

JOURNEYS INTO CORONAVIRUS LAND

Lessons from a pandemic

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01 Preface

04 Chapter 1 Do we get the leaders we deserve?

10 Chapter 2 Why do societies regress?

15 Chapter 3 The courage equation

20 Chapter 4 Coping with life in lock-down

23 Chapter 5 The cabin fever syndrome

27 Chapter 6 Meaning in the age of coronavirus

31 Chapter 7 A tale of two companies

37 Chapter 8 Virtuality becoming the new reality

41 Chapter 9 The virtual team coaching approach

46 Chapter 10 The world at an inflection point

50 Chapter 11 Life after the pandemic

57 About the Author

PREFACE

Someone doesn't have to weaponize the bird flu.

The birds are doing that.

—Film “Contagion”

Somewhere in the world, the wrong pig met up with the wrong bat.

—Film “Contagion”

Sitting in my garden at my house in the south of France in self-isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic, I have a greater opportunity than usual to retreat into my inner world. It is a quiet journey. In many ways, the time available has helped me to reconnect with my reflective self. In addition, the many dreams and daydreams that keep on coming into my mind are of great help taking these journeys into the self. Most likely, the motivation to turn inward is also driven by my age. At my stage in life, I no longer feel immortal. I realize that the days become more precious. More than ever, an invisible threat and forced lockdown are reminders of the tragic transience of time, and the importance of social connections.

At the same time, there is also a feeling of disquietude. Time, more than ever before, seems to fold into itself. In the humdrum of locked-in life, I lose out in its particularity. With one day resembling the other, I seem to experience less highs and less lows. The way I feel at the moment is like sailing in the middle of the ocean, trying to see a glimmer of land to break the monotony.

While rereading recently the sea sailing adventures of king Odysseus by Homer, I had an “aha” moment about the telescoping of time. During his journey back to Ithaca after the end of the Trojan War, Odysseys must have had this experience of timelessness. One story tells how Odysseus, for more than seven years, was held captive on an island by the beautiful sea nymph Calypso. The lush world Calypso offered was a distraction from Odysseus’ war-like life. No longer burdened by the responsibilities

of a warrior-leader, his only role was to serve as Calypso's companion. This change in his way of living may have also set the stage for a personal transformation. The “lockdown” period of reflectivity created for Odysseus a kind of rebirth. We could even speculate that Calypso helped him to heal his soul after the turmoil of the Trojan War. Similarly, I wonder how lockdown is going to affect us. Are we, and the world we live in, ready for a rebirth?

Personally, the sudden stop in my usual maelstrom of activities has brought me a kind of peace. Of course, I realize that I am very fortunate to find haven in the middle of nature. To give a structure to my days, I try to maintain a daily routine. It means getting up very early in the morning, writing and reading until around 11 am, taking a walk before lunch, and doing some reading after. Later in the afternoon, I may go on Facetime, Zoom or WhatsApp, or do some more writing. Then, if the weather permits, I sit on my veranda, have a drink, read various newspapers and take in the sunset. I usually end the day with having dinner, and perhaps seeing a movie. It is an unhurried routine. No more travel to conferences; only virtual travel. No more face-to-face teaching; only virtual teaching. No face-to-face meetings; only virtual meetings.

The paring down of life also allows me to undertake another form of “travel” – into my inner world. My dream life has become increasingly intense and interesting. I also remember a great number of them. People, alive and dead, dwell in my dream space, and these encounters have motivated me to recontact people I haven’t seen for a long time. My dream life has also motivated me to express gratitude for the things that they once did for me. Again, as time has become increasingly finite, it made me realize that it is better to act while I can.

Also, what has helped me in dealing with the pessimistic thoughts that come with this lockdown—along with a sense of the tragic transience of things—is the exploration of esthetics, and music in particular. Like dreams, music is another royal road to the unconscious. It is the source of many associations—of past and future, and can have a great emotional impact.

Recently, I was listening to the hauntingly beautiful Lensky’s aria from Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*—an opera based on Alexander Pushkin’s

verse novel. Afterwards, piqued by Pushkin’s writing, I discovered that he had a period in life when he was confined to his family estate at Boldino, in the southeastern part of the Nizhny Novgorod region. He had gone to the family estate to prepare for his upcoming wedding in Moscow. But a cholera epidemic was advancing from the south and a quarantine, established by the order of the Interior Minister, paralyzed trade and all travel within Russia. As a result, Pushkin was forced to stay at the family estate for three months.

This stay at Boldino proved to be the period when Pushkin’s genius came to full blossom. Working in the seclusion of his empty country house, he finally finished *Eugene Onegin*, a project he had been working on for seven long years. In addition, he wrote many other works. Because of this experience, the phrase “Boldino Autumn” entered the Russian language to denote a productive period spent in isolation. Of course, it is yet to be seen whether a “Corona Spring” will yield similar bounty.

Winston Churchill is credited with saying, “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. In many ways, the coronavirus pandemic is a great opportunity to observe how people deal with crisis situations. Some people will rise to the challenge, while others tend to self-destruct. Whatever happens will be a delicate interplay of personality, living conditions, and economics.

As a leadership scholar, I wanted to capture my reflections of how this pandemic is affecting people and the world. I call these reflections “Journeys through Coronavirus Land” as it traverses many levels, from macro to micro. We’re all affected in one way or another, and for many, this journey has not been easy. At the same time, adversity can be a great educator. The question is, how have each of us responded to this adversity and where will this journey lead us individually, and collectively? Despite all the misery that comes with this pandemic—withstanding all the tears of people who have lost their loved ones—we should retain hope. Hope will be the building stone for fresh commitments and true renewal.

CHAPTER 1

Do we get the leaders we deserve?

The U.S. cannot allow EBOLA-infected people back. People that go to faraway places to help out are great—but must suffer the consequences!

—Donald Trump

It's really cold outside, they are calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming!

—Donald Trump

It is not always easy to keep hope alive reading the newspapers or looking at the news. The pandemic has exposed the fault lines of our economic and social systems as well as leadership at national and business levels. It is especially frightening to see how terrible some leaders behave, especially when leadership is what's needed during trying times. At historical moments in time, a person's character really comes to the fore and it makes me wonder whether we get the leaders we deserve?

Covid-19 is becoming the most serious crisis since World War II. And it is during times of crisis that courageous leaders are needed more than ever. But looking at the behavior of world leaders, few have truly stepped up. Instead, many have been turning inwards rather than seeking collaborative and mutually beneficial solutions. For example, looking at the European community, too many countries looked out for their own self-interest, and regressed into identity politics and the nation state. On the other hand, when people realize that we are all in the same boat, it could also lead to a greater sense of inter-connectedness and shared responsibility.

The responses in Europe have been one thing, but watching the US administration's response to Covid-19 is akin to witnessing someone playing the violin while Rome burns. What happened to the America we knew—that beacon for other nations? The dilettante and dangerous ways in which senior Federal decision makers are approaching the crisis have

become a kind of *comedia dell'arte*. That the US has a serious leadership problem is widely recognized, but this fact is now coming home to roost in the most tragic of ways—the demonstrations against racism being a significant indicator.

An enraged American

This crisis in leadership took on a very personal note when an old friend living in the US called:

Have you looked at the recent announcements on the news? How is it possible that we have Trump as a leader? Is he the kind of person we need during the worst crisis since World War II? As a student of history, his demonizing language has always reminded me of Third Reich rhetoric: 'Build the wall,' 'Lock her up,' 'Witch hunt,' 'No collusion,' 'Make America great again.' His body language is quite disturbing and dismissive of reality. He doesn't seem to care for the many lives at stake. The only things he really seems to care about are the stock market and his ratings. The way he has been handling the pandemic shows what an incompetent buffoon he really is. And now, there are these crazy ways he is dealing with social unrest.

What a charlatan! All his life, he has been stiffing people—his suppliers, his customers, his banks, his ex-wives... But now he's up against a very different show. He can't stiff an invisible enemy like the coronavirus. Deep down, the whole world knows that he is completely out of his depth. What a terrible public image he is creating for America. Certainly, he isn't making America great again. Talk about the ugly American! He has done his utmost to transform America into some kind of banana republic. The US who was once a role model for other countries because of its values, is now looking unreliable, unpredictable, and non-trustworthy, due to its present dysfunctional leadership practices.

Even through this pandemic, when people are looking for leadership and direction, he continues to ride a wave of denial and lies. Given his consistently deviant behavior, how can we trust him to do the right things now? I seriously doubt it. Hopefully, there are still a few people left in his administration who know what needs to be done. But I wonder. So many competent ones have left. I must admit, before this virus, I had a somewhat forbearing attitude towards him, telling myself, this also will pass. But now?

The reason that I am so agitated is that I am in desperate need of a heart

operation, but the hospital where it is supposed to happen, doesn't even respond. Understandably, they have more urgent things to attend to. Like most other hospitals, they were completely unprepared for such a calamity. And as has become quite clear, the administration was dithering for a long time before any action was taken. They have been and continue to deny reality. Now, there is a good possibility that I will die—and all because of this charlatan that's occupying the White House. We must get rid of him!

His outburst was a true “cri de cœur” and I didn’t know how to respond. But what I did know was that my old friend was speaking the truth. There have been many dictators or semi-dictators who have gotten elected by trying to appeal to the lowest common denominator—and then there is Donald Trump. He is a real outlier, in particular in the context of America’s democracy.

Malignant narcissist—The borderline between sanity and insanity

In many ways, Trump has a pulse on what has been called during the Nazi period, *das gesundes Volksempfinden* (“the healthy will of the people”), meaning he is able to tap into and manipulate the darker feelings and frustrations within segments of the population. Additionally, he is quite skilled at responding to their wishes. Unfortunately, by catering to people’s delusional “wish to believe” and promising them deliverance, we have seen the rise to power of a malignant narcissist.

