

Inflection moments – how to recognise and capitalise on leadership breakthroughs

What's our biggest struggle as leaders? It's not what we often think: the struggle for money, power and resources. It's the struggle against time.

No matter how much wealth or power we accumulate, most of us will have about 4,000 weeks to live. And 90,000 hours to make a difference in our working lives. There's a powerful finality in these two numbers.

According to author *Oliver Burkeman*, we have embraced productivity to its hilt. And we now need to accept the limitations of time – that we can't do everything. But as leaders, there are two particular dynamics that make this truth so much more challenging today.

The first dynamic is that we need to juggle the demands of the hour hand (our long-term direction), the minute hand (our medium-term potential) and the second hand (our day- to-day motivation and resilience). That's always been the case of course, but today the second and minute hands move at the speed of light. As we know, what feels urgent often trumps what is truly important; it's so easy, therefore, for the hour hand (our long- term direction) to be neglected. We need a learning dial that helps us to continually refine and correct this balance given the limited time we ultimately have to reach these end goals.

The second dynamic is the critical importance of inflection moments. These tend to be make-or-break moments in our leadership and our lives when something deeply changes in ourselves, our organisation or in the external environment around us. In these times, we have a chance to futureproof success for ourselves, our organisations and the people we serve – or to lay the foundations for failure. Not all time is created equal, and these moments provide a special opportunity to transform our future. As the urgency of our lives has sped up, inflection moments take on an ever more outsized importance. They provide one of the few opportunities we have as leaders to really imagine the mountain we next want – and need – to climb.

But how do you know when you are about to face one? There are two telling signs to look out for.

The first – look out for the asteroid. Something fiery in the stratosphere that you are about to collide into, head-on. It's usually a significant shift in the external environment around you. A change in the market or sector that you operate in, or in a government policy that affects you. It could also be a change in public opinion on an issue, or how your organisation is perceived or governed. Asteroids often emerge out of sight. While we may be aware of a threat hovering in the distance, we can't do much as leaders to temper their fire or speed.

The second – look within your own starship. Think of the Starship Enterprise or Battlestar Galactica. They're our own teams, units, organisations or families. Places where we have much more control. You've got your own crew on the starship, and you probably feel much more comfortable within its sanctum. Yet, even the most capable leaders – think of Jean-Luc Picard or even Spock – find themselves wracked with self-doubt on the Enterprise. And that's where paralysis can seep in. Perhaps you're feeling a sense of drift. The sense that you or your team are not realising your potential. Or the sense that your team may be 'quietly quitting' in front of your very eyes. Be especially wary of the complacent starship.

Remember Picard's refrain to 'boldly go where no man has gone before'. We want to feel like we are alive and growing – cruising our galaxy intentionally and at speed.

Why are inflection moments so hard to navigate? And why are they 'make or break' for leaders? Usually, there are several dynamics at play that create this complexity. First, you have to be able to recognise the stop sign and the fork in the road. Many leaders don't, particularly when they feel like they're already successful and on cruise control. Acknowledging that the future will be different to the present takes courage and humility.

Second, they often come in twos – an external shift and an organisational shift.

This is the asteroid I mentioned above – a sector-wide or even a global shift (I just heard Sundar Pichai, managing director of Google, describe AI as one of our most profound global inflection moments) accompanied by an internal change within the starship (in leadership, governance, or strategy within an organisation). Trying to avoid the asteroid while navigating the changes within your starship is a tough balancing act.

Third, inflection moments require us to balance the needs of the long-term, the medium term and the short-term. It requires thinking across time horizons and building a learning agenda that cuts across these various priorities and goals.

Fourth, there are few obvious or ‘right’ answers for leaders at inflection moments. Remember how outdated our old mental models of leadership are. It requires tapping into our intrinsic (inner) motivation and understanding what deeply drives us and our stakeholders. As we face an inflection moment, we ourselves change, which only creates further instability.

The stakes are high, but if we can successfully navigate such moments, there’s a huge prize ahead: we can futureproof our success. By building a long-term vision and purpose that builds better lives for us all. Inflection moments enable us to reach for what can feel like the impossible – and make it possible.

Whether it’s an inflection moment at a personal, organisational or societal level (or, often, all three at once). They require a lot from us – most of all, elasticity: the ability to step into the new, while still harnessing the best of the old. They’re not easy to navigate, but if we do so with an open mind, we’ll futureproof our own lives and the lives of so many others.

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