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Responding to Turbulent Times: Where Does Leadership Come In?

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Abstract

Leadership is a major twenty-first-century concern because of the need to make sense of an increasingly complex context and to make choices between options for the positive changes that are deemed required. Reviewing the success of leadership responses to challenges of violent conflict and health pandemics as well as the extent to which we see futures through fragmented or solidarity lenses has created real interest in global perspectives in leadership and a new research agenda that is associated with this imperative. The article concludes by identifying work in progress, that is, by assessing the universality of characteristics that have been associated with good leadership and how globalization is changing leaders' perspectives and required competencies.

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We live in uncertain times, which offer more threat than succor for human security and troubled times in which we must find better ways to relate as people and as communities if we are to create and manage a sustainable future. In this age of high anxiety, past approaches to leadership may no longer be fit for purpose. This article highlights this challenge and explores how the process of leadership and approaches to leadership can influence and determine our ability, as a world community, to thrive in this context. Continuous review of approaches to leadership at all levels will help determine whether responses to global crises, be they pandemics, natural disasters, or violent conflicts, are met competitively or through collaboration—through a lens of fragmentation or one of solidarity. For example, it may well be that the global public health crisis that began in 2020 has been a crisis of leadership.[1]

The world today is experiencing increasing complexity and global interdependencies fueled by an unyielding and accelerating pace of change with new pressures from changes in power relations and technologies that disrupt but also offer solutions. The world is better informed than ever before but at the same time misinformed by new media and mass communications. This pervasive misinformation has created declining levels of trust and a decrease in the number of trusted institutions. And though the world today is more connected and interdependent than ever before, it is fraught with significant ethical dilemmas as we experience increasing inequality and lack of fairness.

These interconnections, interdependencies, and complex adaptive systems suggest shared missions. The 2020–2022 global health pandemic has made clear the importance of placing people at the heart of a collaborative world and of ensuring that multilateral frameworks work for everyone. These concerns have been accompanied by an on-going struggle to preserve democratic participation. This changed context is at the heart of our discussion about refreshing our approaches to human security and about how our relationships work in moving society forward.

The complexities also risk disguising a new world order that is unfolding as we transition from a post–Cold War unipolar world order into something new. The violent and destructive Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 highlighted the terrifying risks that such transitions bring. Thus, this turbulent contemporary context demands that we ask and resolve a set of tricky questions—about how we decide to act, as individuals or together, at a local, national, or global level, and whether, either globally or locally, we build coalitions for solidarity or fragment into separate, exclusive actions. Leadership matters and we need to understand it better.

Leadership Matters

The search for new and more apposite social relationships involves leadership. Leadership in this sense is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.[2] Leadership requires working collectively and using dialogue.

Recent scholars and practitioners of global leadership acknowledge the importance of context in analyzing effective leadership. Lane, Maznevski, and Mendenhall, for example, argue that globalization is about "increased complexity."[3] In acknowledging a greater complexity through globalization, reviewers of leadership in the twenty-first century are likely to begin with global perspectives, and of core interest is what "good" leadership looks like in a global context. Such leadership will actively eschew competition and seek out ways to work collaboratively, reaching beyond national borders.

The job of global leadership is to respond to global challenges such as climate change mitigation or adaptation, public health, terrorism or mass migration, and at best to convert them into opportunities for sustainable development. These challenges for leadership are clearly framed in terms of sustainable development at a political level in *Transforming Our World:*

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, published by the United Nations in 2016.[4] The document sets priorities for global leadership and includes a list of seventeen "Sustainable Development Goals."

