

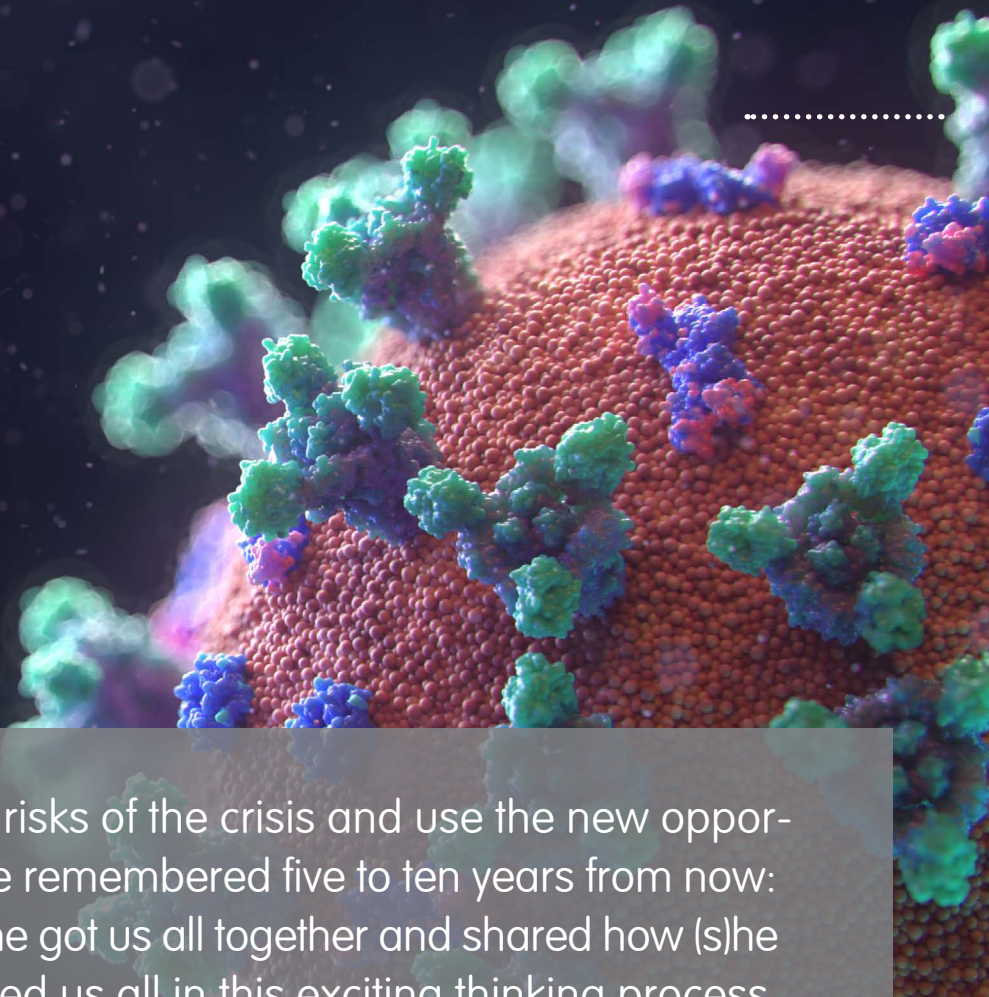
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Leadership Choice in the Pandemic Crisis

“The great gift of this crisis could be that we learn to collaborate much more”

 Quick read

Are you aware of your emotional response to the threats of the Corona crisis? What are you feeling? Are you using your feelings in the strategic decisions for your organization? Leaders need their full emotional power as much as their thinking power in these times, when no one knows all the answers.



Leaders who navigate the risks of the crisis and use the new opportunities that emerge, will be remembered five to ten years from now: “do you remember how (s)he got us all together and shared how (s)he felt at the time. (S)he involved us all in this exciting thinking process. We built our new approach virtually that morning in the spring of 2020. It is thriving today”.

We find ourselves at the heart of the global Corona crisis. It is catastrophic, mind-blowing and scary. Today’s reality seems more unreal than a film script could ever be. Our health and safety, our economies and social cohesion are more uncertain than they have been for a long time. We have no clue whether this will take weeks, months or years. We have no idea whether this will take thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions of lives around the globe. We have no line of sight on what the impact on our economies and societies will be. Will we ever go back to normal? Do we want to? What will be the new normal?

In every crisis there is always an inherent possibility for growth. What is the vibrant opportunity for humanity, now severely attacked by one of the simplest organisms

on earth? At least the Covid-19 virus shatters three big illusions of our time: ‘We know it all’, ‘We have got it all under control’ and ‘we are invulnerable’.