If you don’t know what a malignant narcissist is, let’s just say it is not the kind of person you would like to meet in a dark alley. Although a narcissist can itself be problematic, the malignant one is far more dangerous and damaging. As the psychoanalyst and humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm once noted, this kind of personality “lies on the borderline between sanity and insanity”, combining the characteristics of the narcissistic and anti-social (psychopathic) personality disorder. Thus, the malignant narcissist is both egocentric and ruthless.

Observing Trump, we see the typical features of the malignant narcissistic personality disorder. Throughout his life, he has always believed himself to be superior to others and exaggerated his talents and achievements accordingly. Hasn’t Trump characterized himself as being a “very stable genius” who is “like, really smart?”

Notwithstanding his feelings of superiority, Trump also needs his daily dose of flattery. He likes (and needs) to be told that he is the greatest. And the people around him quickly realize that flattery is the prescription for career success. No wonder they behave in a totally obsequious way.

To the sense of superiority, we can add a sense of entitlement, the dark influence of envy, a tendency to devalue others, little empathy and the need to take advantage of others. Throughout his life, Trump has been pursuing his self-interests without any moral restrictions nor sense of remorse. Significant indicators are the Trump University fraud and the multiple sexual assault allegations, incidents that happened without any sense of ownership for his actions. People like Trump don't care whom they hurt as long as they get their way. For them, the means justify the ends.

Most visible and notorious cyber bully in the world

Malignant narcissists are also masters of polarization. People are either for or against them and there is no middle ground. At the slightest criticism, narcissists become extremely defensive and go in full-attack mode. Trump's usual response to anger or embarrassment is to turn highly aggressive and to humiliate and bully others, especially in public situations. Given all his tweets, he is most likely the most visible and notorious cyber bully in the world.

Malignant narcissists also operate as if social norms don't apply to them. Trump reasons away deceit, exploitation, and manipulation as just smart behavior. To him, most situations are win-or-lose propositions. This paradigm is the premise of his book, *The Art of the Deal*, where pulling a fast one is standard business practice as long as you don't get caught.

Toxic leader-followership

Despite Trump's explicit fallacies, he remains charismatic and continues to be attractive to some people. All too frequently, the lure of (over)confidence, power, glory and money overwhelms calls to conscience. Too many of the people who work for him seem to compromise principle for position. But even though they may be attracted to Trump for the power base he provides, they also fear his volatility. Working for him is like walking on eggshells—they can fall out of favor at any moment.

This leader-follower dynamic creates toxic, paranoid and even depressive work environments—the high turnover among Trump’s staff being a very telling indicator. The most competent people will not last very long—they will either be fired or leave on their own volition. Thus, within the close entourage of Trump, competent, creative, problem-solving people are few and far between. These are also the qualities needed to surmount a crisis. No wonder my old friend was so enraged and distressed.

Responsible leadership—Moral, responsible, systematic & reflective

The leaders we require—in both normal and especially in crises situations—need to have the ability to look at things morally, responsibly and systemically. Such leaders understand interrelationships, and know how to work with others, while focusing on superordinate goals aimed at the long term. What also contributes to effective leadership is having a reflective capability, a solid dose of emotional intelligence and empathy. They should also have a strong sense of self-worth and resilience to able to withstand the pressures that come with the job. Naturally, the leaders I am describing also need to be guided by a strong ethical compass and avoid the corruptive influences that may come with power and position.

After months of inaction and misinformation over Covid-19, Trump has shown that he doesn’t have the moral authority and qualities to provide the leadership that’s badly needed. And if we combine his dysfunctional leadership with a crippled health care system and an opioid epidemic—it is predictable that many people in America will die, unnecessarily. As the many demonstrations and riots following the death of George Floyd indicate, America has become a powder keg.

Given the global crisis, my own “modest proposal”—to quote the satirist Jonathan Swift—is to have Trump removed under the 25th Amendment. I do realize, making this “modest proposal,” that it will be nothing but a pipe dream. But although I may be dwelling in fantasy land, it is also true that having a malignantly narcissistic leader running America is immoral and dangerous not just for the country but for the rest of the world. Mentally, Trump is totally incompetent to serve as a leader of a nation. In most business organizations, he would have been out on the street a very long time ago. But the American public—in particular many Republicans

—continue to tolerate his transgressions. Even though they fear him, they also think, given his many weaknesses, that he can be easily manipulated. Notwithstanding his predictable unpredictability, he remains a loose cannon—and the consequences of his behavior are amplified in times of crisis. It is time for the political leaders of America to tighten their political will and act in ways that are good for the country and transcend narrow party interests.

The hard questions

Restoring trust in the political system and in leaders is something that’s needed now more than ever. Leaders all over have to look at themselves and ask, in times of crisis and beyond, “what type of leader do I want to be?” Similarly, people all over the world need to ask themselves, “what types of leaders do we need to move forward?” If we find ourselves without the courage to confront such questions, we will be forced to face another, far less encouraging one—“Are we stuck with the leaders we deserve?”

I think we can do better. And many other leaders have shown that it is possible.

CHAPTER 2

Why do societies regress?

Mimicking the herd, invites regression to the mean.

—Charles Munger

It is the mark of a primitive society to view regression as progress.

— Neale Donald Walsch

My previous diatribe about Trump clearly shows that I’m worried. And my sense of despair becomes magnified when we look at the most influential leaders in the world.

On one side of the world we have Xi Jinping, the president of the People’s Republic of China who, like Chairman Mao, is making himself president for life. Having presidents for life is a very tricky business as it lays the foundation for the rise of demagogues. On the other side of the world, we have Donald Trump, who, as I have mentioned, isn’t the paragon of mental health.

Not surprisingly, accompanying these two highly visible leadership figures, are copycats from Turkey, Egypt, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, India, Brazil and the Philippines. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s president, has become a true champion of locking up journalists who disagree with him. Likewise, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt’s president incarcerates anyone who dares to make fun of him. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte’s claim to fame is to kill people allegedly for “drug pushing.” In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro is becoming infamous for his position towards the Amazonian rain forest and his denial of the seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic. In India, Narendra Modi has found many ways to demonize Muslims. In Europe, Viktor Orbán is happily violating European regulations on the rule of law on various corruptive practices. Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia’s young leader has become a role model of how not to make friends through the atrocious murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Finally,

there is Vladimir Putin, a master puppeteer, who has been supporting the genocidal regime of Bashar Hafez al-Assad.

Regressive group dynamics

The rise of autocratic leaders is a reflection of societal patterns, and in particular those of regression. Regressive patterns are even more likely in times of crisis, where anxiety levels are high and people look towards strong personalities for direction. But when societies regress, not only will we perpetuate disturbing group behavior, it can also give birth to and reinforce more dysfunctional leadership practices. Of course, a reverse dynamic could also take place, though rarely. It is also possible that out of societal turmoil, other types of leaders may emerge and show their mettle. Such leaders rise to the occasion, inspire and unite people, and steer them in a constructive way through turbulent times.

When there is great uncertainty in a society, particularly if there is a collapse of traditional social structures, a threat to people's cultural identity, economic crises, and an invisible enemy like the coronavirus, conditions are rife for large group regression. People will fall into dependency patterns, making them more susceptible to the siren songs of leaders who create the illusion of security and position themselves as "saviors". However, the psychological dependence on "false" leaders will come with a loss of personal identity—and a reduced capacity for independent thinking and individual moral responsibility. Thus, in a symbolic way, followers outsource the part of their personality that engages in self-observation, self-criticism, and other reflective activities. When this happens, the cognitive capacities of the followers will be reduced and replaced by simplistic slogans and black-and-white thinking. At the same time, this shared identification process with the leader provides a reassuring sense of belonging as well as power through being part of this "special" group.

Over time, both leadership and followership develop a shared sense of what's good and what's bad. These leaders paint a simple world of "us" versus "them," consisting of friend and enemies. Ironically, because of their tendency to "split," they will create these enemies, a process followed by offering up protection. Eventually, with continued suppression of critical thinking and dissension, the leader-follower interchange will assume a cult-like atmosphere. The Trump cult can be

taken as a good example. We see how his unethical actions are consistently rationalized and even morally justified by his constituents. When such leaders are in charge, the danger is ever-present that people who show any signs of disloyalty will also be severely punished. Scapegoating becomes the new normal.

Leaders with paranoid and narcissistic characteristics tend to emerge in situations of societal regression. In particular, people with malignant narcissistic tendencies often rise to the fore. These are individuals who exhibit inordinate self-centeredness, a sense of superiority, a lack of empathy, exploitative behavior, a constant need for external stimulation, vindictiveness, lack of ethical values and general anti-social behavior. In spite of these characteristics, such leaders are often well placed to function effectively in regressive group situations because of their ability to satisfy the basic needs of group members.

The looming danger of despotism

There is also the likelihood that autocratic leadership could turn into full blown despotism. As the saying goes, power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. For some leaders, the pandemic will be a great opportunity to justify extreme measures. As people increase their dependency on leaders, leaders with autocratic tendencies will feel empowered to do whatever they want. More and more they will build up a case for the arbitrary use of power, the grabbing of scarce resources, the repression of free will, and the violation of people's rights, all in service of the populace.

Inevitably, far-reaching restrictions on freedom result in economic and moral decline. Bureaucracy, corruption, and uncertainty, combined with the lack of individual freedom and human rights, will unravel the moral fabric of a country. And as autocratic leadership matures, their embedded practices become greater and greater obstacles to economic development. Unemployment, poverty, and hunger typically result.

What contributes to decline is that autocratic leadership kills civil society. Such leaders will dismantle a country's cultural institutions and with it, a sense of national pride. And the dispersion and discontent that grows up in a populace around inequities and lack of freedom eventually turn an environment of creativity and free thought into a breeding

ground for the disenfranchised. Eventually, in their anger and desperation, citizens may engage in desperate, violent acts. Unable to touch the leader, they strike out wherever they can, destroying their own society in the process.