Research on global leadership includes assessments of the universality of characteristics that have been associated with good leadership and how globalization is changing leaders' perspectives and required competencies. Global leadership is defined through global problems, unbound from a single cultural reference point.[5]

This developing field of research is building understanding around three related agendas: thinking globally, acting globally, and making a difference globally. Thinking globally involves long-term and systemic thinking, navigating complexity, and developing open-mindedness and inclusivity. Researchers at the Arizona State University Thunderbird School who observed global executives and managers in an effort to determine individual qualities deemed essential for the leaders of tomorrow cite as critical the application of a "global perspective" and the cultivation of a "global mindset."[6] A global perspective of leadership includes having knowledge of diverse cultures and socioeconomic and political systems, being comfortable with people who are different, and understanding social and business practices in other countries, systems, and environments.

The World Economic Forum's annual surveys on the global agenda reinforce the conclusions of researchers about the qualities required for successful global leadership.[7] Acting globally and in solidarity with others is a likely consequence of global mindsets. Scholars and practitioners focus on effectiveness, that is, the attributes of "good" or "better" leadership helps the navigation of complexity and helps make positive change when needed. Leadership literature offers countless lists of universal leadership qualities, placing emphasis on such community behaviors as inclusivity, participation, and collaboration. Exhibiting these behaviors in a global context is challenging because of the diversity of cultures that must be negotiated with and accommodated and the multiple and differential specificities of problems at local and global levels.[8]

Clark and Clark define leadership as "an activity or set of activities, observable to others, that occurs in a group, organization or institution, and which involves a leader and followers who willingly subscribe to common purposes and work together to achieve them."[9] This definition is helpful as a baseline but it disguises a degree of ambiguity and the important distinction between *leadership* and *leader*. We can identify leadership as a phenomenon, a process or set of activities, that comprises a set of interconnected collaborators—a leader, followers, and other stakeholders. This collaboration works within a common frame, a common purpose. Thus, leadership is much more than the "leader" or the behavior of the leader. Interestingly, most of the literature on leadership focuses on the persona of the leader, seeking to highlight (and promote) the qualities or traits of "effective leaders" by observing the best, successful leaders and watching how they operate, in the hope of identifying the "key ingredients" of a successful leader.[10]

This same approach can also be applied to global leadership and global leaders. Perceptions about the determinants of successful global leaders are changing. No longer are global managers, transferred from one country to another, seen as good examples. Rather, effective global leaders are seen as those who are able to act as "transcultural leaders" and engage in cross-cultural problem-solving.[11]

The willing subscription to a common purpose and the relationship between leaders and collaborators are supported by the skills of effective leaders.[12] In global leadership, these skills involve the ability to create and manage relationships and the ability to work with colleagues from other cultures and other countries. Global leadership, however, is more than cooperation between countries or cultures. It views the "global" as a whole system, impossible to disaggregate except at the front line of product or service delivery.[13] In the best practice of

global leadership, the differences between people and cultures that many struggle to negotiate are seen as assets allowing the mobilization of levels of global awareness and experience-sharing that transcend the relative simplicity and comfort of working in well-known and predictable locales. Effective global leaders demonstrate empathy, curiosity, humility, cultural awareness, sensitivity to complexity of context, and, above all, the ability to build strong bridges between cultures and make strong connections with individuals and organizations across boundaries.[14]

Global leadership as defined here is linked to systems thinking. Systems leadership places significant focus on connecting and cultivating shared visions for positive change and working with all stakeholders within the global terrain. Thus, global leaders must successfully navigate nationalities and national systems and languages and cultures and must work across gender, age, belief, and professional boundaries, across in-groups and out-groups, and across teams and individuals. Global leaders must excel in global working with communications, attitudes to time, and the management of priorities.

The study of global leadership is still a new science. For the past twenty years, surveys have documented the critical importance of global leadership and the scarcity of global leaders in business. A 2009 study by the Center for Creative Leadership, for example, found that 86 percent of senior executives believe it is important to work effectively across cultural and geographic boundaries in their current leadership role.[15] Yet only 7 percent believe they are effective at doing so. There is no reason to suppose that this finding would not apply also to the public and not-for-profit sectors. More research is needed.

