

## ***Advances in Project Management Series*** <sup>1</sup>

# **Is now a good time for a fundamental rethink of leadership?** <sup>2</sup>

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We all seem to recognise that we live in changing times with rapid advances and wider interactions with nature, ecosystems, and societal concerns. For guidance and direction in such unprecedented times we turn to our leaders. Indeed, leaders are crucial to navigating and guiding organisations, especially in times of turbulence, change and uncertainty.

Deloitte’s 2019 Global Human Capital Trends Survey draws attention to the crucial role of leadership in a world characterised by disruptive digital business models, augmented workforces, flattened organisations and an ongoing shift to team-based work practices (Volini et al., 2019). The study indicates that leaders are being pressured to ‘*step up and show the way forward*’. Yet, the study concludes that while organisations expect new leadership capabilities to deal with the emerging challenges, they are still largely promoting traditional habits, models and mindsets—when they should be developing skills and capability, and measuring leadership in ways that enable leaders to navigate through greater ambiguity, take charge of rapid change, and engage more deeply with external and internal stakeholders.

*“Year after year, organizations tell us they struggle to find and develop future-ready leaders. In this year’s Global Human Capital Trends survey, 80 percent of respondents rated leadership a high priority for their organizations, but only 41 percent told us they think their organizations are ready or very ready to meet their leadership requirements.”* (Volini, 2019; p.1)

And this was before the Covid-19 global crisis...

*“We see leadership pipelines and development at a crossroads at which organizations must focus on both the traditional and the new. Organizations know that they must develop leaders for perennial leadership skills such as the ability to manage operations, supervise teams, make decisions, prioritize investments, and manage the bottom line. And they know that they must also develop leaders for the capabilities needed for the demands of the rapidly evolving, technology-driven business environment—capabilities such as leading through ambiguity,*

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<sup>1</sup>The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers](#), [click here](#). Prof Dalcher’s article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

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*managing increasing complexity, being tech-savvy, managing changing customer and talent demographics, and handling national and cultural differences.” (ibid.)*

The Deloitte survey reports that eighty percent of respondents indicate that leadership now seems to impose unique and new requirements on organisations. These in turn suggest that new approaches are needed to manage organisations in times of change and turbulence. The new skills required from leaders are identified in Table 1.

**Table 1. New leadership needs (after, Volini, 2019)**

Unique requirements for 21 <sup>st</sup> century leaders:	Percent identifying need:
Ability to lead through more complexity and ambiguity	81%
Ability to lead through influence	65%
Ability to manage on a remote basis	50%
Ability to manage a workforce with a combination of humans and machines	47%
Ability to lead more quickly	44%

Whilst organisations have traditionally struggled to identify and develop leaders with the requisite capability, experience and motivation to address existing challenges and requirements, the enormity of new environments and contexts and the new situations that emerge present a new order of novel challenges.

### **May you live in interesting times**

The Deloitte study refers to an intensifying combination of economic, social and political issues that appears to fundamentally challenge existing models, approaches and capabilities. Indeed, management consultant, educator and author, Peter Drucker famously observed that *‘the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday’s logic’*.

Approaching today’s problems with yesterday’s frames of thought and tools for action may miss the insights from both yesterday and today and ignore the emerging opportunities of tomorrow, and the operational necessity to identify potential disruptions and new players within the external environment. Strategic management thinking has thus developed an appetite for disruptive players, emerging platforms, blue ocean thinking, lean start-ups and transformational change indicating an acceptance of the transformative capability of new players and technologies, and the need to widen the scope of interest to new contexts, players and potential stakeholders, and thereby learn to encompass new opportunities.

Donald Sull (2009) observes that we often respond to turbulence by accelerating activities that worked in the past. *“We lapse into inertia when we should adapt with agility, and we cling to rigid dogmas when we should improvise. But throughout history, volatility has not only dethroned incumbent leaders, it has also created untold possibilities to create economic value.”* (ibid., front sleeve).

