

Unmasking Leadership: Leveraging the Dynamic Tensions of The Pandemic

By Melvin Dowdy, Ph.D. -- Faculty in Inspirational Leadership at Kylemore, Kylemore Global Centre, University of Notre Dame

Every year the fall season yard work must be done. Leaves must be raked, flower beds cleared, perhaps a little pruning; but the big job is reseeding the lawn. Aeration is the most popular preparation for reseeding. This year, however, I decided dethatching the lawn was overdue. Thick lawyers of thatch can impede getting nutrients into the soil and become a barrier for new seeds to germinate. Dethatching tears up a lawn, and looks awful at first; but as disruptive as it appears to be, it makes room for new growth.

Covid-19 has exposed layers of organizational undergrowth that have been decaying for years. Hierarchies bounded by turf-minded, silo-preserving leaders; processes that are slow and unnecessarily complex; talented, energized employees waiting for their ideas to be considered or for a leadership advancement opportunity—these are among a few of the decaying organizational practices the pandemic has exposed.

At the core, needed changes are systemic, requiring leaders to scan their operational environments for where and how to dethatch. Systemic change leadership begins with the leader's ability to balance tensions within himself or herself, before attempting to balance tensions within the organization. Consider the following six change dilemmas:

- Creating an urgency for action - AND - Accepting the restraints of uncertainty
- Introducing structural change - AND - Conserving functional stability
- Tough-minded in decisions - AND - Open-hearted to anxious employees
- Caring for the community - AND - Caring for the organization
- Staying personally in touch - AND - Coordinating remote management teams
- Directing top-down execution - AND - Developing cross-functional collaboration

What makes each of these pairs a dilemma is the stronger pull one pole of action asserts over its complement. One seems more compelling, more attractive, more familiar than the other. The danger lies in a leader's failure to recognize an unconscious bias that will neglect the importance of balancing the need or value of one pole with the other, though less familiar.

The Pandemic Lesson. Remember the urgent call made in response to the pandemic for action to serve the value of public health as a common good? Social distancing, hand-washing, wearing a mask became a mantra everyone was repeating. Well, not everyone! Others were equally concerned about preserving individual freedom and a thriving economy; they expressed the restraints of uncertain outcomes. "Would masks make me safe; would the economy falter; would I lose my job and my ability to pay my rent?" These were some of the responses that clearly seemed to conflict with the urgent need for public health on behalf of the common good. Some leaders gravitated so strongly toward the public health/common good pole that those valuing individual freedom/economic vitality were forced to become very outspoken.

With very few exceptions, no leader was able to balance this polarity to leverage messaging and create policy aimed at a dual strategy, fostering public health AND preserving economic vitality.

The unconscious bias to favor one element of a polarity over the other is rooted in an emotional attachment to that pole to such a degree it becomes ideology. One sees all the value of the preferred pole, and less value in the other; thus, one optimizes the value of one pole at the other's expense.

The big picture is lost; namely, the larger systemic purpose of achieving a flourishing community. AND thinking would hold both of these values in creative tension, leveraging the energy of both sides to make necessary adaptations.

We can see from the pandemic how *Either/Or* thinking, under disruptive conditions, quickly degenerates into inflexibility, less adaptive strategies, and weak commitments to long-term outcomes. The *And* approach to leading change will push leaders well into their discomfort zones; but the results are clearer, sustainable, and congruent with a greater purpose.

Applying the Lesson. Developing a leader's ability for *And* change begins with seeing the dilemma for change as a polarity—a dynamic, complementary tension between two different elements of organizational flexibility. Many leaders shrink from organizational tension and competing internal demands. They avoid conflict; some by trying too hard to please, some by demanding compliance, and others by staying aloof. None of these work; none are adaptive; all of them reward inflexibility, not change. The first step in the lesson is to discover the unconscious bias limiting a leader's vision of the challenge to achieve a balanced strategy.

The second step is the leader's willingness to accept his/her discomfort, the great worry or anxiety that becomes more present when the task is to embrace both sides of a dilemma. Leaders gradually realize how their anxieties produce ways of thinking that are not sufficiently robust, are too narrow, too rigid; a shift occurs in their interest; they want to see the big picture; they begin asking the big picture questions.

The third step can be the most exciting. Leaders pivot toward an expanding group of legitimate stakeholders. Leaders begin to inquire actively about differences, forming new relationships with employees, other leaders, and those outside their organization. They become more approachable, understanding, and supportive of outcomes different stakeholder groups represent. The dynamic polarities emerge into clear view, and with this pivot, leaders also see the opportunities to leverage complementary pathways for meeting what may have seemed incompatible, conflicting interests.

If we can learn as leaders to leverage the tensions inherent to the polarities we confront, especially in the face of highly disruptive change, we can also plant new seeds of our collective potential as organizations, and as nations. Hopefully it will not take a pandemic to teach us these lessons. Perhaps we need only to step back, find a group of life-long learners, and take a guided inquiry into our leadership. I know a little place on the west coast of Ireland where this happens every year, sometimes in spring and often in the fall.

By the way—my grass is very Irish green these days. Dethatching did the trick!

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Kylemore Abbey
Connemara, Co. Galway, Ireland
H91 VR90
Tel: 353-(0)9541815
kylemore@nd.edu