Connections Matter

The encounter, exchange, and engagement that characterize the formative connections in an interdependent world both bind us together and drive us apart. Connections create opportunity for competition and for harm; proximity can be weaponized. Thus, a leadership that joins things together for the sake of positive change and greater human security must face the challenge of bringing people together.

Efforts to define leadership and measure its effectiveness are shaped by the historical trajectory of political theory attributed to the development of the concept of leadership. In turn, this definition impacts the research designs of those studying leadership and, crucially, the steps policymakers take to try to improve it. In essence, the "meaning" attributed to more effective leadership greatly impacts the "mechanisms" thought to foster it. This interest is focused on and driven by an anxiety that the governance of human security in operation or on offer at this time is not fit-for-purpose, nor can this be tweaked or adjusted to make it so. We must set out a road map from this place to one more likely to meet human security needs.

That we are in a new context seems obvious, and during this time of pandemic, perhaps we are poised at the gates of a new and silent phenomenon, a domain, like the coronavirus pandemic that is traveling, leaving, and arriving without pattern, purpose, or prevention. This new pandemic, or new turbulence, is exploiting connections and constantly adapting to avoid our control. It thrives on human-to-human relationships and contacts and is manifested in behaviors that exploit the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our imperfect world.

Analysis of the empirical evidence of the interrelationship between the social and structural elements of leadership leads us to argue for a differentiation between two kinds of definitions: those that offer a static description of a more participative and inclusive process in contrast to the dynamic conceptualization of leadership as a political and economic process. Paradoxically, explicating the opposing aims of definitions could provide consensus on the conceptualizations themselves: the disagreement may lie in what the definitions aim to do.

This new context did not just arrive. The accelerating pace of change, technological advances, and connections generally created a perfect storm of complexity that has made new demands on our understanding of how leadership and leadership concepts and methods can guide us in achieving positive change and more security for humanity, and how, importantly, to foster a sense of strong, resilient solidarity now and for the future.

Contemporary experiences describe how international leadership has struggled. For example, the failure of internationally backed leadership in Afghanistan in 2021 showed how an international intervention, some twenty years in the making, supported by military might and billions of US dollars were unable to transform the underlying factors that drive violent conflict in that place. Leadership disappointed and failed.

This intervention is just one example of why the approach to such interventions must change. De Coning emphasizes that the uncertain and the unpredictable in such contexts are not the result of insufficient knowledge or inadequate planning or implementation.[16] They are instead to be expected in complex adaptive systems. This uncertainty and unpredictability defines our turbulent time: within a complex adaptive system, we are unable to predetermine the kind of relationships that will generate any desired end states. This inability is why a refreshed look at leadership actions including capacity to exercise adaptive and more spontaneous approaches has become more interesting. The use of adaptive actions by leaderships does not mean that expert or scientific knowledge is not important, but it tells us to think more of the distinction between evidence and action: listening to experts is crucial, but so too is the full engagement of stakeholders who are experiencing the context.

Relationships Matter

Through this discussion, we also find a significant divergence between whether definitions are entirely social (about solidarity, shared values, and a sense of belonging) and whether they incorporate structural conditions (deprivation, inequality, discrimination). *Social capital* has been a hugely influential concept, developed by a number of scholars with overlapping conceptualizations of the mechanisms by which individuals, and sometimes communities, build solidarity through bonds and bridges, though social capital literature can avoid important social relationships between individuals and institutions.[17]

Some scholars trace the roots of social capital theorization to Marx's work on capital and amalgamate the range of usages under the conceptualization "Social capital is captured from embedded resources in social networks" while acknowledging the lack of consensus over whether such assets are acquired by the group or by individuals Also, there has been ongoing and intense debate about the rigor, coherence, and measurability of the concept.[18] But if social relationships are important and foundational for better forms of governance, then trust is also critical. Discussions about social capital have tended to focus on individual relationships, whereas one might argue that effective or better leadership demands more attention to the relationship between individuals (and maybe their immediate communities) and institutions or structures of governance. We have observed already how this latter relationship has reduced in recent times. The addition of trust by individuals in institutions, and trust by people of nation states, adds a further dimension to relationships.