Whether taken as a blessing or a curse, the phrase ‘*may you live in interesting times*’, often implies a similar penchant for the uncertainty characterised by a mix of the opportunistic with the disruptive. The fusion of unprecedented hazard with unparalleled potential to restructure and organise can thus be presented as a disquieting, yet, intriguing, potential for new events, occurrences and resulting potential, that extend beyond the habitual reality that we normally occupy.

US politician and lawyer, Robert F Kennedy, noted in a speech given to National Union of South African Students in June 1966 at the University of Cape Town on the University's Day of Reaffirmation of Academic and Human Freedom, that: ‘[Comfort] *is not the road history has marked out for us. There is a Chinese curse which says "May he live in interesting times." Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind. And everyone here will ultimately be judged - will ultimately judge himself - on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.*’

And it appears that the majority of human society now finds itself in just such unprecedented, uncharted and ‘interesting’ times with the unfolding coronavirus epidemic. Yuval Noah Harari (2020) observes that humankind is facing a global crisis, perhaps the biggest of our generation, which will ultimately shape our health care systems as well as our economy, politics and culture. Short-term emergency measures often become fixtures of life. Meanwhile many countries and their economies engage in large-scale social experiments as citizens are instructed to work from home, eschew traditional school and work arrangement, communicate from a distance and develop measures for social distancing and separation.

Peter C. Baker (2020) maintains that times of upheaval are always times of radical change, and the pandemic is a once-in-a-generation chance to remake society and build a better future. A mere two or three months ago it would have been unthinkable that most schools would be closed, billions would be out of work, individuals would be confined to their homes, all children would be home educated, our elders would be locked up, food and toilet paper would disappear from shelves, landlords will not collect rent, banks will suspend mortgage payments, public gatherings will be banned, governments will put together the largest economic stimulus packages to maintain national economies and the homeless will be housed in hotels. It is increasingly becoming clear once again that crises can rapidly shape society, the economy and life as we know it. Meanwhile national and local governments engage in experiments related to healthcare provision, ethics, the provision of living wage, housing and other means of social intervention, protection, surveillance and control.

### What’s different now?

The current pandemic has shaken many of the foundations and deeply held assumptions underpinning society and government. Ivan Krastev (2020) distills seven major differences that characterise the current crisis, which are paraphrased and reframed below, with an expanded and elaborated context:

1. The current crisis will force **the return of big government**: Greater government intervention in reducing death and debt and controlling social behaviour and

economics may amend conditions for investment, social responsibility and society at large, with residual impact on how projects are conceived, arranged and managed. It may also offer the potential for major new types of gigaprojects to rebuilt shattered economies, societies and systems.

2. **The return of borders:** Citizens are being asked to fortify communities and regions to avoid infection—the erection of walls and barriers will increase the focus on smaller communities. It may also re-emphasise local as opposed to global concerns, offering potential impacts on how distributed and cross-national projects are conceived and governed and how different interests may compete and collaborate at different times.
3. **The return of the expert:** Previous crises undermined experts and their contribution. In contrast during the current crisis, governments are relying on experts as the basis for concerted, evidence-based and informed action. Renewed trust in experts as the basis for making complex decision and trade-offs indicates greater respect for expertise and professionalism.
4. **The potential of big data:** Big data, smart apps and new surveillance technologies and behavioural tactics offer potential to control and monitor movement and actions of citizens in accordance with the preferences and needs of the state. Some countries have shown tremendous success in controlling and monitoring the population using new technology. Will our personal freedoms be surrendered or returned?
5. **Crisis management:** The standard response to terrorist attacks, disasters and financial crisis is to avoid panic, stay calm and get on with life. In contrast with previous disasters, the success of responses to the epidemic hinge on the ability of governments to scare their citizens into compliance and changing their behaviour patterns, an approach that directly contradicts the normal response to crises.
6. **Intergenerational dynamics:** Younger generations have been critical of their elders for threatening their future, ignoring the environment and not adopting a long-term perspective. Ironically, the pandemic reverses this dynamic, as older generations feel more threatened and must inevitably rely on younger generations to change their way of living and also to agree to sponsor the long-term protection of the older generations. The financial and long-term implications of such a reversal are yet to be worked out but are likely to impact the younger generation for longer. Asking a younger generation that cannot afford housing, for a long-term sacrifice may lead to ‘interesting’ conversations.
7. **Tough choices:** Difficult decisions between containing the spread of the pandemic at the cost of destroying the economy, or tolerating a higher human cost in order to sustain or save the economy.

