Adaptive and Responsible Leadership:
A Relevant Leadership for the Second Half of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The first quarter of the 21st century has shown us that leadership, as we know it, has not been effective at tackling the changes faced by our planet, or at keeping up with the unparalleled advances in science, technology, and society observed in the last 20 years. To be a leader today requires skill, but not the skill that calls for rigid and disconnected organizations which pay more attention to the leader than to leadership itself. This article suggests adaptive and responsible leadership as the leadership styles needed in our current context. As part of an adaptive and responsible leadership, humility, vulnerability, openness, initiative, integrity, creativity, optimism, excellence, and strength in kindness are the personal traits needed to succeed as a leader in the second half of the 21st century. Leadership today requires forcing ourselves to think seriously about our deepest assumptions and most strongly held values. It requires the courage to examine the principles and beliefs that have limited us in the past and to move forward with a frame of mind fit for the second half of the 21st century.

Keywords: Leadership, 21st century, adaptive leadership, responsible leadership.

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Introduction

As the world continues to recover from an unprecedented global pandemic, disasters of epic proportions have shown us that we have entered an era for which most of the world is utterly unprepared. In addition to an exceptional global pandemic, recent natural disasters attributed to climate change and global warming, including unparalleled wildfires, hurricanes, cyclones and tornadoes, devastating earthquakes, volcano eruptions of extraordinary magnitudes, and exceptional levels of heat and rain, have been observed throughout the world.

Technological change is yet another factor that has altered the way we communicate and learn, to the point of overwhelming even the savviest among us. In addition to the familiar advances in technology, like smart phones and self-driving cars, other scientific advancements in biotechnology, including the notorious DNA tests, have altered the way we understand one another, and have shaped our culture and society in ways unimaginable to those born just a few generations back.

The notion that everything that can be invented has been invented, although never fully endorsed by all (Crouch, 2011), has been grossly debunked, leaving no doubt that we have arrived at a time where, even the most utterly unimaginable things, are now undoubtedly possible. The level of exponentiality of these scientific and social changes is such that, even those born as recently as the second half or the 20th century, have had, at some point, trouble grappling with the reality of the world in the 21st century (Coulson, 2000).

The creators of futuristic cartoons from the 1960s could never have suspected that their comical versions of gadgets like smart watches and videoconferencing devices would be a part of everyday life in the 21st century. It has been estimated that the current is an age in which the world will change more than it had in any other comparable span of history (Burton, 2003). These profound changes require leaders to think and act in new ways every year, day, and hour (Hoyle, 2007).

At present, changes in society, science, and technology progress with unprecedented swiftness and with unprecedented consequences. This new realization has birthed in the idea of futuring. Futuring is the act of seeing, feeling, and anticipating events that are in the near, middle, or far future (Hoyle, 2007). Futurists are people who:

- Prepare for what they will face in the future.
- Anticipate future needs.
- Use poor information when necessary.
- Expect the unexpected.
- Think in terms of both short and long terms.
- Dream productively.
- Learn from their predecessors (Cornish, 2004).

Despite futuristic views of what the world will be, the present is already riddled with radical uncertainty, in which, with unprecedentedly high margins of error, the consequences of failure are potentially catastrophic (Mau, Callahan & Ohemeng, 2022).

Given this unprecedented current reality, the world requires unprecedented approaches to tackling these changes, thrusted by individuals possessing an intuitively futuristic approach to understanding science, technology, and society. These individuals are today's leaders of tomorrow. Remarkably, however, leadership, for the most part, has continued to be autocratic, resistant to change, narrow-minded, and inflexible (Rizvi, 2022). Leadership, as we know it, must be redefined and reoriented to meet the needs of the world in the second half of the 21st century.

Against the preceding backdrop, this article introduces the notion of leadership, followed by three important considerations about it. The piece then continues with a discussion pertaining to the classification of leadership styles as inherent personality traits, and the classification of leadership styles as behaviors conducted for a specific purpose and time. The section is followed by definitions of two distinct leadership styles relevant to our current context. The subsequent segment describes the attributes of successful adaptive/responsible leaders. The article concludes with suggestions for the implementation of a leadership relevant for the second half of the 21st century.

What is leadership?

Through time, many have suggested definitions of leadership (Shannon, et al., 2020). This article focuses on two different ways to approach this notion: One suggesting leadership to be an innate quality possessed by some individuals (trait), and the other, understanding leadership as a role fulfilled by a member of an organization (behavior). Stemming from these two perspectives are the following definitions of leadership:

- Leadership is to inspire voluntary participation to reach a common goal. Leaders, through their magnetism and charm, encourage individuals to act, to follow, and to trust them (Khan, 2022; Kinicki, 2021).

