

S K E I N

The Empty Plinth™

Dr Tom Aldridge



The Empty Plinth™ - Part I

The empty plinth is a testament to failed intent.”

Anon

We all have empty plinths – the great and ambitious ideas that we don't implement. The fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, originally intended to hold an equestrian statue of William IV, remained empty for over 150 years. And in business, we build our plinths, write the inscription in our minds, yet ultimately, we fail to deliver a statue that marks out a great achievement from a bold vision.

Why do some business leaders realise their great ambitions – and some do not?

Is it a meticulous attention to detail in developing a change programme? Is it a laser-sharp focus on a clear vision? Is it great leadership in a class of its own? In truth, it's partly all and more of the above. And sometimes the blockers are self-limiting ones. Our knowledge, experiences and wisdom, for example, may tell us that it can't be done.

And yet ... revolutions in technology, medical breakthroughs, corporate transformations, and political earthquakes all show us that the unlikely, or even the seemingly impossible, *can* be achieved. And increasingly, it *must* be, if any business is to thrive.

This is because the world is changing at an ever-faster rate, with a growing and relentless pressure on leaders to look into the future in order to thrive. The leader who is not thinking about what people will expect in 20 years' time is, *de facto*, failing to take their company in the right direction.

The empty plinth is a future opportunity. And if any leader cannot understand the future and their part in it, they will very quickly become history.

This commitment to a future destiny shows itself in other ways. When the engineers at NASA were developing the Saturn V rocket to take men to the moon, they encountered untold engineering and technological problems. A key to their ultimate success was the view that failure, quite simply, was not an option.

There could be no empty plinth, and so there wasn't.

This fundamental belief was embedded in the culture of NASA and all the people working there. It drove them to bring together the right policies, processes, people and leadership devoted to this end. The rocket became the statue, NASA had its plinth, and the world knows the resulting inscription.

In business, the truth is that most things can be achieved – it's more of a question of how badly a leader wants it. Different leaders follow different paths to success, and there is always more than one way to achieve a goal.

But these competing route maps need to share something in common. They need to be less about academic theory and more about a state of mind, identifying the basic needs and then applying them correctly.



What must be becoming increasingly clear to business leaders is that not only can they rise to the challenge, but that they **must**. If the other three plinths in Trafalgar Square, long since filled, represent the established past, the fourth plinth represents a major opportunity for the future.

So how can leaders and businesses realise their great and ambitious plans?

In a paper previously published by The Swann Group (*Defining a global context for incoming CEOs*) we proposed a two-pronged approach to ensure successful leadership – the sort that puts their businesses firmly on their plinth.

One of these is external: How leaders become aware of the bigger context within which they operate, evolve and influence. The other is internal: How they identify and address areas of weakness, such as areas for knowledge, skills and personal development.

These external and internal dynamics are covered in the remainder of this report.

Part 2 - Towards a better, bolder vision

In part one of this report, I explained why leaders must realise their great ambitions if they and their businesses are to thrive.

The next question, of course, is “How?”

In this part, I look at the external enablers behind business success and how leaders can become more aware of the “bigger picture” in which they must operate. Only those leaders able to use this new understanding to commit to a better and bolder vision will prosper.

In our experience, a CEO needs to develop a comprehensive external understanding by:

1. Seeing more effectively into the future – through a high-level grasp of the way the world is changing.
2. Seeing their own business in a different light – particularly the synergies between its component parts.

If CEOs can harness these drivers, it will enable them to make better-informed decisions, and understand clearly how strategy will need to evolve in order to deliver success.

Seeing into the future

Leaders like Elon Musk, Bill Gates and a small handful of others are championed as “exceptional” for their ability to see the trends of the future. Herein lies a problem though: because they are exceptional, they seem hard to emulate.

Most CEOs do not spend nearly enough time thinking in this way. They are more likely to be thinking instead about giving shareholders a good return on their investment every year. In the day-to-day, thinking about the future may get squeezed, but at least the investors are happy.

For now, at least.

But this type of short-term thinking not only misses the point but is fatally flawed. If a CEO cannot understand the challenges of a fast-changing future, the business they run will be quickly consigned to history.



If CEOs want to seize the future, they have to think bigger – and become bolder. A CEO running a mining company, for example, should be looking carefully at rising sales of electric vehicles. The transition from petrol to electricity brings challenges, with a rapidly growing demand for different commodities to make a new generation of car batteries.

The good news is that seeing into the future becomes easier when a CEO takes the time to stop and consider the “Big Picture” present. Here are just a few global trends that most business leaders can see, with a little help:

- The end of globalisation, and the dawn of regional socio-economic and political power blocs.
- The emergence of a handful of powerful companies, with Amazon, Meta, Google, Apple, Microsoft, Gazprom and others, sometimes willing to strong-arm Governments on policy matters.
- The diminishing impact western consumers may have, versus their increasingly affluent eastern peers.
- The rise of technology, and particularly the development of artificial intelligence (AI), and the impact this will have on the future world of work.

