

The age of leadership: the real leadership capabilities we need for 2024 & beyond

I can vividly recollect talking to a client as we landed on the tarmac. I had sheepishly shared with her how, on the flight, the concept of leadership had “appeared” to me.

In response, she pondered this before observing without judgement that, “We’ve got plenty of that in our organisation.” And remarkably, I continue to hear that observation from others and again, without judgment.

Sure, many people have always struggled to make the giant leap from technical roles to more senior roles. But, in the 21st Century, leadership is something much more than that. Something systemically disturbing.

Pushing leadership up hill

We no longer live in a linear, certain world. And that is confronting to many leaders and how they, well, lead.

So many of the truly transformative challenges that we face are no longer “simple” and linear, say, like rolling out a new IT system. Or executing a new marketing strategy. Like climate change or conflict, such challenges often do not have the sense of step-by-step resolution about them that was traditionally

the case.

Instead, too much of what we now face is, well, messy, deeply uncertain.

This shift was even being observed by academics in the mid '80s. However, it really gained traction when the US Army War College coined the term VUCA in the '90s, reflecting a world that was volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

Make no mistake, normal has well and truly left the building.

When faced with this uncertainty and complexity, our dominant leadership styles haven't kept up; they haven't evolved in the face of seismic change. Many leaders are still seeking to solve – and control – issues on their own, expecting to be followed unquestionably by staff.

As a consequence, we have simply pushed leadership up hill. And organisations struggle, having made very few inroads into their biggest challenges. And as time progresses, more significant challenges are appearing. Trust is in decline. Organisations are under threat.

Confronting the 21st Century

If our organisations are to thrive in these times, leadership needs to transform, becoming more collective in style. What could that look like? Well, here are some of the critical capabilities underpinning that new style leaders will need to develop to ensure that they thrive, not just survive.

Better informed to transcend the unthinkable

The predominant thinking in leaders is wired for a world of stability, breaking things down into bite-sized parts and then making decisions. Today, strategic thinkers need to metaphorically take a step back, not only understanding bigger picture implications, but also how the distinct parts of the system(s) are interconnected and what are the relationships between the parts. They seek a better understanding of the complexity that they face before making decisions.

One method that leaders can employ to improve their strategic thinking is the use of a PESTLE analysis. Namely, Political – Economic – Social – Technological – Legal – Environmental. This enables leaders to consider the interconnectedness of parts that are rarely considered.

How do these “parts” fit together? What relationships are there between them? What assumptions or blind spots about them must be acknowledged?

Connecting with dignity

Leaders can improve their thinking by *truly* involving different perspectives regarding their organisation's biggest challenges. Many of these issues are now so "wicked" that leaders cannot resolve them on their own or within their teams. Through collaboration, leaders can not only improve their understanding of their context faced and their decisions, but also this "collision" of perspectives can innovatively create solutions that can be translated into other products or services.

Truly involving others, however, is difficult for many leaders. It requires avoiding the desire to control the process or the outcomes obtained. Collaborating requires *sharing* control, sharing power. A mindset that focuses on the dignity of "the other" will successfully facilitate this. That means seeing the worth in all people as well as their ideas and insights. That is not a traditional way of thinking.

One way for leaders to start improving their ability to collaborate is by seeking feedback on issues before decisions are made, seeking feedback from staff, stakeholders, even those you dislike talking to! And approaching each conversation with curiosity and humility is priceless.

Leaning into the shocks

To fulfil those collaborative efforts is complicated by there being more frequent and larger unforeseen bumps, shocks and crises than was traditionally the case. Hierarchical leadership is unable to cope with a constant state of flux; agility is critical. Leaders must now organise work in shorter cycles, learning and adjusting as progress is monitored at every stage. While this is challenging, this is possible by removing the need for control and enabling self-organising teams.

Leaders can also benefit by being well prepared for the future. We can't predict what lies ahead; but, rather than dangerously relying solely on what we know today, we can *anticipate* the future by calling on futures thinking or foresight. It will be of vital importance if leaders are to anticipate what are the next seismic waves we may experience and then be better prepared.

What assumptions do you have about the future? Are they based on the past? What implications does this create?

We need you

Acknowledging that leadership exists is scary. It isn't a reflection on any individual; it reflects a world that has not confronted the fact that our

traditional organisational stories, mindsets and leadership styles are buckling.

Futurist David Houle asserts in *A Look in 2022*, “the new and future realities are rushing in everywhere one looks ... The old holds on, but is gasping and failing.” Time is up.

The mechanistic view towards the challenges that organisations face, in a world experiencing VUCA, has not served us well. Without shifting to a more collective style of leadership, a growing array of gradual then sudden breeches of what we take for granted as normality will be prompted.

In response, we need to transcend tradition. We urgently need bold leaders. Leaders like you.

David Ross is an international strategist, founder of Phoenix Strategic Management and author of *Confronting the Storm: Regenerating Leadership and Hope in the Age of Uncertainty*

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