- Leadership is to give subordinates tasks to complete, telling them exactly what to do and how to do it (Cherry, 2023; Touro University, 2019).

Important considerations concerning leadership

Before exploring other ideas about leadership, it would be important to establish that leadership is not a moral concept. Leadership, as a construct, is *amoral* (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008). In other words, leadership itself is neither good nor bad. Leadership is akin to money. Money can do wonderful things for humanity, it can provide avenues to mitigate hunger, it can fund education and development, and it can help ameliorate the devastating effects of natural or manmade disasters. It is also true that, on the other hand, money can support terrorist acts, facilitate human trafficking, and facilitate illegal substances and goods to move between continents. Leadership, like money, can be utilized as a tool for wonderful good, or devastating evil. The morality of leadership, like money, is in the hand that holds it. A successful leader is never guaranteed to be a principled human being.

Successful leaders are also known to elicit an emotional reaction in their followers (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008). Leaders, good or bad, invariably evoke a reaction from those around them. The same leader may be loved, admired, and revered by some, and hated, condemned, and rejected by others. Leaders like Mother Theresa of Calcutta have the power to elicit feelings of compassion and love, they inspire good, generosity, and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. On the other hand, leaders like Adolf Hitler have the power to manipulate people to do unthinkable things, like believing that murder can be perpetrated in the name of the progress and advancement of humanity.

Another important consideration associated with the notion of leadership is the separation of popularity and leadership (Khan, 2022). In the era of TikTok, Instagram, and Tweeter, the line between popularity and leadership can be very easily blurred. To be popular is to be liked and enjoyed by many. To be a leader is to be someone who promotes action and change. And, while popularity and visibility are important aspects of leadership in modern society, true leadership encompasses much more than just being well-known. Popularity alone does not persuade individuals to take action, nor is it followed by permanent changes in societal structures or individuals.

Trait and behavioral classifications of leadership

As stated earlier, leadership can be understood as a personality trait, or as a set of behaviors conducted as part of a role assigned to, or performed by, an individual in a specific context, and for a given period of time.

As a personality trait, leadership can be classified as: 1) Autocratic, in which leaders are the center of attention, and all decision-making power resides in their hands. An autocratic leader rarely consults anybody as decisions are made (Briker, et al., 2021; Khan, 2022). 2) Transformational, in which a leader inspires trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect from others, who are willing to work harder than originally expected, and make sacrifices for the leader's sake. The transformational leader has the unique ability to promote change through the articulation of an energizing vision and challenging goals that provide followers with a sense of identity (Norlin, 2020; White, 2020). 3) Democratic, where the leader is inclusive of the needs and desires of others. The democratic leader is

capable of creating an engaging culture of shared responsibility within a group (Beerbohm, 2015; Khan, 2022). 4) Laissez-faire, where the leader leads by delegation. Followers are empowered by being given authority, but with little-to-no direction. Followers of a laissez-faire leader often feel insecure, since they fear being punished by not meeting the vaguely defined expectations of the leader. Furthermore, because of the lack of supervision inherent to this type of leadership, the leader's vision might never be executed in an ideal manner (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021).

As a set of behaviors assigned to, or performed by, an individual in a specific context and for a given period of time, leadership can be classified as: 1) Transactional, where the leader relies on rewards and punishments to achieve a prescribed level of performance from others. It is based on the active monitoring of the activities of their subordinates (Jones & George, 2009; Lutkevich, 2022; Young, 2021). 2) Bureaucratic in which leaders exist as a part of an organization and lead by the regulations imposed on them. The leader is instructional, offers regimented supervision, and expects structured implementation of established rules. Teams under bureaucratic leaders are aware that rules must be followed, and that there is little room for creativity or innovation (Khan, 2022; Nevarez, 2013).

Contemporary Leadership Styles

The understanding of the traditional definitions and styles of leadership allows for the categorization of "new" contemporary leadership styles. These contemporary leadership styles, although somehow founded upon outdated principles, are an adaptation of these basic principles to the reality of the 21st century. Two of these new/contemporary leadership styles are:

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is composed of a networked managerial structure of individuals with the right knowledge, skills, and authority to make immediate decisions in a constantly changing environment. An adaptive leadership style allows people and groups to operate with minimal central authority and to deal with crises quickly and effectively, potentially lowering the impact of unexpected, unplanned changes, disasters, and risks. Organizations based on an adaptive leadership fare better in a sustained crisis because they possess:

- Distributed governance.
- Dispersed workforce.
- Less interdependency among parts of the organization.
- Cross-trained generalists rather than specialists.
- Guidance by clear yet flexible rules.
- Freedom to execute immediate mitigation measures.