In addition, what makes demagogue-like leaders so dangerous for the global community is their tendency toward violence as a form of self-preservation. Starting a war—engaging in any violence, for that matter—is much easier for autocratic leaders. They do not need to ask permission from various executive and legislative bodies. They have the power to do pretty much as they wish.

It goes without saying that wars come at an incredible price in human suffering. The visible costs of war—death for soldiers and civilians, homelessness, privation, economic disaster—are only the tip of the iceberg. Other hidden effects of war—the loss of self-respect and national pride, and the obliteration of culture and creativity—can take generations to rebuild. These desolating consequences are a persuasive argument to prevent autocrats from coming to the fore.

The need for countervailing powers

While benevolent autocracy is a theoretical possibility, rule by a solitary leader typically ends in servile obedience to authority and the abuse of human rights. Democracy (though flawed) is still the only countervailing force we have to safeguard human dignity, individual freedom, free choice, and voice in decisions that affect our destiny. Humankind's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary. As Winston Churchill said quite accurately, "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the others."

Especially in difficult times, democracy should never be taken for granted. All of us have a darker side, a violent streak ready to erupt depending on the circumstances. And people in a leadership position are much more susceptible to the sirens of power. All too quickly, they may resort to demagoguery when the opportunity arises. Therefore, it is imperative that no single individual should ever be in complete control of an organization, community, or society. The statement *Homo homini lupus* ("Every man is a wolf to every other man") is painfully true and human susceptibility to cruelty and violence can turn people in high positions into villains with alarming frequency.

Now, more than ever, we need to defend checks and balances on power, such as the judiciary, varied political parties, independent administrative bodies, a free press, labor unions, and a comprehensive legal system.

Without these safeguards, any regime, no matter how benign, can give way to despotic rule. Countervailing structures help prevent leadership and followers alike from falling into a regressive abyss; they serve as boundaries against humankind's excesses. Only political diversity, a well-established legal code, and freedom of expression and economy can ensure democratic rule. But these things alone may not be sufficient. In addition, each of us must have a personal code of conduct, and endorse a mindset that supports democratic social structures. In other words, we need to internalize a civic culture that protect against the abuse of power. That internalization comes from learning the fundamentals of democratic government at home and in school, seeing democratic government at work in daily life, participating in open and honest elections, and defending human rights.

Particularly in times of crisis, strong institutions are needed to limit our potential for regression. A number of our current leaders have seen in the present pandemic a great opportunity to give free hand to their inner autocrat as reflected in emergency measures, which, unchecked, could become permanent. It is at times like these that we should do everything in our power to prevent this from becoming the new normal. Countervailing powers need to be maintained if we want democracies to survive. But it will be a constant balancing and rebalancing act, as the forces that need to be strengthened today may need to be weakened tomorrow. Therefore, all of us have the responsibility to prevent autocrats from coming to the fore, particularly in these trying times. It will be the only way to create a better society for our children and for future generations.

CHAPTER 3

The courage equation

Courage is grace under pressure.

—Ernest Hemingway

One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.

—Maya Angelou

One of my ex-students, the CEO of a large, diversified industrial company sent me an email in the midst of coronavirus pandemic, stating that he had decided to take a number of bold steps. He believed “this was the moment to show people in the company that management really cared.” To start with, in spite of the dire financial implications, he made the decision not to furlough anybody. Also, he asked his senior executives to take a major reduction in salary in exchange for shares guaranteed to be bought back by the company at the price they were issued. He himself decided to take no salary for the year. In addition, he offered credit to all his suppliers who were in trouble. With the help of his top team, within a few days, he also arranged an airlift of personal protective equipment for the local hospitals after having raised a substantial amount of money from the top executive team and other employees.

He mentioned in his email that what he had learned in my executive development class years ago had taught him about “his inner humanity.” He recounted that at the onset of the crisis he was “set on a quite different path” but that he managed to “find the courage to do what was right.” As he said, actions speak louder than words—and he hoped that his actions would bring the people in the company even closer together. He ended the email by saying that “the response from my people has been humbling” and was grateful that my class had prepared him for value-driven leadership in these difficult times.

I must admit, after reading this note, that I was quite moved. Here, was a relatively timid, anxious CEO who had been brave enough to take courageous actions, despite resistance from several key shareholders. He had learned to reflect on what he thought was the right thing to do, and to find the inner strength to be courageous in the face of opposition.

Reflecting on my ex-student's comments, I wondered what it takes for someone to be courageous. In the first place, for any action to be considered courageous, there must be a degree of fear, risk or danger. Showing courage is all about being afraid but still acting. And I'm sure that my ex-student knew that his decisions carried a considerable amount of risk—both organizationally and personally. But despite his fears, he decided to go ahead. All of us can fantasize about taking bold actions. But fantasy isn't good enough. Courage requires action.

My ex-student's bravery made me also think of the activities of my grandfather during World War II. At that time, he was hiding many people in his farmhouse to protect them from the Nazis, risking the safety of his own life and his family. Even though he had almost been beaten to death by the Nazis, fear didn't deter him from following his beliefs. Not only did my grandfather possess the *moral courage* to take a stand, he also had the *physical courage* to go ahead despite formidable physical threats.

The courageous mindset

What kinds of people take a courageous stand? Taking a “nature” point of view, there are some people who, from a neurological perspective, can be described as having a thrill-seeking or “Type T” personality [1]. The brain structure of type Ts, linked to various hormones and neurotransmitters, may be predisposed to greater risk taking. This, combined with a strong value set determining what they perceive as right or wrong, would make it more likely, when the situation requires it, for them act in a courageous manner.

Nature aside, courage doesn't come to the fore without practice. It is like a muscle that we need to exercise—we learn to be courageous by practicing being courageous. Courage comes from *living and acting authentically*. Our held values and beliefs are the building blocks of courage. If they are crossed, these values will exert strong psychological pressures and may

compel us to act. Therefore, being courageous—as could be inferred from the behavior of my ex-student—is very much a learned behavior.

Also, the ability to act is linked to our *sense of self-efficacy*—the confidence we have in our capacity to confront the challenges ahead of us. This belief that “we can do it” will make a difference when the time comes for courageous action. In comparison, *low self-esteem* can affect our assessment of our ability to successfully overcome challenging, risky tasks. A similar point can be made about level of anxiety. People with *high levels of anxiety* may also be less inclined to take action. But, as my ex-student demonstrated, low self-esteem and high anxiety can be overcome. Furthermore, referring to the dimensions in the Big Five personality trait theory, people who score higher on *openness to experience* (versus being more risk averse) may also more open to engaging in more courageous acts [2].

There is also the phenomenon of *social contagion*, in which shared normative beliefs on what we consider to be the right or wrong can propel people to act. That was certainly the case for my grandfather. The invaders in Holland were not exactly welcomed. He was not alone in his feeling that what was happening to the Jewish population was unequivocally wrong. Thus, I’m sure, no social support would have been forthcoming if my grandfather had defended a Nazi against a mob of furious Dutchmen. I don’t know, however, to what extent social contagion helped my ex-student make his decision.

Finally, there is *context*. There are certain situations that incite courage more than others. All too often, in these “difficult-to-produce-courage” situations, we will succumb to fear, peer pressure, groupthink, or obedience to authority.

In sum, courageous behavior is dependent on a delicate interplay of factors: nature, nurture and context.

Becoming courageous

As courage can be acquired, a number of steps can be taken to enable us to act courageously. Even though self-esteem issues and high anxiety can deter us from courageous action, practice will help us to overcome these limitations.

Taking my ex-student as an example, he was able to overcome his limitations, helped by the strong social support during my seminar and by people around him. Generally speaking, in the courage equation, I have found the following suggestions quite useful:

- *Create “as if” situations.* I often advise people to create extreme “what if” situations. For example, I would ask them what they imagine would be the worst that could happen to them if they would take a certain kind of action, and what the outcome would be if they wouldn’t take any action. It is a very effective way to have them visualize the risks they are taking and to play out the implications should things go wrong. This process can create a dose of reality check and immunity vis-à-vis their fears.
- *Recognize the negativity bias.* To follow up on this exercise, I help them to realize that the only thing to fear is fear itself. I call attention to possible negativity bias—the propensity to attend to more negative than positive outcomes. All too often, excessive fear is often just in their heads. Engaging in such an exercise can recalibrate their excessive fear by also considering possible positive scenarios. As such, I try to nudge people towards reframing what may appear as dangerous situations in more realistic and constructive ways.
- *The talking cure.* I have also found that talking about our fears can have a great cathartic effect. As every coach or psychotherapist can attest to, calling out these fears can put us at ease. To open up, to be vulnerable, and to talk about what we think we are afraid of, can have a positive empowering effect to take control of our actions.
- *Manage your body.* Fear is physically draining and during stressful times, people need to make sure they are in good physical shape. When people find themselves drained, confused and fed up, I recommend they turn their attention to stress management. This includes paying attention to healthy eating habits, regular exercise, getting enough sleep and taking regular time outs. Various relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga can also be quite helpful to create clarity for courageous action.
- *Look for role models.* What I also found useful is to expose them to stories of people who have acted courageously. Through the contagion effect, tales of other people’s bravery and concrete examples of what others have done to overcome their fears can inspire and steel their nerves.

- *Recognize that you are not alone.* In addition, it is helpful to have like-minded people around who are also trying to act courageously. Creating courageous communities will provide the support group needed when faced with a call for courageous action. All in all, sharing ideas with like-minded people who possess similar courageous values can be very helpful.
- *Practice going out of your comfort zone.* I also advise people to do something that takes them out of their comfort zone every week. Consciously and consistently practicing small acts of courage can have a cumulative effect. For example, I suggest trying to speak up when they believe something is not right in their everyday life. To take a stand for seemingly little things can strengthen the habit of making truly difficult and courageous decisions.
- *Take a leadership development course.* Finally, as my opening example illustrated, having people participate in a seminar like the one taken by my ex-student does go a long way to create the desire to flex the courage muscle. There is something to be said about the group pressure exerted by the other participants (and me) to behave courageously.

