## Case Study: Research in motion

**Research in Motion: Co-Leadership in Tough Times**

Mike Lazaridis and Jim Balsillie, co-CEOs of Research in Motion, will have their leadership skills put to the test over the coming years. Although the Blackberry has fared well, it faces stiff competition, especially from Apple’s iPhone, the sales of which have grown over 245%.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Lazaridis and Balsillie both have formidable backgrounds to help handle the task. As a teenager, Lazaridis developed a reputation as someone who could fix things. In high school, he got fed up with a buzzer used for a quiz competition so he made a new one that worked so well that other schools started ordering from him. His next big break came in college, when he won a $500,000 contract to build a computer network control display system. With the contract in hand, he dropped out of school and started Research in Motion at the age of twenty-four.[[2]](#footnote-2) Lazaridis is credited with single-handedly developing the key concepts behind BlackBerry’s wireless e-mail service and is still known in the global wireless community as a visionary and innovator.

Jim Balsillie, one of Canada’s richest men, earned his MBA at Harvard University and is a fellow of the Ontario Institute of Chartered Accountants.4[[3]](#footnote-3) Balsillie joined Research in Motion in 1992, when it was still known for making radio-based electronics. Balsillie provided the financial and marketing skills necessary to turn Research in Motion into a global company. It didn’t come easy though. He has described the many rejections he received before finally selling the BlackBerry to one Canadian wireless company.[[4]](#footnote-4)

How Lazaridis and Balsillie use their experience and skill to lead their company in a highly competitive global market? They will continue to focus on innovation by encouraging teamwork, empowerment and development. Both men are big believers in hiring smart, innovative people and giving them the flexibility to work. Fostering collegiality is so important to their leadership strategy that when they new open offices, they will often look for companies that are downsizing and hire entire teams that are already integrated.[[5]](#footnote-5) They also foster collegiality by supporting employee sports teams and company-subsidized social events. For example, in 2008, they organized a surprise holiday staff appreciation concert featuring Tragically Hip and Van Halen for over 14,000 employees, co-op students, and business partners.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Lazaridis and Balsillie reduce corporate bureaucracy and lead through empowering their employees, listening to them, and allowing them to participate in decisions. This creates an environment in which employees want to work and can be innovative. Lazaridis and Balsillie are quite focused on communicating their innovation vision. Research in Motion has weekly vision meetings where the co-CEOs talk to various teams. They also have brainstorming committees that focus on all parts of the organization from technology to research and development to the BlackBerry user interface.

These co-CEOs also value quality of life for their employees. Research in Motion offers its employees on-site massages, flexible work hours, and subsidized tuition for continuing education. Their focus on employees has made them one of Canada’s top 100 Employers in 2009.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Discussion Questions:**

1. In what ways do Balsille and Lazaridis function as leaders of Research in Motion?
2. Different leadership situations call for different leadership styles. How does RIM’s co-CEO structure allow for flexibility in leadership?

Which of the following best describes Balsille and Lazaridis’ approach to leadership: autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire? Which best describes how you would want to lead an organization?

1. P. Elmer-DeWitt, “Apple 2.0: Mac News from Outside the Reality Distortion Field,” *Fortune* (March 12, 2009). http://apple20.blogs.fortune.cnn.com/2009/03/12/iphone-sales-grew-245-in-2008-gartner/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Abkowitz, “The Blackberry Boss,” *Fortune* 159 (April 27, 2009): 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://[www.rim.net/newsroom/media/executive/index.shtml](http://www.rim.net/newsroom/media/executive/index.shtml). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I. Austen, “Blackberry Billionaire has the N.H.L. Buzzing,” *The New York Times* (May 9, 2009), http://www.nytimes.com/pages/sports/basketball/index.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. P.W. Beamish, R.E. White, and D. Mazutis, “Research in Motion: Managing Explosive Growth,” *Harvard Business Case* (May 15, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://[www.CanadasTop100.com/national](http://www.CanadasTop100.com/national). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.eluta.ca/top-employer-rim. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)