Disasters, crises and emergencies are underpinned by harm, hurt and danger, but they also enable new developments. Solnit (2009) asserts that emergencies foreground ways in which human reserves of ingenuity, improvisation, solidarity and resolve enable recovery, and open

up new possibilities. However, such potential is often choked by mismanaged responses, which tend to treat people as part of the problem to be managed, rather than an invaluable component of an emerging new solution. Klein (2007) observes that real disasters (Disaster 1) are typically followed by what she terms Disaster 2, a significant mismanagement of resources, and tactics and the squandering of vital opportunities for improvement.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) have published the third edition of their successful book on *managing the unexpected*. Their work focuses on the identification of high reliability organisations (HRO) able to sustain high performance in the face of unforeseen change. HROs are able to consistently outlast bank failures, intelligence failures, quality failures and other organisational breakdowns. Their detailed analysis uncovers five key principles that are common to HROs enabling them to manage the unexpected. Weick and Sutcliffe's principles are listed below, with some additional summarised and paraphrased elaboration on each item.

**Principle 1: Preoccupation with failure:** Implies paying attention to anomalies, cues, normalising, wariness and doubt

**Principle 2: Reluctance to simplify:** Implies sensitivity to variety and refusal to oversimplify

**Principle 3: Sensitivity to operations:** Implies situational awareness and staying in motion (i.e. think while doing, and by doing)

**Principle 4: Commitment to resilience:** Implies elasticity and recovery as a result of making sense of an emerging pattern

**Principle 5: Deference to expertise:** Implies (using expertise for) reorganising around problems

HROs master the five principles in order to sustain sustained performance. Weick and Sutcliffe give the typical exemplars of HROs as commercial aviation and emergency rooms, which provide instances of exceptional organisational preparedness. Yet, the current pandemic has hit with such size, scope and severity that seems to have overwhelmed even many of our most trusted HROs, requiring significant intervention and rebooting on an unprecedented national and global scale. The longer-term implications and the need to rethink and improve our ability to sustain sustained performance may require significant further investment and some out of the box thinking about supporting our critical HROs and the important social and societal capabilities.

Disasters bring out the worst, and sometimes also the best in people. They certainly require the making of difficult decisions and trade-offs by officials and functionaries. In such unprecedented and turbulent times, when our most trusted lines of defence are breached we often yearn for a hero; a mythical figure to lead, guide us through the wilderness of the crisis towards a new promised land of security, safety and renewed prosperity. We also expect such leaders to make the difficult decisions for us to enable the re-emergence of hope, and the promise of enduring success.

## In need of a leader?

We often lament the qualities and capability of our leaders, political or otherwise. Nicholson (2013; p. 261) observes that there are times when, manifestly, we would be better off without leaders, especially when we watch venal, greedy, lustful, punitive and selfish leaders at play. At other times we may question if we get the leaders we deserve (Dalcher, 2017).