Fear can prevent us from living our life to our full potential. If we aren't careful, it can lead to a life half-lived. The more we are able to face our fears, the more we will replace fear-based responses with courageous ones. By living a life of courage (which fundamentally means living by our core values), we live more authentically and fully. As the philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "He who is not every day conquering some fear has not learned the secret of life."

[1] Kets de Vries, M. (2016). Managing thrill seekers. *INSEAD Knowledge*.

[2] Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO personality inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO five-factor inventory (NEO-FFI): Professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.

CHAPTER 4

Coping with life in lock-down

We are, each of us, our own prisoner. We are locked up in our own story.

—Maxine Kumin

Locked up from mortal eye in shady leaves of destiny.

—Richard Crashaw

I wonder, as we live in a highly interconnected world, is it really possible to run away from a pandemic? This is the first question I pondered after seeking refuge in my house in Southern France. Looking at the olive trees from a viewpoint on my property, two stories that I had read many years ago came to mind.

The first is an ancient Mesopotamian tale called “Appointment in Samarra.” A merchant in Baghdad sent his servant to the marketplace for provisions. Soon afterwards, the servant came running home, white as a sheet. He told the merchant: “Master, just now in the marketplace, I was jostled by a woman in the crowd. When I looked closer, I realized that it was Death who made a threatening gesture towards me.” Trembling with fear, the servant asked the merchant to let him borrow his fastest horse so he could flee to Samarra, a town more than one hundred kilometers away, where he believed Death wouldn’t be able to find him. Sometime later, the merchant walked over to the marketplace and found Death. He asked her why she had made such a threatening gesture towards his servant. She replied, “It was only a sign of great surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

The second story, written by Edgar Allan Poe, is “The Masque of the Red Death.” The protagonist, Prince Prospero, attempts to get away from a plague known as the Red Death, by retiring with the nobles of his court to one of his castle-like abbeys. Locking the gates so the members of his party could enjoy themselves in safety, he organized a masquerade ball.

During the revelry, at midnight, a new guest makes an appearance. As Prospero confronts him, the ghoulish figure reveals his face, and the prince let out a scream and died. One by one, the other revelers meet the same fate. The mysterious stranger was, of course, the Red Death.

The morale of both tales is that no mortal, whether a servant or a prince, can escape death. These two stories found their mark when the stonemason working in my garden informed me that his colleague had just fallen ill with the coronavirus. So much for my attempt to run away from Paris, France's coronavirus capital.

The psychological impact of social distancing

Although we cannot escape death, we can try to delay it. That is why the governments of so many countries restricted people's movement. They wanted people to self-isolate and to engage in social distancing. These measures are considered reasonable steps to diminish contagion and lessen the pressures on health systems. As the world has been transitioning out of confinement, the experience of lockdown has brought to the fore how important our social relationships are.

Homo sapiens are, first and foremost, social animals. As humans, we have a strong need for inclusion within a social collective. Additionally, a large body of research has shown that socially active people tend to have higher levels of physical and psychological wellbeing. With all social gatherings prohibited, loneliness was sure to raise its ugly head. For some people, experiencing this sense of isolation was extremely stressful.

What aggravates the situation is the fact that, in times of crisis, human beings are drawn to one another to share experiences, show solidarity and provide support. It is exactly during such crises that we need social support the most. Togetherness can protect us against the negative impact that these events can have on our mental health. Therefore, what's asked from us—although absolutely necessary in the greater scheme of things—is exactly the opposite of what we would normally do. Not being able to seek the comfort of others adds to the level of stress and anxiety already caused by the situation.

Staying connected with others and with ourselves

Staying connected to close family members or friends can help minimize

the stress caused by the pandemic. Presently, many of us have been connecting through calls, texts, emails and other virtual means to create a sense of togetherness. This is especially important to people who live alone. Those without communication devices, and fewer resources to draw upon, would very likely experience serious psychological reactions.

On the positive side, social isolation might be an opportunity to slow down and practice reflection. Our lives before Covid-19 may have been one of autopilot or with a manic quality to them; running from one thing to another, and never having time to ask ourselves what we would be running from and running to. This forced period of reflection may have been a blessing in disguise, to rediscover ourselves and explore our inner desires that may have been dormant for too long.

This inner journey could also turn out to be a great learning experience to discover our strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs, desires, or generally speaking, the important themes in our inner life. While on this inner journey—difficult it may be in these stressful times—we could also have tried to work out what makes us laugh, and to do more of it, and what would make us cry—and do less of it.

As an example, I was moved by New York governor Andrew Cuomo’s account of the experience of having one of his daughters in quarantine:

“To tell you the truth, I had some of the best conversations with her that I’ve ever had. She was alone for two weeks. We talked about things in depth that we didn’t have time to talk about in the past... or we didn’t have the courage or the strength to talk about in the past—feelings I had about mistakes I had made along the way that I wanted to express my regret and talk through with her.” [3]

As the caterpillar undergoes a dramatic transformation before it emerges as a butterfly; likewise, a journey of deep reflection could lead to a great transformation. We need this capacity for individual change if we are to change collectively. As the well-known psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Victor Frankl once said, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

[3] Senior, J (2020). Call Trump’s News Conferences What They Are: Propaganda, *NY Times*.

CHAPTER 5

The cabin fever syndrome

They weren't crazy. They were tired of being locked up. Even I could see it.

—Kate Millett

If you are going to have a cabin fever, have a big cabin.

—Joe Cocker

Karl Jaspers, the German psychiatrist and philosopher, once wrote that “humans become aware of themselves in boundary situations.” The spatial and temporal restrictions placed on us by the pandemic could have had quite an impact on our psyche. Being restricted in the freedom of movement, is not without consequences. When confined for long periods of time, some people experience what is known as “cabin fever syndrome” and can become stir crazy.

Generally speaking, the “cabin fever syndrome” can be described as a claustrophobic irritability or restlessness which we may experience when stuck in an indoor space for long periods of time. The informal name of cabin fever may have originated in North America in the 1800s when settlers would be confined to their log cabins during the long winters.

Although it is not an official syndrome, the social distancing designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus can pose a serious threat to our general state of wellbeing [4]. After all, taking an evolutionary point of view, one of our major existential needs is the need to belong. As social animals, we require regular contact and cooperation with other individuals for the purpose of survival. Long periods of isolation can negatively affect our mind and body, as many astronauts and polar station explorers can testify [5].

Typically, the symptoms of “cabin fever syndrome” include a range of distress signals such as restlessness, irritability, impatience, lethargy, difficulties concentrating, low motivation, food cravings, and sleep issues.

In particular, the corresponding sense of helplessness and hopelessness correlates with a high risk for depression and other mental health conditions, possibly even suicide. In some instances, forced isolation—exacerbated by anger and confusion—can also contribute to greater alcohol and drug consumption and domestic violence. Add financial concerns and uncertainty about the future to this volatile mix, and wellbeing takes a toll.

Ways of coping

You're certainly not alone if you experienced pressures of being cooped up at home. If you feel the “cabin fever syndrome” settling in, what can you do to cope? Here are a few suggestions:

- *Maintain social contact.* Make a great effort to maintain, develop and grow your connections. Try to energize your social life. Now more than ever, stay connected to your social network. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Even though you may be physically distanced from most others at present, there are still so many virtual ways to connect. Pick up the phone, get on Skype, Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram or twitter. Equally important is to maintain your connections at work by scheduling regular video chats with colleagues during working hours.
- *Do your utmost to avoid conflict.* In some instances, you may have been self-isolating with a small group of people, whether family or friends. Although confinement in groups may prevent loneliness, it could also generate conflict. When stuck together for a long period of time, even the people you feel very close to may get on your nerves. It is therefore important to find the proper balance between togetherness and being apart, by spending time together, but also taking alone time and giving each other space.
- *Spend time outside.* When possible, make an effort to spend time outside. Being in natural light is good for you as it helps regulate your body's biorhythm. There is much to be said, given our ancient history, about ecotherapy [6].
- *Exercise.* While outside, exercise. And if that's not possible, try to do so inside. Physical activity is one of the most powerful anti-depressants. It

helps release endorphins, making you feel better. Furthermore, regular physical activity can help burn off any extra energy you have from being cooped up indoors.

- *Structure your day.* Routines can have a great comforting value. Maintain a set schedule for mealtimes and bedtime. Planning out activities and setting goals can also help to keep you motivated and prevent you from feeling down.

- *Maintain normal eating patterns.* Monitor eating habits to ensure that you maintain the proper nutritional balance. Do not “regress” in either overindulging in junk food or forgetting to eat at all. Eating in a healthy way can increase our energy levels and motivation.

- *Goal setting.* Set achievable goals of what you like to get done while cooped up. Try to focus on the things that give you a sense of mastery and energy. The goals you set can be work-related ones, but also more tangential ones such as gardening, cleaning the house, or doing household repairs. And don’t forget to reward yourself when a goal is met.

- *Try to be creative.* If you have a talent for music, art and writing, you can use the time available to engage in these activities. Creative activities can have a strong stress reducing effect. Also, take this opportunity of having time available to find new books to read. Stimulating your mind can help keep you moving forward and reduce feelings of isolation and helplessness.

- *Engage in altruistic activities.* Do something that’s helpful for others. Engage in activities that spread joy and give you something meaningful to do with your time. Altruism can have an uplifting effect.

- *Practice gratitude.* Express your appreciation to people for things they have done for you. It makes them feel better—and it makes you feel better as well.

- *Start a diary.* Journaling allows you to express overwhelming emotions and observe thought patterns, rather than simply reacting to them. Also, it helps you to prioritize problems, fears, and concerns. Furthermore, it can give you an opportunity for positive self-talk and identifying

negative thoughts and behaviors. And not to forget, it builds self-awareness, creating links with your inner and outer world.