Individual members of an adaptive leadership team are empowered with the ability to make quick decisions in real time as needed, resulting in a highly motivated, resilient team (Hayashi & Soo, 2023; Obolensky, 2016).

Responsible Leadership

Responsible leadership is the "art of building and sustaining relationships with all relevant stakeholders" (Maak & Pless, 2006, pg. 104), which allows leaders to provide vision, inspire, influence, and guide others to contribute towards achieving organizational goals through a relational process. Responsible leadership is relevant in environments with radical uncertainty and high margins of error with potentially catastrophic consequences of failure (Mau, Callahan & Ohemeng, 2022).

The second half of the 21st century calls for a healthy, balanced mix of adaptive and responsible leadership. The lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, the unprecedented natural catastrophes recently experienced throughout the world, and the unparalleled changes in our global society, as well as in science and technology, have revealed that leadership, as we know it, is bound to

fail because it is excessively rigid and unable to adapt to changing circumstances; messy, disorganized, and disconnected; disengaged from the notion of crisis management; unprepared for the unexpected nature of global risks and their complexity; ill-equipped to handle the ripple effects from a crisis spreading far beyond its epicenter; and pays more attention to the leader than to the actual act of leading (Boin & Hart, 2003; Hayashi & Soo, 2023; Mau, et al., 2022).

Leadership for the second half of the 21st century

Leadership in the second half of the 21st century requires greater levels of (Boin & Hart, 2003; Hayashi & Soo, 2023; Mau, et al., 2022; Obolensky, 2016):

- Networked structures.
- Dispersed governance and workforces.
- Decision-making power able to be activated without delay.
- Individuals with the right knowledge and skills.
- Cross-trained generalists rather than specialists.

In order for this type of leadership to be nurtured and supported, a vision that concentrates on more than one person is crucial. Authoritative, transactional, and bureaucratic leadership styles are inconsistent with the leadership needs of the world today. The following are fundamental character and personality traits needed to succeed as a leader in the second half of the 21st century (Ball State University, 2020; Eims, 2012; Thrall, et al. 1999).

Humbleness: Humbleness is the result of a balanced sense of self-concept and self-esteem. Humble leaders do not rely heavily on self-sufficiency. Their sufficiency springs from their understanding that they are a vital piece of something greater than themselves.

Vulnerability: A vulnerable leader is quick to admit limitations. Vulnerability requires leaders to take the path to shared leadership, the path to community.

Openness: Successful leaders are open to new ideas, to criticism, to listening to any and all members of their team.

Initiative: Proactive leaders do not wait to be told what to do. They use their ingenuity to make things happen as they are needed.

Integrity: Integrious leaders can be trusted and are true to their word. They possess strong moral principles and sustain moral respectability.

Creativity: Creative leaders are not afraid to try new things. They think differently, unconventionally and see challenges from as many different angles as they possibly can.

Optimism: An optimist leader expects good things from circumstances and people. Optimism does not mean to be naïve and foolish. It means, by contrast, to have a strong determination to think about the positives in any situation, regardless of the circumstances.

Excellence: Everything an excellent leader does is as faultless as possible and free as possible from any defects. Excellent leaders display completeness, precision, care, and comprehensiveness in everything they do.

Strength in kindness: Strong leaders personify generosity and compassion under any circumstance, particularly amid challenging situations, chaos, and unexpected crises.

Conclusion

The first quarter of the 21st century has shown that leadership, as we know it, has not been effective at tackling the unexpected effects of crises throughout the world, resulting in a widespread erosion of faith in authority (Hayashi & Soo, 2023). Consequently, it is imperative to realign current conventions and recognize that the leadership for the second half of the 21st century is not about

gaining greater control, a higher position, or a higher quantity of influence. Rather, it is about ascending to a higher *quality* of influence (Thrall, et al. 1999).

Leadership for the second half of the 21st century must be adaptive and responsible, built upon the foundations of a distributive governance, a dispersed workforce, less interdependency, engaged generalists rather than specialists, clear and flexible rules, and freedom to make decisions as challenges and crises appear. This leadership demands skill, but not the skill that calls for rigid and disconnected organizations which pay more attention to the leader than to leadership itself. The successful leaders of the second half of the 21st century understand, exemplify, and foster humility, vulnerability, openness, initiative, integrity, creativity, optimism, excellence, and strength in kindness.

Effective leadership requires forcing ourselves to think seriously about our most deeply held assumptions and ideals. It requires the courage to examine the principles and beliefs that have limited us in the past, and to move forward with a frame of mind fit for the second half or the 21st century.

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