*‘Many of the leaders we encounter in all spheres of life place their desire to be right above the wish to achieve the right outcome. ... As a result, many followers, citizens and workers remain concerned by the apparent lack of leadership skills. The World Economic Forum identified lack of leadership as one of the major global challenges facing the world in 2015, and commissioned a survey to investigate further. A staggering 86% of respondents worldwide agreed that there is currently a global leadership crisis.’* (Dalcher, 2017; p.2)

Salicru (2017; p. xxxiii) maintains that leaders are more likely to create what he terms as the three Ds of leadership—distrust, doubt and dissent rather than the confidence and engagement we crave. Yet, in times of uncertainty, turbulence and crises we crave the control and certainty that come with established leadership. Boin and Hart (2003) therefore view crisis and leadership as closely intertwined phenomena. People experience crisis as episodes of threat and uncertainty requiring urgent action (p. 544). They turn to leaders to do something, and alleviate the threat and uncertainty. When crisis leadership results in reduced stress, they herald the “true leaders” for mitigating harm and alleviating stress (ibid.).

Spicer (2010) invokes the metaphor of leaders as commanders, which often involves borrowing from the deep and rich language associated with military activities, when the leader becomes a commander. In a crisis situation, the commander’s job is to define what needs to be done and get on with the job, often relying on coercive or hard measures to achieve the required results.

*‘Here there is virtually no uncertainty about what needs to be done – at least in the behaviour of the Commander, whose role is to take the required decisive action – that is to provide the answer to the problem, not to engage processes (management) or ask questions (leadership).’* (Grint, 2005; 1473-4)

In unpacking the position of the commander, Spicer (2010) identifies four potential types and roles of commanders: the leader of the charge; the ass-kicker; the antagonizer, and, the rule-breaker. The command stance proves that the leader is willing and able to put themselves on the line (p. 130). Commanders instil a mixture of fear and respect, enforce collective standards, and are able to draw on the power that continues to be associated with images of harsh masculinity, often exhibiting what is commonly referred to as alpha-male behaviour (131). The notion of commanders, allows leaders to defeat the enemy and overcome other hardships as they execute their role, address the crisis and resolve the situation.

Whilst appealing, in principle (with an agent directly placed for addressing the main concerns), Spicer raises a number of problems with the command model of leadership:

- The model is highly unrealistic as leadership is assumed to flow from a strong figure who is able to lead a group through social conflict (134)
- It assumes that leadership is an act of command and is therefore highly authoritarian, with a single individual who is empowered and knows best what to do (134-5)
- It significantly blurs the line between management and leadership (135)
- And, most disturbingly, it promotes a masculine image of leadership (136)

The command approach works well in times of crisis and stress over a short duration, or when there is a well-defined enemy that can be overcome, however, it comes at a cost and clashes with the humanistic values that are associated with most organisations and groups (137). Nonetheless, in times of adversity and crisis it offers a model that individuals can subscribe to, which offers a heroic figure to lead and direct the battle on our behalf.

McChrystal, Eggers & Mangone (2018) also take issue with the heroic models and the outdated notions of leadership as great men in command. The work builds on General McChrystal's earlier exploration of leadership and the prologue describes his progression through the ranks of the US army. McChrystal became a general and pursued traditional approaches until he was posted to Iraq and Afghanistan post-9/11, where he realised that command in the twenty-first century, technology-enabled battlefield required not just traditional leadership skills, but also intuitive adaptations (p. xi).

*'Reflecting on his experience as the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s, General Stanley McChrystal devised the notion of Team of Teams (McChrystal et al., 2015). McChrystal discovered himself facing an enemy organised in flat networks that enabled it to regularly change, adapt and reconfigure itself. To combat the enemy, McChrystal investigated the ideas of complex systems and thereby recognised the need to transit from a fixed and cumbersome traditional military hierarchy towards a set of dynamic teams operating as high-performance teams.'* (Dalcher, 2018a; pp. 5-6)

McChrystal, Eggers & Mangone (2018) profile thirteen iconic leaders from a wide range of eras and fields who followed unconventional paths to success. The work identifies new realities regarding leadership in practice. The realities identified by the research (396) state that:

1. Leadership is contextual and dynamic, and therefore needs to be constantly modulated, not boiled down to a formula.
2. Leadership is more an emergent property of a complex system with rich feedback, and less a one directional process enacted by a leader.
3. The leader is vitally important to leadership, but not for the reasons we usually ascribe. It is often more about the symbolism, meaning and future potential leaders hold for their system, and less about the results they produce.