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The three big illusions

Suddenly, illness and death are more present in our lives again. The rising occupancy rates in hospitals force us to have conversations with our parents and grandparents:

“How do you want to live during the crisis?” and “how do you would want to be treated, if the virus would reach you?” It is not only about the length of life, but also about the quality of life. What would it mean to lie in a hospital bed without visits for several weeks? The lockdown forces us to have different conversations with our kids about health, life’s meaning & quality and the earth’s sustainability. At many dinner tables, conversations over the last three weeks have been different from the three years before. The measures governments take, force us to reflect on our ability to control a virus and control the world in general. Many people have come to a standstill as their jobs stopped overnight, whilst they are fit and might wonder what to do with their time. Businesses have come to a grinding halt. Entrepreneurs find themselves ‘knocked out’ all of a sudden. For others the ‘heat is on’ as they work in hospitals, elderly homes, public services, schools, logistics, supermarkets and cleaning. They expose themselves every day to the risks of the virus and have to deal with their fear of catching it themselves. It is a complete reshuffle of the value of jobs. The intrinsic social nature of entrepreneurship surfaces. It has become self-evident how you serve others through supermarkets, telecoms, banking. It also becomes clearer for many of the services we are missing at the moment: sports, culture and restaurants & bars. For decades we talked about social entrepreneurship. It is a pleonasm. Now is the time to reflect on how meaningful your business is.

When the virus hits the townships, favelas, refugee camps and slums around the world, or the dense elderly populations in big urban city centers, it will show the powerlessness and vulnerability of us humans even more. We may look with guilt at our own blessed fate, unable to do much about the horrific fate of others

who happen to be living in areas where social distancing is impossible, and healthcare simply isn’t available.

More than ever we can see how interconnected our world is: family, friends, neighbors- there is a complete revival of the meaning of neighbor and neighborhoods in big cities, work, religion and sports. ‘Flattening the curve’, is the credo for the moment. What happens when the virus returns, bouncing back from another part of the world which is further ahead or lagging behind our local ‘flattened’ curve? There will only be a new normal. A normal in which we accept that we don’t know it all, that we are not in control and that we are vulnerable people. There is no simple way out of this crisis.

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The antidotes to the illusions

We are also witnessing beautiful antidotes to the illusions above in our collective effort to ‘flatten the curve’. If no one has the answer to the gigantic challenge ahead of us, then there is no other option than to join forces and open up the collective wisdom: ask for the help of others, preferably everyone who can come up with ideas for protective masks, breathing supplies and IC capacity. All rules and regulations are questioned or sidelined to crack the challenge. We saw the Dutch prime minister reach out to an opposition party to fill a crucial vacant minister post. Best person for the job, rather than the traditional party line.

We can 'say sorry', if it turns out we got overly focused on our own local crisis, showing too little understanding for the situation of the person 'next door'. We had another Dutch minister who did exactly that, when he showed no empathy for needs of the Mediterranean countries dealing with their Corona crisis.

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We can also 'reach out & open up' for feedback or input when we are determining how to prioritize. In the millions of Skype, Zoom or Teams calls, there are more and more little children showing up, curious to see what their parents are doing. There is a magical little story where a father said to his seven-year-old son: "I am in a call, only disturb me for something really important". Ten minutes later his son was in the room: "dad: do you think I should color these shorts blue or red?". Importance is just a matter of perspective. Especially now that work and life are more connected than ever before. Therefore, it is not enough to use these antidotes of 'asking help', 'saying sorry' & 'opening up'. This is how we can change our 'doing'. Changing our 'doing' sustainably, requires that we reflect on our 'being': our values, beliefs, preferences and our emotional life story which influence our 'doing'.

Providing direction: towards a new normal

In times of crisis, leadership choice concentrates on providing direction for action through

the chaos and uncertainty. We have to take strategic decisions with limited information. Once the direction is clear and agreed by a large part of the 'population', people can move quickly, become creative and courageous. A shared direction provides hope, meaning and togetherness. Almost every business and public institution has to think through what the new normal will look like for their organization during and after this first pandemic crisis. It is a vibrant call for renewal of our missions, values and business models.

The question is how to provide direction. As human animals we all first respond emotionally to the threat of a crisis: our most primitive brain informs us to fight, flight or freeze. As a result the tendency for many people is to either avoid providing direction altogether, or to get into control mode. People who don't get out of the grip of their first primitive response, will not be able to provide strategic direction. Therefore it is vital to find out how you respond personally to a crisis: are you fearful, fearless, or somewhere in between both ends of this spectrum. We have seen examples which show that both the fearless and fearful responses are dangerous. Fearless leaders don't take risks seriously enough and become reckless. Bolsonaro and Trump had more time to respond to the Corona threat than European and Asian country presidents and prime ministers. However, they failed to take enough precautionary action, which is leading to the catastrophic losses. You can hear a lot of language inspired by the fearless voice from within: 'to fight', 'to battle', 'to conquer', and 'to win', are almost instinctive responses. These responses neglect the vulnerability of life. The unwillingness to accept life as it is and that some things cannot be changed by 'fighting' the threat. The fearful response is equally risky and is prob-

