo. As such, she noted, *“building trust with patients in a conservative cultural context required careful communication, consistency, and empathy.”*



Relatedly, PT24, the founding chief people & culture officer a talent consultancy organization pioneered a “*people-first shared services model*” which she describes as a “*shared services framework that treats people & culture not as a back-office function, but as a strategic driver of growth... with built-in agility, culture mapping, and impact tracking—ensuring we could scale services across multiple ventures while preserving distinct brand identities.*” This is design to the “outdated, one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation in Southeast Asia. According to this leader, “*this solution was born out of primary research, expert interviews, and international benchmarking*”. The primary research enabled a clear understanding of the context, helping the re-contextualization of solutions adapted from other regions of the world.

This is consistent with leadership research regarding the importance of context in leadership and decision-making. For example, Lakomski and Evers [8] reveal some important aspect regarding context in leadership argue the following:

We argue that it is an open empirical question about what counts as the unit of leadership: individual, group, network, organization, society. This makes context the deciding issue, and because context changes, the idea of a default option drops out of the explanatory picture. As a theory of leadership always exists in a specific context it is therefore required in order to make defensible inferences from standard empirical methodologies (p. 3).

Although this was discussed under the context of education, it can apply to any leadership decision-making scenario. Additionally, Elson [8] argued that understanding context can help reduce miscommunication, time and energy spent in the “wrong direction.” Burak’s [9] framework of context emphasizes the importance of understanding context in its multidimensionality, including who, when and where, which clarifies the why. This external research suggests that organizations that invest in localized intelligence and customer-centric research are more likely to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. From the ACES Awards data, the insight-backed diagnostic rigor is further reinforced by what another leader described as a philosophy of contextual intelligence. The leader, a marketing growth strategist and founder of a Marketing, Advertising, and Public Relations company, believes that “*Context Creates Kings*”. As such, he revealed that he believes “*great decisions require contextual intelligence, a reason for which he “allocate[s] 20% of [his]week to “immersion time” (e.g., joining customer support calls, shadowing new hires.*” This practice, he reveals, “*uncovered a glaring disconnect in [their] CRM process, leading to a pivot that reduced sales cycles by 15 days.*”



Such practices demonstrate that data is not confined to dashboards, but it also it is also embedded in observation, contextual intelligence, listening, and direct engagement. It further suggests that analytical leadership begins not with tools, but with curiosity. These leaders reveal that they actively seek ground-level insights, combining formal research with experiential learning to build a nuanced understanding of the environments they operate in. Thus, to properly diagnose an issue, context is key, which requires a good understanding of facts in their multidimensionality. Specifically, in ASEAN's culturally diverse and rapidly evolving markets, this diagnostic discipline becomes even more critical for ensuring effective leadership. The current evidence indicates that some corporate leaders are already embracing this leadership trait by ensuring their decision-making is based on insight, data and facts and a clearly understanding of the context.

De-Risking Innovation: Empowering Calculated Boldness Through Data

In addition to using insights as a means to ensure contextually relevant leadership decisions, some leaders also indicated that they can use research to empower de-risking innovation. There is a common misconception that data-driven leadership is risk-averse. However, instead of viewing data as a “risk-repellent,” leaders can use it as tool for enabling calculated risk-taking through ensuring risk-awareness. One leader described fostering experimentation through a structured framework he calls his ‘*Greenhouse Rule*.’ According to this leader, this approach entails granting team members permission to experiment an idea. He said that “Every team member gets a monthly ‘wild card’ to test an unconventional idea without approval—provided they document learnings.” This approach reframes risk as a managed process, where experimentation is encouraged but always tied to measurable outcomes. While this might not necessarily be the “big data” ideation of research, it is definitely an evidence-based approach to decision-making. Allowing team members to test ideas provides evidence for the best ideas to implement. Here, the evidence (the documentation of the experiment) is what justifies the innovation. It moves the conversation from “I think this will work” to “the data from our test shows this works.” This indicates a process where innovation is not characterized by reckless experimentation, but by structured, data-informed risk-taking. Leaders get ti are increasingly leverage data as a “safety net” that enables bold action while minimizing uncertainty.



Similarly, another leader emphasized the importance of validating ideas in real-world conditions. As a renowned strategist and the founder of a marketing, advertising, and public relations company, this leader faced the challenge of bridging the gap between traditional sales tactics and the evolving demands of modern buyers. This was triggered by the realization that that aggressive, transactional approaches were losing effectiveness—clients craved authenticity, trust, and personalized solutions, marked by rampant resistance to change. To overcome this problem, he refined consultative framework that prioritized active listening, emotional intelligence, and long-term relationships over quick wins. To ensure the method worked, he says, *“I tested this method in competitive markets, proving its impact through measurable results—higher conversion rates, repeat business, and referrals.”* Here, data was used to not just evaluate an innovation but also legitimizes it. These data-backed innovations tap into the lean startup methodology, which advocates for science- or evidence-based innovations [10]. This data-based approach aligns with broader evidence suggesting that organizations that integrate data into their innovation processes are more agile and resilient. By quantifying risk and capturing feedback loops, ASEAN leaders can transform uncertainty into opportunity.