The conclusion of the study suggests that "leadership is a complex system of relationships between leaders and followers, in a particular context, that provides meaning to its members" (p. 397). The position allows for a richer and more powerful conceptualisation of leadership across multiple aspects and perspectives. The implications are that we follow leaders partly so that we can achieve certain results, but also because of the sense of purpose they can offer. At times it is not the outcomes that we crave, but the fulfilment of the role or purpose that satisfies

a need offering a more delicate balance. Moreover, the network of relationships allows for influences rather than a one-directional causality from the leader. Finally, leadership cannot be made prescriptive.

*‘Leaders are necessary because we tend to understand the world through individuals who organize into various structures as a way of fulfilling collective needs. ... (leadership) is something that helps us to make sense of the world, sustains our common identities and holds hope for a brighter tomorrow. Like leadership itself, our need for such symbols—meaning, identity, hope—is part and parcel of our human nature, which few ever saw as being so simple. Coming to terms with our own complex selves allows us to recognize that leadership too is necessarily difficult and yet endlessly inspiring.’ (398-9)*

### **The business of people: Leadership for a changing world**

Leadership offers the potential to make sense of difficult conditions and find our way out of crisis. Leaders maintain their importance in symbolic as well as practical terms but some of our approaches and models for thinking are overdue for a much-needed refresh, or an even more significant upgrade or major overhaul. Indeed, Drucker observed that many of our tools for observing (and shaping) the world are unfit for their purpose.

*‘As we advance deeper in the knowledge economy, the basic assumptions underlying much of what is taught and practiced in the name of management are hopelessly out of date [. . .] Most of the assumptions about business, technology and organisation are at least 50 years old. They have outlived their time.’ (Drucker, 1998, p. 162).*

The new theories around leadership acknowledge the subtlety of novel approaches to positioning leadership in an organisational context. The notions put forward by McChrystal and his team require new ways of building and engaging with leaders, followers, team members and stakeholders. So where, do we look for re-positioned knowledge and insights on leadership, especially in times of change and turbulence? How can we consider the impacts of contemporary change-rich and turbulent environments on projects, programmes and portfolios?

This month’s contributors rise to the challenge and offer new ways of being the best we can be and engaging with teams involved in project work. The contribution by Iain Fraser and Madeleine Taylor is extracted from their recent book *The Business of People: Leadership for the Changing World* published by Taylor & Francis. Fraser and Taylor acknowledge the need for a new type of leadership that is flexible, collaborative, and courageous, whilst still allowing sufficient flexibility to balance opportunity and risks. They acknowledge that we live in a VUCA world requiring a mix of speed of execution and adaptability skills to respond to emerging change. There is an overriding recognition that the context within which projects are executed is becoming increasingly more demanding.

The work of Fraser and Taylor puts the emphasis back on people. In their view, successful implementation and sustainability rely on success on three fronts: purpose, people and performance. Their book therefore fills a much-needed void by emphasising the human dimension from an academic as well as a practical perspective. People skills are critical to



organisational success, and developing insights, knowledge and skills in the leadership aspects of project work addresses an important perspective.

It is estimated that US companies spend in excess of \$14 billion annually on leadership development and yet numerous organisations identify a leadership gap that requires bridging. Part of the problem relates to outdated training and wrong mindsets, part of it emanates from limited understanding of what leadership is and yet another part of it is to do with where people come from. Many people arriving at leadership, especially at project, programme and portfolio levels hail from technical disciplines, where only limited emphasis is traditionally invested into the ever so crucial softer skills. As we attempt projects in increasingly more distributed, demanding and turbulent contexts, the need for good leadership skills is ever more critical.

Leadership involves multiple aspects. Fraser and Taylor recognise the different needs and focus on the four key domains of managing ourselves, leading others, managing groups, and leading the organisation to deliver significant outcomes. Fraser and Taylor distil many ideas and insights into useful and workable practical advice for project leaders. They consider wider topics and influences and link leadership thinking and development to areas such as change, sustainability and agility at the corporate level.