We need new assessments of leadership around its twin roles: helping to make sense of the potentials and realities in our complex world and helping to make positive changes to that world. This statement does suggest that we search for new understandings, and new arrangements for leading, and ones that might not resemble models that we currently know. We should be looking for forms of leadership that adapt to change and that focus on behaviors, models, and cultures of leadership, with more interest in all stakeholders within leadership than

on leaders themselves. We are prompted by an anxiety about the adequacy of leadership in our confusing and fast-changing time.

Conclusions: An Agenda for Leadership

How might refreshed and updated approaches to leadership help respond to threat and turbulence in the global context? And how will such new thinking point toward the positives of collaborative actions and solidarity, in preference to fragmentation and competitive actions? Conscious efforts to identify actions and behaviors likely to reinforce new and "better" forms of leadership to help navigate this context highlight choices to be made. Can we set out some general, overarching behaviors and qualities for leadership? This question sets a research agenda as we struggle to develop governances that can better support in complex time:

- *Asking the right questions*. In changing contexts we assume, too often, that leaders and stakeholders know the right questions to ask. In dynamic contexts, this is not necessarily the case. Asking the right questions and corralling the appropriate evidence is key to acquiring relevant knowledge about current challenges. Leadership that is always "asking questions" can appear indecisive and questioning and as a result can be seen as a weakness.
- *Working with complexity.* Decision-making processes needs to be able to work creatively and in ways in which the journey becomes more significant than the destination. Scientists and experts are often caught in linear and reductionist modes that are found less able to adapt to emerging complexities. Leaderships also struggle with grasping the intricacies of operating within complex adaptive systems. So leaderships that can learn while doing and do while learning may better cope with uncertainty and a lack of predictability.
- *Cultivating trust.* Leadership must cultivate trust. It is no longer the case that when a leader appears to work effectively, trust is earned and built. Trust is formed and broken horizontally between individuals (e.g., affiliation, affection) and vertically between institutions that form the fabric of society. Distrust of government and institutions has increased enormously in the last decades.
- *Being agile and adaptable to the profundity of contemporary change.* Processes are continuously updated requiring dynamic changes to keep pace. Positive experiences and past successful solutions will be neither sustained nor sustainable without agility and adaptability.
- *Investing in continuing learning*. The current intensification and disruptiveness of social and technological change requires a leadership phenomenon that can accommodate learning, experimentation, and innovation. Complexity describes risk and risk introduces the prospect of loss or harm, and leadership must be comfortable with both risk and the management of loss.
- *Engaging with the whole.* As we have indicated, definitions of leadership vary and typically romanticize leaders. Leadership is better defined by what leaders do. Governance phenomena should be less leader-centric and emphasize the active engagement of the whole and be inclusive and empathetic about the role of all participants or stakeholders. Leadership is thus a collective not individual endeavor.
- *Managing loss resulting from change*. Decision makers that capture gains and moves organizations or communities forward must also manage and make meaning of loss and suffering for all stakeholders. Leadership can be more difficult when it accommodates losers as well as those who benefit from actions.
- *Mainstreaming the relationship between local and global.* Decision making and actions at global and local levels are not mutually exclusive. Old assumptions of unilateralism

and tribalism must adapt to the realities of interdependence. Global issues have local impact and vice versa. Global interdependence calls for alternative approaches to leadership and decision making.

Sustainable leadership through stressful times can be helped, also, by a set of behaviors more likely to reinforce solidarity and trust with stakeholders at all levels. First, leadership must be based on a non-negotiable commitment to an ethical approach. A leadership commitment and a design that is focused on "do no harm" at minimum and at best to protect rights is more likely to sustain and reinforce solidarity through time. This process will try to find a way to protect one person's rights and needs against and alongside the rights and needs of others. Second, inclusive leadership, representative of all stakeholders, should employ the practice of bringing people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized into a process. Inclusivity typically leads to a diversity of outcomes that are balanced and include multiple perspectives.