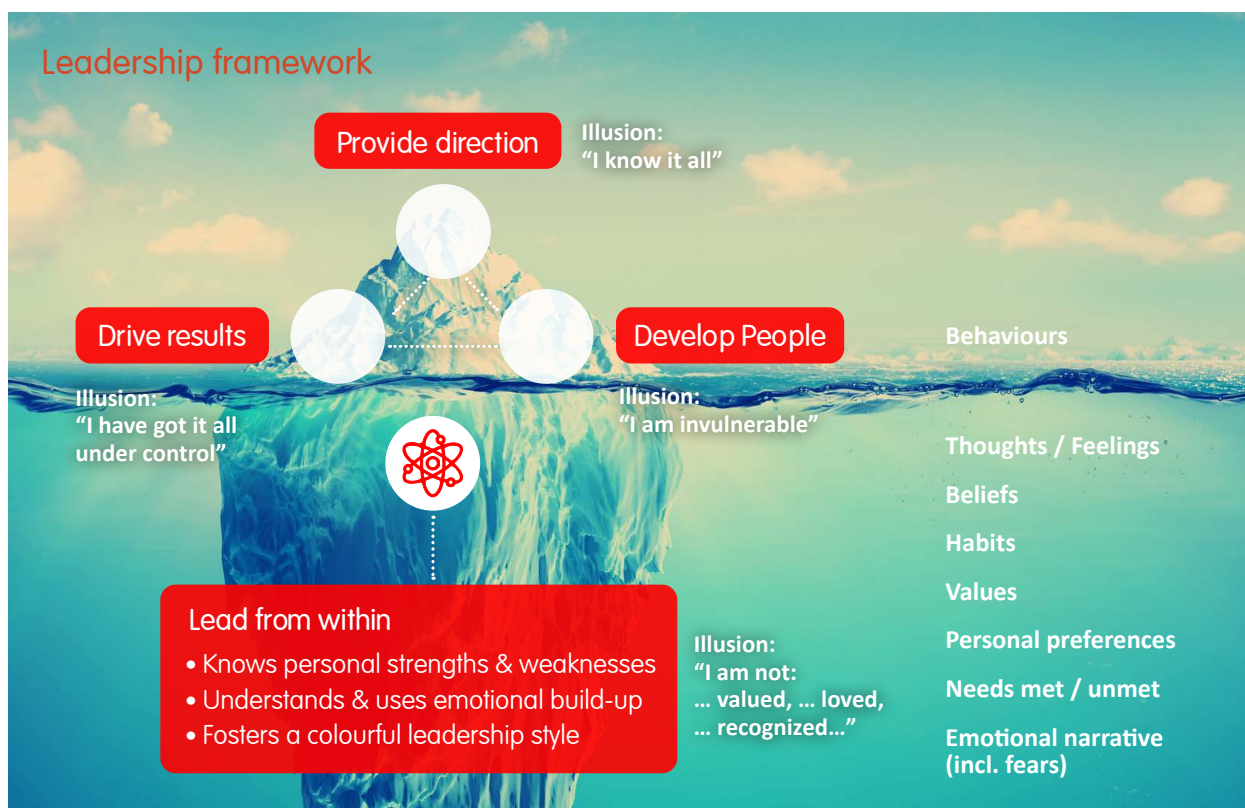
lematic in a different way: it is contagious. This means that a team can start operating at the emotional state of those who are most fearful. You may not personally be among the first to start hoarding supermarkets, but what happens when you find yourself in a half-empty supermarket? You may start to think that you are underestimating the risk yourself, heightening your own fearful responses.

In order to provide direction you may want to calibrate your thoughts about the direction of your organization with someone with a different fear profile. 'Fear-informed' decisions are decisions that have rationally looked at the brutal consequences of the crisis for your organization and reviewed both the risks and opportunities of the challenges ahead.

A few hard choices early-on in a crisis need to be made swiftly, with just a few people involved. The majority of choices which follow, and which will provide direction for your organization, can and must involve more people.

Our collective thinking power is much stronger than anyone's individual brightness. The strategies to navigate crises are much more acceptable, if we think through our challenges together. The great gift of this crisis could be that we learn to collaborate much more inside and outside our organizations and nations' borders. "Together we get the virus under control", the signs say throughout our country. There are many more big (global) issues out there that could benefit from a collective approach to shaping the new normal.

So our call to action for leaders is to understand your primal response to fear and mobilise your people to think through the risks & opportunities of the crisis together. It is not all doom and gloom. The gamerules of many industries, business models and ways of working will be re-written in this Pandemic crisis. Are you re-writing the rules of the game in your organization, industry or eco-system? •





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