- *Engage in self-reflection.* See social isolation as a chance to learn more about yourself and to engage in an inner journey. To obtain greater self-insight, try to have meaningful conversations with others, and in particular family members and friends. Also, practice meditation and mindfulness. These activities are great ways of focusing inward to increase calmness, concentration, and emotional balance.
- *Visualize future activities.* The forced social distancing is a great opportunity to do some preparatory work on your bucket list—to make some plans, both for trips and other pleasurable activities.

Generally speaking, if these activities don't give you sufficient peace of mind and if the "cabin fever syndrome" continues to negatively impact your mental health, it is advisable to seek professional help. Mental resilience will be important to navigate these difficult times. While it may seem difficult to find serenity in periods of crisis, our challenge is to be mindful of the pressures that we are experiencing and to find ways to work through them.

And remember, as with previous pandemics and epidemics, this chaos will also pass. And once you choose hope instead of despair, everything becomes possible.

[4] House, J.S. (2001). Social Isolation Kills, But How and Why? *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 63 (2): 273–4.

[5] Muller H. K., Lugg D. J., Ursin H., Quinn D. and Donovan K. (1995). Immune responses during an Antarctic summer. *Pathology*, 27, 186-190.

[6] Kets de Vries, M. (2016). Eco-therapy: The walking and talking cure. *INSEAD Knowledge*.

CHAPTER 6

Meaning in the age of Coronavirus

Everything in this world has a hidden meaning.

—Nikos Kazantzakis

Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It is about learning to dance in the rain.

— Vivian Greene

My life during the confinement had not changed much as I have been used to working at home for a long time. I didn't experience the kinds of stress that many other families may have as my children are no longer at home. What I missed were activities that would give variety to my life, such as visits from my friends, going to my wine bar and restaurants, and visits to the local outdoor markets. Consequently, I had a sense that the days folded into each other without much diversity. The only diversity was in the different types of animals or birds I would encounter in my garden. Would it be the roebuck, the wild boar, the foxes, the squirrels, or the bats? In particular, it was nice to see the turtledoves, the nuthatches, the hoopoes and—early in the morning—the owls. Also, there is diversion in seeing things grow: strawberries starting to blossom, the raspberry bushes growing fast, and each day, different plants blooming.

Alongside the passing of daily life, a number of more existential themes pass through my mind. A major one is the death anxiety. Although many of us repress its presence, this anxiety is ever present, and amplified with the coronavirus pandemic. Having read the reports of the terrible scenes playing out in the hospitals and retirement homes, it is no wonder that the death anxiety becomes top of mind.

It is understandable to be anxious. The invisible enemy is a formidable one, evoking many disturbing fantasies. And, the way we have dealt with the effects of confinement very much depends on culture, personality,

financial resources—including living conditions. Certain cultures are more outdoor-oriented, a factor very much dependent on the climate conditions. For example, in Europe, we can see that the people in southern countries compared to Northern ones will spend more time outside. Furthermore, personality also determines how people deal with being confined. I have noticed that introverts tended to do better than extroverts. In addition, people who need the structure and busyness that work provides may find forced confinement more challenging.

A more constructive way of dealing with forced confinement is that it provided time out for a life review. It may bring up existential concerns, a major one being humankind's search for meaning, especially as a counterpoint to the death anxiety. To know that our days are numbered is something that comes home to roost in pandemic times. But life, however stressful the circumstance, is never completely unbearable. What makes it unbearable is a lack of meaning. The meaning of both life and death is hope, even in the darkest of times.

I have always felt that the five pillars of fundamental needs very much influence the way we experience meaning. To start with, meaning in life is affected by a *sense of belonging*, and the need for interpersonal relationships. And belonging very much depends on our ability to bond with others. All too often, people are lonely, because they build walls instead of bridges. But this sense of belonging is also related to our capacity for generativity. Human development scholar Erik Erikson, an old teacher of mine, observed that generativity is the concern for people apart from the self that usually develops during middle age. This refers to the need to nurture and guide the younger generation and to invest in their future.

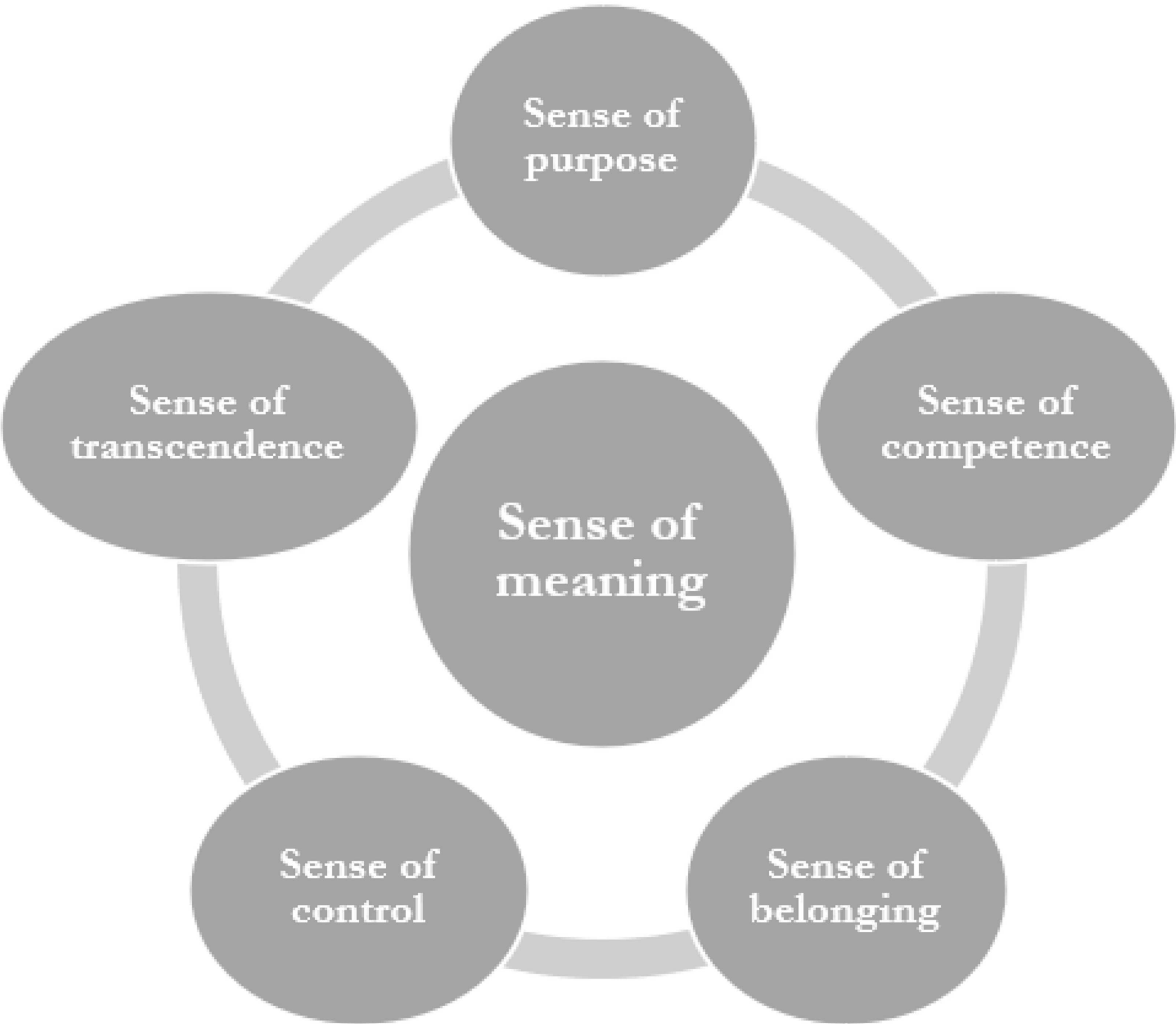
Meaning is also tied to the degree in which we are able to *find purpose*. Purpose can be identified by the kinds of activities that drive us and give us energy. In many ways, the adventure of life is to find purpose in life. But for many of us, the traditional ways in which we have found purpose have now been seriously disrupted, implying a need to find other ways. Again, to use the words of the concentration camp survivor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl, “those who have a why to live, can survive almost any how.” If we are motivated by goals that have deep meaning, then we really live life.

In addition, meaning is dependent on a sense of *self-efficacy and competence* in the activities we engage in. This sense of mastery is the extent to which we think we influence the forces that govern our lives; how in using the specific talents we have, we can make a difference.

Furthermore, meaning has to do with our *sense of control*—the degree in which we believe that we have choice in the decisions we make and that we can control our own life. Presently, many things that determine the way we live are totally out of our control. For some of us, this can lead to a great sense of frustration contributing to various ways of acting out. It may also lead to various stress reactions.

And finally, we have *transcendence* which is the way we connect ourselves to issues that are larger than ourselves and contribute purposefully to society at large. In that context, the meaning of life could be looked at as guardianship of the world.

The present state of the world is giving us much to think about. We could even look at it as an experiment in living, or new ways of living. Our temporary forced “house arrest” has already resulted in reduced pollution and much cleaner air. We can use this reset to reflect on how we can create a better world for our children and grandchildren. In one way or another, the meaning of life is to serve humanity; life without dreaming is a life without meaning. And as life consists of memorable moments, it up to all of us to create them. Although many people try to accomplish something big, they don’t realize that most things in life are made up of little things.



Pablo Picasso once said, “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” Despite the pandemic, we cannot stop living. This is not the time to complain, but to think about future possibilities, although there will be many uncertainties. Life is not going to be the same. There will be a major reset in the way we will be living and it is a good time to reflect on things apart from selfish concerns. It is a time to care for others, to re-enforce old relationships and to build new ones. And given the times we are in, this isn’t going to be easy. But as Friedrich Nietzsche noted: “To live is to suffer. To survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” Sometimes, we need bad things to happen to us, to inspire us to grow. In other words, the meaning of life is to give life meaning.

CHAPTER 7

A tale of two companies: how to prepare for post pandemic times

The best way to predict the future is to create it.

