

Facing my own Black Swans

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Context

In an article distributed in February this year (A Bevy of Black Swans), we came to the following conclusions:

1. The world has seen the advance of a bevy of black swans. They no longer occur as rare events spaced over time, but cluster together over much shorter time frames;
2. They lead to a series of mostly unplanned systemic consequences;
3. The interdependencies of which also play out over different time frames, some immediate, some potentially only over the longer term;
4. Which places extraordinary demands on the capabilities of leadership at all levels of the enterprise, but also in all spheres of life.

Little did we know that the world would be faced by a crisis of the enormity that COVID19 brought to the world. At some level, it now becomes almost meaningless to have conversations about the economic impact swine flu in China, or political upheaval in Hong Kong when at an economic and social level the entire world is in the deepest global crisis we have seen. For most, if not all of us, the stories of similar incidents such as Spanish Flu a hundred years ago, or two World Wars in the previous century are stories only. Very few of us have life experience allowing us to frame the devastation already facing many, and likely to impact on even more people, communities and enterprises.

Leadership and Disorder

It is so easy to intellectualise the challenges facing leaders at all levels and within all spheres of society. Barely a day goes by where one is not inundated with offerings of books, programs, research findings and the like to explain what might be happening, and in many cases offering solutions for this interlude before things "return to normal". But what if things will never be like before? What if there is not a return to "normal", but we are faced with a simple reality that we have to create the "new" normal? Is this not the essential leadership challenge facing humanity now?

As part of our approach to this challenge, we decided to have conversations with as many leaders as we can, essentially to engage on four topics:

- Where are you as a human being in the here and now? What are your fears and anxieties at a personal level?
- What are your fears for your enterprise and its people? What are you most worried about in the here and now?
- What are your views about your own future post this crisis? How will you as a person think and behave differently?
- What are your hopes for the future of your enterprise and all of its stakeholders?

The responses to this sequence of questioning is really interesting. For many people in leadership roles that we have the conversation with, it is strange to have the

opportunity to talk about their own feelings. Of course, many share the same concerns about their enterprises, such as job losses, cash flow challenges, supply chain failures and the like. Many are uncertain about their own futures, particularly from a career perspective, but also with respect to their ability to support their families. A few are also deeply concerned about whether or not their business will survive the economic fallout of this global pandemic.

It is at this point in the conversation that we then explore the following two questions:

- What is the future you would want to create for yourself and your enterprise?
- What can and must you do now to begin to create that future?

The responses we get seems to provide some evidence that the five stages of leadership is a useful framework to interpret where leaders are in their own head and heart space. Each stage leads to the next, and moving from the stage you're in to the stage above will help you build an organization and culture that can better compete in a disordered world. These five stages are¹:

- Egocentric leadership which is quite adolescent and immature. Fortunately, many leaders seem to evolve past this stage on their own.
- Reactive leadership is the leadership stage where most managers find themselves at. Leaders functioning from this mindset do not realize how much of their leadership behavior is being run on autopilot, shaped by the outside expectations of those in their current (and past) circumstances.
- Creative leadership is the stage where leaders are 'at choice' about how they show up in most circumstances, instead of acting on autopilot, authored by others. They lead from their own deeply held discerned purpose and values.
- Integral leadership is built for complexity. It sees wholes, not merely parts. It is capable of holding significant diversity of opinion and deeply conflicted positions in dialogue without reacting to 'fix' things or championing one perspective over another. This ability to hold the tension of conflicting opposites allows higher-order solutions to emerge.
- Unitive leadership where leaders are operating from the enlightened awareness that all is an astonishing unity. This type of leadership is not just rare but exceedingly so.

To some degree at least, the five stages of leadership also links to Kegan's² stages of adult development. Specifically, integrative and unitive leadership can be related to stages 4 and 5 of adult development, referred to as the "Self-Authoring" and "Self-Transforming" mind respectively. Not surprisingly, many leaders have now become stuck in Reactive Leadership, or have regressed to that stage. Of course, this is entirely understandable as leaders at all levels are faced with the need to make immediate decisions to deal with the extraordinary demands of the here and now. At the same time, we would like to suggest that this is precisely the time where we need to create for ourselves the time and space to be truly mindful and try to adopt a creative and integral stage of leadership. After all, every decision you take now will lay the foundation for the future, for the "new normal".

Final Remarks

There will be a great deal of emotional, physical and financial pain in the immediate future. A crisis of this scale will never be truly resolved until many of the fundamentals of our social and economic life have been remade.

There is also the need, more than ever, for business leaders to recognise the crucial interdependencies between business and its environmental, social, and governance context.

We do not claim to have the answers to the challenges facing leaders. What we do hope to have added to you, the reader, are some questions and a framework to guide your own thinking, so that you can frame the mindful questions before coming to conclusions and taking action. Perhaps it helps to know that in this journey, you are also not on your own.

If you would like to participate in a “thinking partner” conversation, please let us know. Above all, take care of yourself and all of those you love and care about.

References

¹ Anderson, R.J., Adams, W.A. (2015). *Mastering Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Breakthrough Performance and Extraordinary Business Results*. Wiley.

² Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ Hamann, R., Coronavirus will have long-term implications for business leaders. Here are the top five. *Fin24*, 6 April 2020.