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OXFORD UNIVERSITY
Mathematical Institute Lecture Theater
Delivered by Muhtar Kent
Retired Chairman and CEO
The Coca-Cola Company
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Brand Leadership in the AI and Quantum Era

Distinguished Fellows, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Students, Scholars, Faculty and future leaders.

It is truly a privilege to be back here at Oxford -
an institution that has, for nearly a thousand
years, taught the world to ***think*** before it acts,
and to question before it believes.

There's a story that when **Sir Isaac Newton**
was once asked how he discovered gravity, he
said:

“By thinking about it all the time.”

In many ways, we are all living that same reality today.

The leaders of this new century - in business, in science, in society - must think about **AI** and **Quantum** technologies “all the time.”

Because these forces are not just reshaping industries. They are reshaping the very definition of what it means to lead.

And in that context, the question I want to explore with you today is simple, but profound: **What does leadership mean in an era where intelligence is no longer uniquely human?**

Now, let me start with something I have always believed - something that, for me, has stood the test of time in business and in leadership.

“A brand is a promise. A good brand is a promise kept.”

You see, a brand is not a logo, or a color, or a jingle.

It is a living promise — a commitment that exists in the mind and heart of every person who experiences it.

It says: *“You can trust me. I will be here. I will deliver what I said I would deliver.”*

That's what a great brand does — it keeps its promise, over and over again.

And in a world now driven by data, algorithms, and prediction models, this principle – **trust** - is more valuable than ever.

Because AI can write, code, analyze, even imitate.

But it cannot **promise** - and it cannot **keep one**. Only people, guided by purpose and integrity, can do that.

Let's begin with a brand I know well –
Coca-Cola.

For nearly 140 years, Coca-Cola has stood for a very simple idea: **refreshment and optimism**. Not just the refreshment of the drink - but the refreshment of spirit.

It's a brand that has survived wars, depressions, recessions, pandemics, and social revolutions - yet the taste, the tone, and the feeling remain the same.

Wherever you are - Nairobi, New York, or Naples - when you open that familiar bottle, you know exactly what you're going to get.

That is the power of a promise kept - **consistency**.

And in the **AI** era, consistency is not static.

It means showing up in new ways - more digital, more connected - yet never losing that emotional center.

Today, Coca-Cola uses **AI** to predict consumer preferences, design personalized campaigns, and even generate new flavors in record time. But here's the key: **AI amplifies creativity; it doesn't replace it.**

It allows the company to listen better — not to shout louder.

At its heart, Coca-Cola still keeps the same promise it made more than a century ago: To bring a small moment of joy into people's lives.

And that's what great leadership does - it scales humanity without losing it.

Now, take another timeless leader: **Procter & Gamble** - one of the great quiet giants of global business.

P&G's brands — Tide, Pampers, Gillette, Ariel, Head & Shoulders — reach billions of homes every single day.

Its promise? To improve everyday life - simply, reliably, and responsibly.

What's remarkable about P&G is how it built ***trust*** through generations.

It doesn't rely on flash or fashion. Its products work - every time.

And that reliability builds something that no AI can code: **emotional confidence.**

Consumers trust that if it says "P&G," it will deliver.

Now, in the AI age, P&G uses predictive analytics to understand the small habits that define human life.

It can model the needs of a new mother in São Paulo or a student in Seoul with astonishing precision.

But it's not the algorithm that wins loyalty.

It's the *promise* behind it — the promise that what enters your home is safe, effective, and true to its word.

In that sense, P&G reminds us that technology should serve **trust**, not substitute for it.

Then there's **L'Oréal**, one of the most fascinating brand leaders of our time.

For over a century, L'Oréal has made its promise about **empowerment** — not perfection.

Its iconic line, "*Because you're worth it,*" didn't sell a product - it sold self-belief.

That phrase transformed how women saw themselves - and how they saw the role of beauty in their lives.

Today, L'Oréal is leading the way in AI-driven personalization - using facial recognition and data analytics to create custom skincare and makeup experiences for each individual.