—Abraham Lincoln

My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.

—Charles Kettering

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” These opening lines from Charles Dicken’s *A tale of two cities* captures the contradictory times we live in. Using Dicken’s description as a starting point, this chapter tells the tale of two organizations, who on the surface appear to be quite similar, but have responded to the coronavirus pandemic in very different ways.

Company A

When the pandemic occurred, fear permeated the top echelons of company A. Before the pandemic, its leadership had bought back shares to improve its financial metrics and to create bonuses for its top management team. Due to these activities, they didn’t have much financial leeway. Subsequently, motivated by fear, the CEO and the CFO went on a major cost cutting spree, slashing every expense to its bare bones. In addition, they used the turbulent economic environment as an excuse to make decisions that they now said were long overdue but in better times had been too controversial to implement. In taking these actions, top management paid little attention to people-related issues. Many employees, labelled as underperformers, saw their contracts abruptly cancelled without any explanation. To add insult to injury, many of them were escorted out of their offices by security guards. Senior management also cautioned remaining employees to never to mention their names again. Not surprisingly, considering these actions, a highly

anxious, doomsday atmosphere prevailed within the company. Many employees were wondering who was going to be next. Furthermore, as part of the cost cutting purge, all training and development activities were cancelled.

Company B

The reaction to the downturn by the senior executives at company B was very different. Granted, what made their options easier was their less precarious financial position. Compared to company A, their balance sheet was much less leveraged. Its leadership, remembering quite vividly the lessons learned from the last recession, had created a strong financial buffer. Driven by their robust balance sheet, they made the decision to do their utmost not to lay off anyone. Instead, they chose various ingenious schemes to keep their people employed. For example, to preserve continuity, the decision was made to reduce regular and overtime hours, put in place sabbatical programs, make use of government-supported schemes for shorter work weeks and switch full-time employees to part time. In addition, they decided on a salary freeze, and set the example with top management severely cutting their own salaries. They also stopped hiring, except in situations of highly qualified candidates. Previous experience had taught them that recessions offered exceptional opportunities to pick up some high-quality talent as many other companies would be laying off people or were not hiring. What the aftermath of previous recessions had taught them was not to fall into the trap of having a shortage of people with key skills. Furthermore, as a way of boosting morale, the decision was made to continue with company events virtually. And although training and development would have been an easy item to cut, top management decided to keep vital training and development activities and to deliver them virtually, to better prepare their workforce for the future. In addition, given the high levels of anxiety due to the pandemic, all employees were provided with the opportunity of virtual coaching.

The key question remains as to which company will be in better shape when the economic downturn has passed? Will it be company A or B?

Knee jerk versus thoughtful reactions

What's to be expected in major recessions is that cost cutting will be top of mind. And many companies, given their financial situation, will have

very little choice. In economic downturns it is a common reaction to let go of seemingly underperforming employees. Of course, the label “underperforming” might also turn into a rationalization to justify their actions. Therefore, such measures should be taken with great caution. Although the reduction of headcount may lead to immediate savings, it may also endanger the future morale of the company. If a reduction in workforce is inevitable, however, it should be done in a dignified way. Much sensitivity and care are required when employees need to be let go.

We could see how senior management in company A, knowing that budget cuts were inevitable given their precarious balance sheet, didn’t pay attention to people-related issues. Their panic and focus on cost cutting made them lose sight of the human side of the enterprise. And given the way they handled the layoff process, they will probably end up with a group of employees suffering from the “survivor syndrome” [7]. Its common symptoms include fear, anger, perception of unfairness, and the loss of loyalty and commitment. Consequently, they may have created a workforce that is not going to “lean in” and help the organization get through tough times. Most likely, their people would “lean out” and disengage; high potentials may also run for the exits.

Company B adopted a more reflective and proactive stance. They had learned from past experiences, resisted panic reactions and focused on developing for the long term. They also used crisis as an opportunity for creative problem solving, and to reinvent themselves. They continued to invest in their people and build new skills so that they could adapt to future changes in the nature of work.

Creating an action plan for the future

Given the dramatic changes in the economic landscape, what are the variables senior executives need to keep in mind to navigate through crisis?

Build scenarios

With so many knowns and unknowns, companies would be wise to build different scenarios, sketching out at least three related to a relatively modest downturn, a more severe recession, and a worst-case scenario. Of course, it is up to top management to work through which scenario is the most likely to unfold in their business. Although the assessment of the

different scenarios and their effects on the company and its rivals will just be a first step, it will help the executives identify areas where they're vulnerable and where immediate action is needed. Furthermore, taking time to think through and define their action plan will help them to communicate to the entire organization the justification and the motivation for the kinds of actions necessary in response to the crisis.

Divestments and acquisitions

Smart companies will have slack in the system, in the form of cash and liquid resources which will give them flexibility and options during difficult times. For companies with strong balance sheets, an economic downturn presents a great opportunity to strengthen their position, giving them a running start when the inevitable rebound occurs. Times like these could be reframed as great opportunities to focus on what the company does best; what's needed to reinforce the core business; where to spend to gain market share; and to divest noncore businesses and/or selling off poorly performing operations.

Apart from divesting, acquisitions during a recession can also create greater value, as the costs will be much lower. Furthermore, the entry costs of gaining access to market segments from the acquired business will often be much lower, as many companies will be shrinking or shutting down their business. Of course, some of these investments will take time before they will bear fruit. But not doing anything and playing a waiting game may compromise the ability to capitalize on opportunities when the recession is over.

Meaning and culture management

In these difficult times, top management needs to provide their employees with a sense of meaning. Meaning will help them see the bigger picture and provide a focus to help them go through difficult times. Part of this process is to inform everybody what the company is trying to achieve. And through their actions, senior executives should demonstrate that they are all in it together; and that they care. Furthermore, economic downturns are critical periods to revisit and reinforce a company's culture—to re-emphasize the core values and behaviors that the employees should incorporate when they make key people decisions such as hiring, terminating, promoting and developing.

Having voice

One of the best remedies to deal with potentially flagging morale, especially during difficult times, is to engage employees in helping to turn things around. Employees will be greatly motivated when they believe that they have some power to make a difference. Thus, it is important to encourage employees at all levels to provide actionable ideas which could potentially not only save the company money, but also better prepare them for the future. Furthermore, if a significant reduction in work hours is unavoidable, let executives at different layers in the organization take on a lead role in designing the best way to go about it. Engage them in developing plans to move people where they are needed most.

Be very careful about layoffs

Senior management should also be very careful about laying off people. The way company A went about it serves as a cautionary tale. Even in major downturns, it is unwise to rush into laying off people. If at all possible, it is much better to follow the more ingenious ways of company B. How people are treated during a downturn will have serious post-recession implications. After the last recession, the biggest people-related challenge many companies seemed to have was that the employees who remained (the “survivors”) never forgot how those who were laid off had been treated. If the company, during these difficult times, had acted rather callously, there would be a good chance that several their best people would decide to leave when the economy picked up.

Training and development

Resilient organizations don’t stop training and development in major downturns. They look at the downturn as a great opportunity to upskill their capabilities and to preserve morale. Through training and development, employees will come to understand the potential shifts in business needs and skills; and to review what future technologies are needed to increase efficiency, reduce costs and make the business more competitive. We saw how senior management of company B took advantage of the slack time available to engage employees in professional development and technical training programs. Furthermore, often helped by these developmental programs, the best thinking and most innovative projects will emerge.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Communication is a good business practice in good times and in bad. But in difficult times, managing the rumor factory becomes even more important. Senior managers have a natural tendency to retreat in difficult times as retrenchment is a stressful process. Company A illustrates that. But despite the stress top management may be experiencing, this is not the time to retreat. More than ever, top management needs to have a firm commitment to open, consistent and honest communication and regular feedback. These actions are needed to build trust. They also need to deal with people's feelings. Being empathic will be a very important commodity in difficult times. Also, top management should go out of their way to show appreciation to employees who are willing to take on greater responsibilities. It is these kinds of actions that will reinforce the spirit of loyalty and confidence—intangibles that take the biggest hit during stressful times. Of course, top management often must walk a fine line between what can be said and what can't. When in doubt, the best thing to do is to err on the side of transparency. Otherwise, when the storm has passed, companies may lose their best employees.

Leadership in times of crisis

A natural response during difficult times would be to focus solely on the problems at hand. Doing so, however, would mean missing out on other opportunities. These are exactly the times to be curious about the many opportunities that are presented; and to challenge old ways of doing things. The difference between the companies that survive and the ones that lose out, is how they respond proactively to the dramatic changes in the business landscape. Real leadership ensures that the business comes out re-energized through tough times and prepared to face the future. And it is how fast and how well these responses will be, that will determine success. That's why some companies are able to benefit competitively during and after a downturn, while others may not make it.

The leadership teams of the best companies will find the courage and the conviction to make the fundamental changes needed to survive this dramatic economic downturn. They also realize that culture and talent management is going to be more important than ever. This is exactly the kind of leadership that will pass Warren Buffett's swim test: "Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked".

[7] Kets de Vries, M.F. R. and Balazs, K. (1997). "The Downside of Downsizing," *Human Relations*, 50 (1), 11-50.

CHAPTER 8

Virtuality becoming the new reality

If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.

—Albert Einstein

Virtual business outsources all the work and insources all the profits.

—Mark Victor Hansen

With the pandemic, millions of more traditional businesses have been forced to contend with the prospect of leading and managing in different ways. For many, the challenge is now how to manage a completely remote workforce. Fortunately, what is going to be of great help is the fact that there's a huge range of communication tools available today to work remotely.