Third, the ability to listen, hear, and reflect on conversations in the public square is critical. More impactful governance processes mobilize inclusive and civil conversations. The potential for civil society to inform the process and affect policy through innovative small and large groups, such as Citizens' Assemblies,[19] is huge. Generative conversations that bring about new ideas from the people who are present in the process should be ongoing and carried out consciously and deliberately at various times. Fourth, a leadership that promotes solidarity will commit to a comprehensive community engagement that encompasses the promotion of a multigenerational approach to learning and co-creation. Solidarity across generations might deliver a holistic approach to collaboration and learning that can move people from apathy to empathy, and intergenerational dialogue can strengthen critical thinking and mobilize social media and digital technology as a force for positive change.[20] We often hear of "the young" or "the older generation" in separate and fragmented discussions of social capital and action; whereas an approach that captures the "now" generation, that which can be engaged, together, now, might be very enrichening.

Finally, leadership dealing with stressful context can choose to focus on questions rather than answers. Governances need to become educated consumers of information. Inquisitiveness, healthy skepticism, and openness to different questions lead to a fuller understanding of challenges and therefore better solutions, particularly in complexity. Leaders receive the answers to the questions they pose. When leaders ask the wrong questions, they receive the wrong answers and overall leadership struggles. Scientists can inform leadership on specific topics, but interdisciplinary, nonlinear solutions require coordinated input from multiple stakeholders. Because of the existing silos, polarization, and fragmentation, better governance might benefit from a breadth of both exposure to a diversity of experiences and training.

Further work will focus on the quantity, quality, and effectiveness of support to new forms of governance. It must resolve the intricate relationship between governance and leaders. It will seek to address the tendency of viewing these through the lens of the "leader" and thus reposition the leader within leadership. The programming of new resource support is needed to match a fit-for-purpose leadership phenomenon and address current challenges by reinforcing an emphasis and commitment to ethics, inclusivity, public conversations, and trust in intergenerational solidarity and education. Better governance might well use relationships in different and clever ways.

Moving forward is not in the solutions but in the questions we ask. There are three within the focus of current discussions and on the agenda for scholars. Given globalization and technological advances that are accompanied by disruptions, uncertainty, interdependencies, rapid change, and unpredictable outcomes, should not leadership be only and always operating within a complex system, and what does this mean for leadership development? Second, and

importantly, what better understanding is needed of power, how it works and the difference it makes within leadership? Our forms of governance, and the leaders and leadership within, cannot be ambivalent about power and the less savory and uplifting parts of acting or making choice. So, within the phenomenon of leadership, how can we make sense of and reconcile exercising power that may include unsavory or expedient components in contrast to exercising leadership that is deliberate and ethical but may be less expedient?

Finally, there is another, big question about empathy and how we approach and feel for others. Decision-making systems as with leadership has a choice between self-centredness and selflessness, and whether to focus on and within private or public space. How will all stakeholders maintain a focus on empathy and on a compassionate collaboration likely to support movement towards a better world?

Notes

[1] Interview with Dr. Tedros Adanon, DG World Health Organisation, October 2020.

[2] See Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linksy, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, 2009).

[3] Henry W. Lane, Martha L. Maznevski, and Mark E. Mendenhall, "Globalization: Hercules Meets Buddha," in *The Blackwell Handbook of Global Management: A Guide to Managing Complexity*, ed. Henry W. Lane, Martha L. Maznevski, Mark E. Mendenhall, and Jeanne McNett, 3–25 (London, UK: Blackwell, 2004).

[4] See UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, September 2015), https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

[5] For a good discussion, see G. B. Graen and C. Hui, "Transcultural Global Leadership in the 21st Century," in *Advances in Global Leadership*, ed. W. H. Mobley, V. Arnold, and J. Gessner, 1:9–26 (Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 1999). See also Gama Perrucci, ed., *The Study and Practice of Global Leadership* (Bingley, UK :Emerald Publishing, 2022).