How do CEOs begin their journey of exploration? Impartial external counsel enables a broader perspective, highlights the developments that risk disrupting them and be able to discuss even the most sensitive issues.

Seeing the business differently

A compelling vision should be simple, clear and bold – and create a unique selling point. And with this in place, the CEO can drive on further and faster and see the business and, in particular, the synergies between its component parts, in a very different light.

From then on, in our experience, success comes down to a fusion of mastering behaviour and skills. We work with people on the behavioural side of delivering the vision – and enable our clients to think very differently in the process. And we also work with the skills side, something which very few other organisations do. The best visions deliver results because they harness synergies from both across the business.

These, then, are the external enablers for a better, bolder vision. Other drivers behind business success are internal: how leaders can identify and address necessary changes in mental attitude, knowledge, skills and personal development.

We explore these in the final part of this report.

Part 3 - Look within to achieve your vision

In this final part of The Empty Plinth™, we look at the necessary conditions within the business to deliver a big, bold vision.

The questions that need to be asked here are both simple and high-level yet penetrating and specific to each set of circumstances. There are three parts to these questions. Every business leader needs to be clear about what the potential for the business is, the reasons why it may be falling short and, crucially, what to do about it.



Vision and People

A business's potential must be reflected in any great vision. The ability to deliver and maintain it, however, then needs to be thought through in the context of the people working there, their capabilities, and how they use the other assets they have for the best outcome.

The interweaving of vision and people is a crucial first step.

At Skein, we've learned much over the years about both. A leader can only manage the business and deliver the vision successfully by managing the people; and these people are the ones who can – and must – go to extraordinary lengths to turn this vision into a reality.

Any leader with big goals, however, first needs to look within. He or she needs to understand clearly why a business is not performing as it should. How can he or she do this effectively?

Start with where you are, right now

Every leader needs to understand where the business's people and all other assets are in the present.

They need to ask themselves – fearlessly – some difficult questions, such as:

- Whether they have the right people and structure in place.
- What the core competencies of their key people are right now.
- Whether their people are not only competent but also engaged and involved in their roles.
- If their individual and collective mindset is ready for a much better outcome. Or is failure still an option?

The leader's own role in achieving the vision, too, must begin with self-awareness.

We worked closely with one senior female leader who had previously worked in aggressive male-dominated workplaces. When she became their leader, she behaved in a similarly combative manner with her colleagues.

Over time, her self-awareness grew. She realised that she had become her own worst enemy, hindering rather than helping the business to progress towards its vision. When a leader has self-awareness, they can take the business anywhere. But if they don't, they get stuck.

Alongside people's behaviour, comes a technical assessment of where a business is at present and what needs to be different. At Skein, we know that it can be very hard for many otherwise willing people to embrace a vision, let alone deliver on it, unless their leader can start talking specifically about what this means for them in practice.

He or she needs to make sure people clearly understand, amongst other things:

- The processes and changes that they need to go through.
- How to apply their specific skills – and to remove or repair anything getting in the way.
- Whether the business has the specific assets they need in the first place to move forward.

In our view, Skein is the only consultancy that helps clients to drive their great ambitions from both a behavioural and technical perspective. This attention to detail for both may be one reason we are prospering in sectors where precision is highly valued, such as mining and pharmaceuticals.

Bring the vision closer



SKEIN

Once the full potential of a business and the realities of the present are both understood, it's much easier to see what needs to happen next. The key issues at stake then become things such as:

- What the core competencies of the key people driving the vision will need to be.
- How to pick the right tasks in the right order – and hold people accountable.
- How to ask the right questions at the right time to make sure that progress continues.

Any leader on this journey additionally needs to make sure that all their people also understand the value of their contribution.

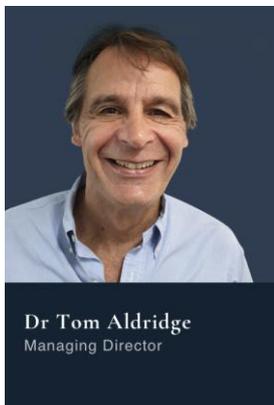
We worked with one business leader who would only do his general manager's performance review once he had exhaustively taken soundings from everyone around the business who worked for him. To have the fullest possible perspective in this way meant that the leader could talk clearly about what that person needed to do to enhance his contribution. And it also reinforced the loyalty and respect of everyone who worked for that organisation.

In short, any business leader with a big vision needs to be very clear about three things.

Firstly, that not only can they rise to the challenge, but they must.

Secondly, they must look externally and become highly attuned to the “big picture” environment and what it means for their ambitions.

And finally, they must look internally, to align the vision with people, be clear on the behavioural and technical necessities for success – and, crucially, see clearly what those bold first steps on the journey will need to be.



Skein Advisory identifies and implements the changes needed to achieve strategic goals and financial results. Our expert advisory services are based on decades of experience at senior levels and contemporary research and analysis.

Call us on +44 20 7770 6799 or email tom.aldridge@skein-advisory.com



SKEIN