What are some of the advantages of remote working? For starters, working from home allows for a much more flexible schedule. It enables people to customize their work environment. For some people, working at home helps them to concentrate better at what they are doing as there will be less office distractions and interruptions. Working with a greater sense of focus will most likely contribute to productivity gains. Productivity gain may also come from cutting out unnecessary meetings and other time wasters that are ubiquitous in an office environment. In addition, “office politics” may become less intrusive, making the experience of a toxic work environment less likely. Although work pressures exist in any kind of work situation (including home-based work), it is less severe compared to working in an office. I may go even as far as to suggest that working from home will contribute to improvements in our general state of health and wellbeing. A flexible work environment can be an antidote to stress, making for a much healthier work-life balance.

Naturally, not everything about remote working is going to be wine and

roses. Working at home requires having the will power to concentrate on what needs to be done. And not all of us are able to do so. Also, working at home can make it more difficult to monitor people's performance. More critically, remote working makes it much harder to create a true team culture. After all, it is more difficult to establish trust and develop relationships with colleagues and clients when there is no daily face-to-face connection. Also, it may result in loyalty issues vis-à-vis the organization. Another key challenge is the ability to manage boundaries. For some people, working at home means that they will “never leave the office” or “switch off.” But most importantly—returning to the notion of *Homo sapiens* being primarily a social animal—working at home may increase feelings of isolation, in particular for people who thrive on social interaction.

To sum up, remote working will suit some jobs better than others. Generally speaking, productivity and overall success as a remote employee will depend entirely on preferred work style. And it is quite clear that working from home will suit some personality types much better than others. For example, the tech industry has always been known for its flexible schedules and telecommuting opportunities. Going this route has enabled them to hire top talent with no local geographic limits. Another typical group of people working from home are the gig workers such as independent contractors, online platform workers, contract firm workers, on-call workers and temporary workers.

The need for control

Taking a managerial perspective when it comes to working from home, there are still many executives who believe that nothing will get done when employees are not at their desk. Taking more of a psychological perspective, business leaders would need to let go of their need for control if they are to be comfortable with remote working. It is their need for control that makes them so reluctant to give their employees the permission to do so. Many of them still live under the illusion that employees who work remotely aren't really serious about work. But what makes them ill at ease is not having direct oversight, but rather, their inability to witness productivity firsthand.

Due to the coronavirus, more traditional organizations have no choice but to catch on to the trend of working from any place (including home). But, as I have said previously, while working from home may not be for

everybody, many employers are now able to find out that they can save money and increase productivity by giving their employees that option.

Keeping these various developments in mind, the forced “house arrest” that has prevailed in so many countries may have had a silver lining. Of course, in making this comment, I realize that it is quite paradoxical to speak of a “silver lining,” given the deadly nature of the coronavirus—and the havoc it has created to the world economy. Presently, many companies and their people may come to realize that working from home may turn out to be the best decision they’ve ever made. And with the technology that’s presently available, and where it’s at, and where it continues to grow, it will become easier and easier to do so. As things are now, a person only really needs a computer and access to the internet to be a productive worker anywhere.

Practical tips for employees working from home

The pandemic can be viewed as a forced experiment about a relative new way of working that can bring many advantages. At the same time, while going through this experiment, we should be mindful of its psychological impact. Innovative ways need to be found to help people to stay connected to their organization and to assure their loyalty. In addition, innovative ways are needed to deal with the feelings of loneliness that are an inevitable part of remote working.

That being said, a few practical tips may be helpful to facilitate work at home:

- Create a private space in the house (if not yet available)
- Find the best time slot for the family to get work done at home
- Get into a routine timewise—don’t be seduced by other activities
- Keep virtually in touch with employees, as a way of breaking feelings of isolation, managing anxiety and to create opportunities to talk about work issues
- Don’t deal with conflict with an email—have a virtual meeting

What managers can do to look after their staff:

- Stay in virtual touch regularly to provide updates about the situation
- Have many of these meetings but keep them short

- Don't forget during these meetings to address the anxiety about the future and ask questions about the staff member's present state of mind and physical health
- Given the difficulties ahead, try to positively reframe the situation, even using humor
- Have individual virtual meetings about tasks to be accomplished. Brainstorm in virtual team meetings about ways of tackling the future and finding innovative ways of running the company together
- Pay attention to body language and tone of voice, even in a virtual environment
- When warranted, ask for the services of a coach or coaches to address the anxiety of your people and to help them explore knotty issues

In and of itself, remote work is a concept with much appeal. As workplaces implement it in great haste and in a context rife with uncertainty, managers must take care to navigate the pitfalls of this new way of working and collaborating to reap its full benefits. But if you stay where you are, you will never do the things that need to be done. It is outside of your comfort zone where the real magic begins. Take this leap of faith into the unknown. You might even forget to go back to previous ways of working.

CHAPTER 9

The virtual team coaching approach

Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.

—Helen Keller

Any virtual community that works, works because people put in some time.

—Howard Rheingold

An important part of remote work will be the way teams are going to be managed virtually. Thinking about teams I am reminded of the famous oath from Alexander Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*: “One for all, and all for one.” It symbolizes the essence of teamwork. The musketeers believed that when one of them was in trouble, they were all in trouble; and if one of them succeeded, they all succeeded. The musketeers showed how through cooperation rather than through conflict, they could attain their greatest successes. Whatever needed to be done, they knew that they could do more as a team than as individuals working by themselves.

Team highs and lows

More than ever, teamwork will be a crucial element in an organization’s effectiveness, not the least because well-aligned team thinking and goal orientation facilitates problem solving especially through difficult times. At the same time, I realize that many organizational leaders remain ambivalent about teams—virtually or otherwise. For example, they fear unresolved overt and covert conflict, lack of closure, uneven participation, tunnel vision, lack of accountability, and indifference to the interests of the organization as a whole. Also, I have seen all too often, that many of them have no idea how to put together well-functioning teams. And their fear of delegating—losing control to which I referred in the previous chapter—reinforces the stereotype of the single heroic leader who is expected to do it all. Furthermore, for some of them, teams represent a hassle, a burden, or a necessary evil. This can become, not surprisingly, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although many teams do generate remarkable synergy and excellent outcomes, some become mired in endlessly unproductive sessions, and are rife with conflict. Ironically, the use of teams in the workplace is both a response to complexity and a further layer of complexity. Ineffective teams can mean very high coordination costs and little gains in productivity. In some corporations and governments, the formation of teams, task forces, and committees can even be a defensive act that gives the illusion of real work while disguising unproductive attempts to preserve the status quo. At best, this does little harm because fundamentally it does nothing; at worst, team building becomes a ritualistic exercise blocking important actions that might enhance constructive change. Dismantling a dysfunctional team might even require a kind of Gordian knot solution, which could lead to damaging outcomes both in economic and human terms.

Despite possible team dysfunctionalities, its potential benefits very much depend on the way members of a team learn how to work together. To enable this to happen, I have learned from experience that team coaching is second to none. Thanks to the intervention methodology I have developed—using the life case study approach combined with psychometric multi-party feedback—it is possible to create well-functioning teams [8]. In these stressful times, it is even more essential that people work together effectively, be it virtually.

Team coaching

The essence of team coaching is to establish a safe environment where people feel at ease—whereby mutual respect and trust become key ingredients. To make these enablers part of the equation, a very important element is the cathartic experience of storytelling—or more precisely, the life story of each member of the team.

It is very liberating to tell our life story, and while doing so, to be listened to respectfully by others. And while listening to the life stories of the others, team members come to realize that they are not alone in their situation. The realization of the universality of some problems—seeing that other team members struggle with similar issues—can bring a great sense of relief and mutual identification. This connection reduces guilt and shame and opens up opportunities to discuss other creative ways of doing things.

At its best, team coaching creates alignment among the members of a team. It fosters a deeper understanding of the different areas of the business through the sharing of experiences. Discussing different areas of the business can create greater awareness of how to solve shared problems. Furthermore, these discussions will help break silo-like behavior that are the source of so much dysfunctionality in organizations. When discussions take place among the members of the top executive team, buy-in of difficult decisions become more likely. With the establishment of trust, meaningful exchanges will be more likely, as is a greater willingness to exchange information. Thanks to team coaching, lateral and horizontal communication will become more of a reality, making it much easier to manage interrelated tasks, thus creating more agile and boundaryless organizations. Execution, often the greatest weakness in many organizations, will be enhanced.

The virtual approach

During the coronavirus period, I have found that team coaching can be highly effective even when done virtually. Although virtual team coaching will always remain a second choice compared to face-to-face interaction, it can still build trust, create team alignment and break silo behavior. Also, it facilitates the exchange of knowledge and a true learning culture.

While the first team coaching session ideally should be in person, we may not have that luxury for some time. While social distancing may be a temporary necessity, it looks like remote working will be part of a much broader socio-cultural shift. Even as some countries are transitioning out of confinement, organizations are now confronted with how to invite people back to work, and for some employees, questions arise as to whether they want to return to old ways of working. As much of our lives is already lived online, it is likely that virtual working, and subsequently team coaching, is here to stay.

To illustrate, in one global organization, I helped a project leader deal with what he originally called a “team from hell,” consisting of nine geographically distant alpha males and females who had never worked together and spent far too much time on power plays.

To prepare for the virtual team intervention, I first read a large number of written reports pertaining to the project. Then, I had one-on-one virtual interviews with the members of the team, as well as with their previous superiors, peers and other relevant stakeholders that were familiar with the project. This allowed me to get a sense of major recurring concerns and patterns of thinking.

Before the virtual team meeting started, I sent out several ground rules. Participants had to attend the full length of the meeting, not to enter or exit at will. Also, they were asked not to multi-task: muting their mic and turning off visual were not options. They had to be fully and mentally present, else the meeting would be a waste of time. Furthermore, I made it clear that active listening was part of the “contract” to enable meaningful, reflective virtual team conversations.

During the virtual team discussion, I would regularly summarize what was said, listening very carefully to what was said—and wasn’t said. At times, I would confront the participants, trying to clarify their challenges through asking open-ended questions. And while doing so, I was able to discern the dynamic, emotional forces that were blocking the team’s progress and surface them for discussion.