Although hard facts and scientific data is critical to decision-making and leadership, the power of subjective judgment cannot be neglected, as it is a critical ingredient in the decision-making matrix. In a recent study on managerial data driven decision-making, a participant argued that they (managers) “obviously” try to weigh things (decisions) to decide whether an intended actions presents a bigger chance for a good outcome or a bad one. But sometimes you have to make a decision that might result in a loss. But there's a risk it could turn into a big plus” [11]. This incorporates the intuition angle of the analytical mindset. Rather than treating data-based insights as cast on stone, leaders also incorporate their instinctual views based on experience. This spirit was evident through the co-founder of a nonprofit youth organization in Philippines who narrated the following:

My leadership philosophy is simple but powerful: focus on what we can control. In a field like public health and development work—where uncertainty, external factors, and systemic barriers are common—it's easy to feel overwhelmed. That's why I anchor my decisions on what's within our reach. This mindset helps me prioritize urgent needs, take action where it matters, and “park” issues that either require more time or are outside our influence. I've found that focusing on controllable factors—like team dynamics, project execution, and daily progress—not only builds momentum but also keeps the team grounded and motivated, rather than frustrated by things beyond our grasp.

Thus, scientific inquiry and leadership judgment both work together to ensure insight-driven decisions.



Operational Excellence and Predictive Power

Beyond diagnosis and innovation, there is transition from reactive tracking to predictive power for to enhance operational performance and anticipate future challenges. The shift from reactive to proactive management is particularly evident in the adoption of real-time analytics and predictive tools. The ACES data points to a significant investment in "predictive diagnostics" and real-time dashboards. One notable example highlights the use of integrated dashboards: *"We then gave HRs access to our Pulse dashboard to visualize their organisational wellbeing and engagement trends in real time. This data-driven approach helped HR leaders move from reactive to proactive decision-making."* This has allowed HR leaders to visualize organizational wellbeing and engagement trends in real time. It is a transformative shift that allows a leadership team to move from reactive firefighting—addressing a problem after it has caused turnover—to proactive decision-making that prevents the problem from occurring in the first place. The importance of using predictive technologies was also emphasized by the senior manager of a wellness centre in Thailand, who revealed that they're preparing for the future trends "...by investing in genomic and proteomic research, expanding data-driven wellness platforms, and training our team in predictive diagnostics.

This trend toward "Building a data-driven enterprise for operational excellence" is echoed across industries. Leaders are investing in genomic research, proteomic data, and data-driven wellness platforms to differentiate themselves. The integration of research and data science systems is not seen as a futuristic goal but as a current necessity for productivity and efficiency. As one leader noted, their "data capabilities, supported by decades' worth of accumulated data," serve as their primary point of differentiation in the market. Research indicates that using predictive analytics and "advanced strategic insights" is associated with improved business efficiency, profitability and performance as well as enhance future-preparedness, thereby ensuring operational resilience [12], [13]. In a recently-proposed framework called the "3Rs of organisational excellence" [14], "resilience" and future readiness are central to organisational excellence, powered by data and insight-driven decision-making. As such, insight-driven practices are key to operational success.



In the ASEAN region, where market volatility is a constant, the ability to use data-informed marketing strategies and predictive modules to "enhance guess-work" (or rather, eliminate it) is a significant competitive advantage.

Perhaps the most profound insight from the ACES Awards data is the application of data to "soft" organizational challenges. Evidence-based leadership is being used to solve human problems like workplace conflict, mental health, and employee trust.

One leader detailed the establishment of an "internal investigative committee" to handle workplace conflict. By using a cross-functional team to conduct a "thorough inquiry" and "interview all relevant parties," the leader ensured that the solution was based on evidence rather than office politics. This "data-driven" approach to justice provided protection and confidentiality to the complainant, balancing empathy with professional rigor. These approaches seem to borrow from established conflict resolution models, whether consciously or otherwise. For instance, while the Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict resolution does not explicitly mention "evidence-based," it is an inherently data-backed tool for finding solutions to organisational conflict [15], [16], [17]. Evidence-based conflict resolution practice has been recommended as promising mechanism for effectively handling organisational conflict [18]. Thus, the adoption of these strategies by ASEAN leaders is consistent with industry standards, though they never explicitly claimed to be aware of or consciously employing said strategies.

Similarly, some leaders claim to be grounding mental health innovations in "primary research, expert interviews, and international benchmarking." By combining "lived experience" with "system design thinking," these leaders are creating solutions that are both modern and inclusive. This proves that data serves the culture, not just the bottom line. Whether it is through "active listening" or "science-informed messaging," the goal is to build trust through evidence. As organizations move toward "Expanding data-driven wellness platforms," they are acknowledging that the health of the employee is a measurable, controllable factor that directly impacts organizational resilience. This transition reflects a broader evolution—from tracking historical performance to predicting future outcomes. Leaders are investing in systems that enable continuous monitoring, early warning signals, and data-informed forecasting.



In parallel, organizations are building internal capabilities to support this shift. Investments in predictive diagnostics, advanced analytics, and data literacy are enabling teams to move beyond descriptive insights toward prescriptive and predictive decision-making. External studies reinforce the importance of this transition, noting that organizations leveraging predictive analytics outperform their peers in efficiency, employee engagement, and strategic agility. In ASEAN's competitive landscape, the ability to anticipate rather than react is emerging as a key differentiator. Ensuring organisational excellence through decisions grounded on data and insights will continue to shape the next chapter of entrepreneurial endeavours.

Conclusion

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