[6] See Mansour Javidan, "Bringing the Global Mindset to Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, May 19, 2010; Robert J. House, Paul J. Hanges, Mansour Javidan, Peter W. Dorfman, and Vipin Gupta, eds., *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of Sixty-Two Societies* (London: Sage, 2004); Robert J. House, Mansour Javidan, Paul J. Hanges, and Peter Dorfman, "Understanding Cultures and Implicit Leadership Theories across the Globe: An Introduction to Project GLOBE," *Journal of World Business* 37, no. 1 (2002): 3–10.

[7] World Economic Forum (WEF), *Global Leadership Index: Survey on the Global Agenda* (Geneva: WEF, 2014); WEF, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2015–2016* (Geneva: WEF, 2015); WEF, *The Global Risks Report 2016* (Geneva: WEF, 2016); WEF, *The Davos Agenda 2021* (Geneva: WEF, 2021).

[8] See Gill Robinson Hickman, *Leading Change in Multiple Contexts: Concepts and Practices in Organizational, Community, Political, Social, and Global Change Settings* (Washington DC: Sage, 2010); Mark E. Mendenhall, Joyce S. Osland, Allan Bird et al., eds., *Global Leadership: Research, Practice and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[9] Kenneth E. Clark and Miriam B. Clark, *Choosing to Lead*, 2nd ed. (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1996), 25.

[10] See Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991).

[11] Graen and Hui, "Transcultural Global Leadership"; Dale Pfeifer and Brad Jackson, "Cross-Cultural Leadership," in *Leadership: The Key Concepts*, ed. Antonio Marturano and Jonathan Gosling (London: Routledge, 2008), 34–35.

[12] Clark and Clark, *Choosing to Lead;* Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century.*

[13] See Jagdeep S. Chhokar, Felix C. Brodbeck, and Robert J. House, eds., *Culture and Leadership across the World: The GLOBE Book of In-Depth Studies of Twenty-Five Societies* (London: Psychology Press, 2019).

[14] Angel Cabrera and Gregory Unruh, *Being Global: How to Think, Act, and Lead in a Transformed World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2012).

[15] Jeffrey Yip, Chris Ernst, and Michale Campbell, "Boundary Spanning Leadership: Mission Critical Perspectives from the Executive Suite," Center for Creative Leadership Organizational Leadership White Paper, October 17, 2009, available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=1490462.

[16] Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251.

[17] See T. Claridge, "Social Capital and Natural Resource Management: An Important Role for Social Capital?" (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, 2004), https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/.

[18] For a comprehensive critique, see Ben Fine, with Dimitris Milonakis, *From Economics Imperialism to Freakonomics: The Shifting Boundaries between Economics and Other Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and, for a meta-analysis of definitions, see Gregory M. Fulkerson and Gretchen H. Thompson, "*The Evolution of a Contested Concept: A Meta-Analysis Of Social Capital Definitions and Trends (1988–2006),*" *Sociological Inquiry* 78. no. 4 (2008).

[19] See Jessica Hill, "Citizens' Assemblies: A New Dawn for Democracy?," *Local Government Chronicle,* January 2, 2020, https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/governance-and-structure/citizens-assemblies-a-new-dawn-for-democracy-02-01-2020/.

[20] See "No Time to Lose: An International Dialogue on Why Youth Participation Is Essential," PLAN International (blog), August 11, 2021, https://plan-international.org/eu/blog/2021/08/11/blog-intergenerational-dialogue/; "Promotion of Intergenerational Dialogue in Youth Work, Council of Europe, European Union, 2022, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/intergenerational-dialogue; Megan Gilligan, J. Jill Suitor, Marissa Rurka, and Merril Silverstein, "Multigenerational Social Support in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 12, no. 4 (2020): 431–447, https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12397.