But what's important is that L'Oréal didn't lose its soul in the process.

The promise remains deeply human - celebrating individuality, not conformity.

The technology simply amplifies that promise - making it more personal, more relevant, more inclusive.

That's what leadership in branding looks like in this new era:

You use technology to **humanize** the brand - not to mechanize it.

And finally, let's talk about a brand that belongs almost entirely to this century - **Tesla**.

Tesla is not selling cars.

Tesla is selling **courage** - the courage to believe in a different kind of future.

Its promise is not comfort or tradition. It's transformation.

And it keeps that promise by relentlessly challenging what's possible - from electric mobility to self-driving systems to energy storage and beyond.

Now, Tesla is not perfect - far from it. But its leadership represents something every brand must learn in the AI and Quantum era:

To lead means to ***move first***, to take risks, to imagine the world not as it is, but as it could be.

Tesla doesn't follow the data. It **creates** it. And that's the kind of boldness that defines the frontier of leadership in our time.

Now, let's turn to the larger question — **what does leadership mean in this new age of intelligence?**

We are moving from - a world of intuition to a world of insight - from guesswork to prediction. Artificial intelligence now helps leaders make decisions once thought impossible:

How to allocate resources, how to personalize products, even how to anticipate social trends.

And soon, **quantum computing** will accelerate that exponentially.

Quantum systems can model billions of variables simultaneously - making our current computing power look like a candle next to the sun.

But here's the **paradox**:

The more intelligent our machines become, the more **human** our leadership must be.

Because when everything is knowable, what still matters is **why** we choose.

Algorithms can optimize.

Only humans can **prioritize** - can define:

what is right,

what is fair,

what is meaningful.

In this New Quantum and AI era:

1) Tomorrow's best leaders must have a **GLOBAL WORLD VIEW** and the intense

**ABILITY TO NAVIGATE DIVERSE PEOPLE,
PLACES and CULTURE.**

2) Tomorrow's successful leaders must be **MASTER RELATIONSHIP BUILDERS** who treat others with **DIGNITY** and **RESPECT** . And the very best will be able to build **VIBRANT RELATIONSHIPS** across the **GOLDEN TRIANGLE** of **GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS** and **CIVIL SOCIETY**.

3) **LEADERSHIP** success will always come with remaining **ENTREPRENEURIAL** and **FLEXIBLE** with a strong and **ABIDING** respect for **CASH**.

4) **SUCCESSFUL LEADERS** will be those who get outside of their **COMPANIES, OFFICES, INDUSTRIES, CITIES** and

COUNTRIES because when this happens, you always learn more. And,

5) Any leader to be TRUSTED must deliver what he or she PROMISED, and finally, a good LEADER MUST BE RELIABLE to be TRUSTED.

So the essence of leadership in the Quantum and AI era will not be superior intelligence, but **superior judgment and generation of TRUST.**

It will be the ability to blend precision with purpose.

To use data without losing empathy.

To lead not just with information - but with inspiration so that **PROFIT** and **PURPOSE** blend seamlessly .

That's where the enduring value of the brand comes in.

Because a **GREAT BRAND** is

- one that keeps its promise
- provides a moral compass in a world of infinite possibility.

So, let me leave you with this thought.
Technology will continue to evolve.
AI will become faster, smarter, more omnipresent.

Quantum computing will take us into dimensions of complexity we can barely imagine.

But the essence of leadership — and of great brands — will remain astonishingly simple.

A brand is a promise.

A good brand is a promise kept.

If you remember that, you will **not only survive** the AI and Quantum era - you will help **define** it.

Because people will always remember not what you built, but what you **stood for**.

Not how smart and efficient your systems were, but how **true** your promises remained.

So keep your promises - to your consumers, to your customers, your colleagues, to your community, to your shareholders and all your stakeholders and your conscience.

And when the world looks for leaders in this new age of intelligence, it will look for those who have done just that - those who have led with **trust, courage, and purpose.**

THANK YOU!!

End.