Projects involve people working in complex setting. As we endeavour to address more ambitious undertakings, deal with change, respond to challenges and emerging crises, and sustain sustained performance, we need to develop better ways for engaging individuals and communities and taking them with us. Fraser and Taylor through their work offer multiple pathways for improvement that can support organisations on their increasingly more critical and more demanding journeys.

### **So where do we go in times of crisis?**

Contemporary research acknowledges that leadership is both difficult and perplexing. Leadership is situated in context, and is highly dependent on complex interactions, relationships and feedback that responds to and reacts with changing conditions.

Yet, if leadership under normal conditions appears difficult enough, what chance does crisis leadership, or indeed, extreme or mega, crisis leadership stand?

Boin et al., (2013: 81) maintain that the effectiveness of crisis leadership can be assessed along the following dimensions:

- Making things happen: crisis management is about organizing, directing, and implementing actions that minimize the impact of a threat;
- Getting the job done: forging cooperation between previously unrelated agents; and enabling “work arounds” when routines and resources do not work;
- Fulfilling a symbolic need for direction and guidance.

In a crisis leadership context, the dimensions can remain agnostic to specific outcomes, focusing instead on improvement and adaptability to emerging conditions and unfolding opportunities.

The basic principles of leadership in modern contexts go a long way toward addressing the need for leadership under crisis conditions, but the level and scales are multiplied and expanded. Large crises have a complex nature that involves many different fields of inquiry and areas of concern. Crises are difficult and any attempt at resolving a crisis, much like a wicked problem or a mess, would require consideration of many areas and domains with far reaching consequences. (Ultimately, as we have seen, a medical pandemic can rapidly entail educational, financial, social, employment, well-being, transport, and manufacturing angles as well as political and existential considerations. It also opens a possibility for other interactions regarding defence, borders, competition for scarce resources, repatriation and wider considerations regarding each proposed solution.)

Mitroff (2005: xiii-xiv) suggests seven essential challenges that organisations of all types need to overcome to survive today's threats: the challenges include:

1. **Right Heart:** Crises exact tremendous emotional costs; as a result, crises demand exceptional emotional capabilities, or emotional IQ. Effective crisis management (CM) demands high emotional capacity (e.g. sensitivity) and emotional resiliency.
2. **Right Thinking:** Crises demand that we are capable of exercising on-the-spot creative thinking. They demand that we are capable of thinking outside of the box that contains the box (known as double outside of the box thinking), and high creative IQ.
3. **Right Soul:** Effective CM requires a special type of inner spiritual growth, or spiritual IQ. Without this our world is rendered meaningless by a major crisis. Most major crisis cause a person to suffer an additional crisis, a deep existential crisis.
4. **Right Social and Political skills:** Effective CM requires a special type of political and social IQ. This is absolutely necessary if we are to get the leaders of an organisation to buy into crisis management.
5. **Right Technical Skills:** Crises demand that we know different things and that we do different things differently; this is technical IQ.
6. **Right Integration:** Effective CM requires that we integrate previous forms of IQ; thus, integrative IQ is required.
7. **Right Transfer:** New knowledge and new forms of IQ are needed to be able to see the world anew. Aesthetic IQ enables crisis management to be viewed as an overarching discipline permitting new forms and design.

Crisis Management may be able to support the “business” bottom line of the crisis, however, Crisis Leadership extends beyond management thus, providing the means for addressing the challenges highlighted above and supporting the existential, emotional and spiritual bottom lines, that extend beyond the mere business bottom line. With crises, such as the current pandemic, any attempt at generating a reboot of society would involve a complex mix of crisis Leadership skills. The resulting effort can then be carved into projects, programmes and portfolios of initiatives and actions required to reinvigorate, rebuild and restore society as part of the reboot effort.

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