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Why wakeful leadership is more important now than ever

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Leadership has been described, studied and applied in more ways than the lights we see in the sky on a starry night. The fact that such is the case is a good indicator of the fascination scholars and practitioners seem to have with the subject. It also demonstrates that leadership is a frequently implemented phenomenon. Actually, there are conflicting opinions about the meaning of leadership. A large group of leadership authors feels that we can only speak of leadership when people exert leadership behavior in a formal, hierarchical setting toward others. Others broaden this scope and include informal settings to the picture, but maintain that “others” have to be involved before we can speak of leadership. And then, there are those, such as the author of this article, who feel that leadership should be considered from an even broader scope: as a behavior we exert throughout the many decisions we make and the many actions we take, whether others are involved or not. It is our personal leadership that drives us to make the strategic choices in our lives, for instance, whether we will continue our study or find a job right after college, or whether we should invest our savings in a new car or a long overdue paint job of the house.

Seen from a positive angle, the fact that opinions differ so broadly about leadership indicates the vitality of this topic, for whenever people passionately differ in opinion about something, it means that they *think* about it, and consider it important enough to take a stance. However, whether we consider leadership a behavior in which others should be involved or not is of less importance to the following annotation. The *quality* of the leadership we choose to exert today – regardless of the setting – is of much higher urgency and importance.

The quality of our leadership

In considering the quality of our leadership, we have to include our values and moral convictions. What do we believe in? What do we consider important? What is acceptable to us and what is not? It should be noted that many people have a tendency to just adopt mindsets and behaviors from others because they simply do not think about the option of developing their own. And as they engage in this mindless adoption process, they fail to question the reasons and motives behind those others’ actions, or the circumstances under which those mindsets and behaviors were developed. This act of mindlessly following trends and behaviors has been the plight of humanity for the longest time. The major problem we are facing today, however, is that we have progressed – or regressed – too far in our so-called civilized pattern to further uphold any form of mindlessness. In our local and global society of today, we are too connected, too informed, and too interdependent to continue hiding behind a mask of ignorance and mindless behavior. Aside from the numerous alerts on global warming, pollution, extinction of species and forest and water decline, we are dealing with inevitable interdependencies, inexorable cause and effect

trends, which demand urgent attention to the decisions we make from here onward. Some recurring interdependencies in business leadership that require strict caution are:

- *Short-term profit based decisions*: On one hand, these hit-and-run type decisions benefit a small cluster of affluent individuals, but on the other hand, they cause escalating levels of poverty and anger among large human communities.
- *Downsizing workforces to safeguard corporate continuance*: These processes often happen without considering constructive and creative alternatives, such as proposing a temporary collective salary reduction. Downsizing sets a tone of despair and destroys morale, which in turn negatively affects perceptions of the company and its leaders, as they are ultimately responsible for these actions. A company with a harsh reputation may rest assured that the favor will sooner or later be reciprocated.
- *Starting businesses with a sheer profit motive rather than a socially oriented motive*: This egocentric model may have worked in the twentieth century, but in today's day and age, the model and its success rate are just as unsustainable as the mindset behind them.
- *Lack of transparency within the business*: Leaders who try to maintain this, now obsolete, model of "divide and conquer", will soon find that today's educated workforce has neither patience nor appreciation for such insecure strategies. These leaders may find that their employees will display lack of transparency about their opinions and preferences, which may lead to painful and embarrassing findings in vulnerable times.
- *Underpaying field-level employees to pay out gigantic bonuses, salaries and dividends to strategic-level stakeholders*: Leaders who see themselves as "higher" and "better" than their workforce will not find empathy when they need it most.

As we move toward an increasingly interdependent and vulnerable global, mental and emotional climate, it is critical to adopt wisdom and empathy as dominant virtues to ends that justify means.

So, which mindsets and behaviors are causing the above-described behaviors? Here are some:

- Lack of reflection, which can drive us into self-centeredness and failure to consider the effects our decisions have on others.
- Mindless performance, which is the immediate manifestation of a lack of reflection.
- Change aversion, which is a problem many people struggle with, because we are creatures of habit, even when those habits have lost their constructive use.
- *Blindly adhering to traditions, which is one of the most common drivers behind mindless behavior*: We often get stuck in doing things that were traditionally done this way without reflecting or questioning whether they still make sense today.
- Lack of broad view, which lies at the foundation of many a disastrous decision. Till today, when deforestation practices are implemented, they are done with a deliberate blind eye to the massive damage this practice does, not only to wildlife, which is robbed from its habitat, but also to humanity, which is systematically stripped from its oxygen.
- *Too much detail focus, which is a more focused approach to the issue mentioned above*: We can get so lost in details – a problem that is visible in many workplaces – that we waste precious time on nitpicking, at the expense of the bigger picture and its impact.

A wakeful approach

A wakeful approach begins with awareness – of our values and moral convictions, as mentioned earlier, of our beliefs, priorities, boundaries and behavioral tendencies. It really catalyzes when we start accepting that many of our traditionally held beliefs may need

serious re-evaluation, so that we refrain from mindlessly following existing patterns, but instead formulate our own opinions, based on our own, contemporary insights.

Reflection is a fairly simple activity, yet many people forget to engage in it regularly. Frequent reflection can help us stay alert of our decisions because we dare to question them. It can also enable us to see the wider scope of our actions, and motivate us to reconsider first impulses. Reflection can help us understand that each choice we make is actually based on insufficient information, and that much of the course of our life depends on the actions we take after our decisions are made. What this means is that we may sometimes make poor decisions, but we can correct them if we reflect and find that the direction in which things are developing is unsatisfactory.

Wakeful leaders reflect in three dimensions:

1. *Personal*: Personal reflection solidifies the relationship we have with ourselves. It can be achieved and maintained through self-imposed questions such as:
 - How do I differ today from the person I was last year?
 - Have I changed for better or worse in moral regards?
 - How can I (further) improve my moral performance from here onward?
2. *Relational*: Relational reflection evaluates our connections with others, and the nature of those connections. It can be practiced through insight enhancing contemplations such as:
 - What does this relationship mean to me?
 - What constructive actions have I taken in recent months to nurture this relationship?
 - What constructive effects has this relationship had on me in recent months?
3. *Professional*: Professional evaluation considers our connection with our formal activities. Some reflective questions we could ask in that regard are:
 - What am I passionate about professionally?
 - Is what I do today related to my passion?
 - Is my professional activity a constructive one to me and to society?

Allocating regular time to reflect helps us gain more influence of our past (because we get to appreciate it more), the present (because we experience it more intensely) and the future (because we consider it more deliberately). Self-reflection is a guaranteed way of staying mindful and preventing ourselves from mindless actions. Self-reflection is therefore not something we should only do once. It has to become a regular part of our life. Self-reflection can serve as a powerful thread that weaves our past, presence and future together: we see the bigger scheme better and realize that many of your setbacks are necessary parts in the puzzle that is our life. More importantly, self-reflection helps us make different decisions, based on broader considerations, thus elevating our moral and mental spectrum from merely the here and now, toward inclusion of the well-being of those that come after us.

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