At the end of the session, the mood among the members of the group had changed remarkably. There seemed to be in a more trustful atmosphere and they felt more connected. According to many of them, for the first time they had a more open and honest conversation. There was also a greater willingness to make commitments. Of course, as I have learned, follow-ups will be critical to make these commitments stick. But given the general mood, I was quite convinced that they would implement what they had promised to do. In a later communication, this was confirmed by the project leader.

In a virtual team coaching intervention, the participants engage in a social learning experiment. Through observation and interaction with others, members of the team learn how to change habitual thought processes, feelings, and behavior patterns. Peer and coach pressure, and the provision of continual feedback influence this behavior modification process. Gradually, in particular, if there is more than one virtual team building session, the members of the team gain greater self-confidence in

engaging in courageous conversations, developing new leadership skills, and becoming better at solving their own problems and solving problems with others.

As a virtual team coach, I have to pay heed not only to the structures and processes that facilitate cooperation among the team members, I also have to pay attention to the messier aspects of team dynamics. I need to understand what's happening on the surface, but also pay attention to what happening under the surface, including the participants' ability to navigate their own unconscious world of resistances and defenses.

Helping to create a high-performance team is very much like conducting an orchestra. As a virtual group coach, I am constantly shifting focus and emphasis, attuned to the ups and downs of the emotional state of each member of the team. At the same time, I need to be able to encourage and coalesce the dynamics of the team-as-a-whole. And as has been said, no one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it. But even virtually, music can be played!

[8] Kets de Vries, M. F. R. (2005). Leadership group coaching in action: The Zen of creating high performance teams. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 19 (1), 61-76.

CHAPTER 10

The world at an inflection point

We, in this generation, must come to terms with nature, and I think we're challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.

—Rachel Carson

Gentlemen, you can't fight in here! This is the War Room.

—Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove

Reflecting on the pandemic, I recall how, in 1962, I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. At the time, it made a strong impression on me. Her concerns about the future of the planet and human impact truly rang a bell. Her writings placed environmental conservation (especially the environmental problems caused using pesticides) on the map. In her book, she made a plea to all of us to act as responsible stewards of Planet Earth. What shouldn't come as a surprise, given its success, was that she was vilified by the chemical industry and its allies inside and outside the US government. But although she didn't set out to do so, her book significantly influenced the environmental movement in making a powerful case for the idea that if humankind poisoned nature, nature would, in turn, poison humankind.

Two years later, I remember seeing the film *Dr. Strangelove or how I stopped worrying and loved the bomb*. Stanley Kubrick, the film's director, dramatized the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cold War and the invention of the hydrogen bomb. And in spite of all the humor, this pitch-black tragicomedy was extremely disturbing, and remains an unforgettable classic. In the film, we meet the paranoid U.S. Air Force general Jack Ripper, living in a world full of conspiracies. As an illustration of the dangers of a nuclear holocaust, the general goes totally haywire, sending B-52s with nuclear bombs to destroy the USSR and by extension, Planet Earth. In spite of the

passing of time, this threat is still very much with us. Since Kubrick's time, the main actors in the race to Armageddon may have changed, but the film is still an effective piece of biting satire.

In 2013, Thomas Piketty published his bestselling work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. His study focused on wealth and income inequality in Europe and the US since the 18th century. In the book, he tried to demonstrate that the top 10 percent of earners were reaping more than half a country's total income. And despite all its flaws, this study shows a movement towards an increasing concentration of wealth. Large wealth gaps in turn are a prescription for social unrest. As inequality has a dramatic impact on people's wellbeing—meaning everything from health to happiness—the disadvantaged may become frustrated and organize themselves to improve their economic position. If necessary, they will also do so by means of violence. High income inequality has a corrosive effect on societies, making these countries terrible places to live, for both poor and rich alike. Terrorism can be seen as another outcome of income inequality. For some, when there is no hope for a better future, an ideology bound to violence seems to be their only option.

These dark clouds over our planet made me think of the symbolism of the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*—in the form of war, famine, pestilence and death—as described in the New Testament's Revelation. Without taking a religious angle, my fear is, given the way things are going, that some of these terrible predictions have a chance of turning into reality. For a very long time, we have had nuclear threat hanging over our heads. Income inequality is there for all to see—the surging in numbers of billionaires worldwide being a significant indicator [9]. Terrorism is ever-present—something we live with daily. And it has become increasingly clear—just observing our present extreme weather conditions—that global warming is real. Presently, we have yet another plague: pestilence in the form of the coronavirus. And if we combine these threats with dysfunctional leadership, all of us are finding ourselves in an extremely volatile situation. Global catastrophe is turning into a frightening reality.

In 1945, a *Doomsday Clock* was created by University of Chicago scientists who had helped develop the first atomic weapons in the Manhattan Project. They used the imagery of the apocalypse (midnight) and the contemporary idiom of nuclear explosion (countdown to zero) to convey threats to humanity and to Planet Earth. The decision to move (or to leave in place) the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock is made each year. This year, the editors at the “Bulletin of Atomic Scientists,” the eminent group that determines the symbolic clock’s movements, shared a common concern over the failure of the multilateral system to address the existential threats that we face. Reluctantly, they moved the hands of this Doomsday Clock from minutes to seconds. This should be a real wake-up call to all that the clock stands now at 100 seconds to midnight.

As history has shown repeatedly, when the dark clouds of anxiety and uncertainty are hanging over us, this perfect storm is also a great opportunity for dysfunctional leaders to unleash their inner autocrat. As mentioned in Chapter 2, without institutional checks and balances, self-aggrandizement, entitlement and the exploitation of people by such leaders could become the order of the day. Furthermore, if this dark genie gets out of the bottle, often paranoid, scapegoating behavior will also come to the fore.

All of us better realize that this isn’t the kind of leadership that will help us to deal with the problems of the world at large. At this historical point in time, we need leaders who will take the opportunity given by the coronavirus—if “opportunity” is the right word to use given all its misery—to help all of us to engage in a major reset. With millions of people having gone through some form of “house arrest,” we should take this opportunity to nurture our more “reflective self”—to think about what kind of world we would like to live in—and what kind of world we like our children and grandchildren to live in.

To create a more hopeful world, we need leaders who can resist the calls of regression and whose outlook is firmly based in reality, not on magical thinking. What’s needed are values driven leaders who possess the qualities of Complexity, Confidence, Compassion, Care, Courage, Critical thinking, and Communication.

Such leaders have the capacity to deal with *complexity*. They possess a long-term, systemic outlook in dealing with problems. Such leaders will be true merchants of hope, with their vision based on a realistic outlook to things. Also, these leaders should have a solid sense of *self-confidence*. Possessing a sense of inner security will contribute to better decision-making. Furthermore, *having compassion* enables leaders to approach the people they lead with humility, respect, appreciation, and empathy. Such leaders have reflective capability and emotional intelligence. In addition, they need to *care passionately* about what they are doing. Passion and inspiration go hand in hand. These leaders also need to have the *courage* of their convictions. They need the personal integrity, moral values, and persistence to make tough decisions. They are also skilled in *critical thinking* and are able to think things through and have a deep understanding of what they are doing, and why. Finally, they need to possess good *communication skills* to present their ideas concisely, coherently and (particularly in crisis situations) repeatedly.

The answer to dealing with these Horsemen of the Apocalypse is not having a Darwinian outlook—to have everyone pursue selfish interests, against common good. If we take this route, we will end up endangering life on Planet Earth. Never has there been a greater need for enlightened, value driven leadership. Never has there been a greater need to have leaders who have a more visionary, but reality-based outlook to what needs to be done. Never has there been a greater need for leaders who can take an oppositional stand when the sirens of regression and paranoia raise their ugly heads.

At this historical moment in time, more than ever, strong leadership and collective action will be needed.

[9] Number of billionaires worldwide surged to 2,754 in 2017, *The Guardian* (May 15, 2018); What billionaires said about wealth inequality and capitalism in 2019, *CNBC* (December 31, 2019)

CHAPTER 11

Life after the pandemic

The one way of making people hang together is to give 'em a spell of the plague.

—Albert Camus

Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.

—Jonas Salk

It must have been ages ago since I read Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*. I recall how it started with rats dying, followed by a tsunami of human deaths. Initially the town's leaders were reluctant to acknowledge that there was an epidemic. And even when the death toll kept growing, they tried to ignore the human suffering taking place right under their noses. Eventually, however, they had no choice but to take the situation seriously. Martial law was imposed. No one could enter or leave the city. And as law and order was breaking down, riots and looting became the order of the day. The residents of the city were in a state of despair. Being cut off, unable to communicate with or see their loved ones or move freely, weighed heavily on everyone—for some, even more so than the threat of death itself. As the plague continued to ravage the town, its citizen filled the hospitals and the cemeteries. Funerals turned into rush jobs, with no ceremony or emotion, the only concern being to get the dead into the ground as quickly as possible. Finally, a serum was developed but it turned out to be a failure. But as time went on, the number of deaths due to the plague deaths declined as a new version of the serum turned out to be more effective. The quarantine was lifted; and the gates of the town were opened. A very similar scenario has been playing itself out right now.

It should be said that Camus was trying to describe how human beings respond to and live with an inexplicable, irrational, and completely absurd death sentence. What's not clear is whether he wrote this story as

a warning about human behaviour. Was he trying to show how little it takes for a society to fall apart?

Thus, already in 1947 (the publication date of Camus' novel), we got a strong reminder of the unpredictability of life as well as concern for how humanity was evolving. But attention wasn't paid.

A more recent warning about the precariousness of the human condition can be seen in the 2011 movie *Contagion*, a film directed by Steven Soderberg. While watching the film, like reading *The plague*, many of its scenes hit very close to home. The movie tracks the arrival of a fictional virus called MEV-1 that ends up killing millions of people worldwide. In the film, this disease that originated in Hong Kong, rapidly spreads around the world through basic human contact. The outbreak of this pandemic sends officials from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) scrambling to stop the outbreak. And what's more, they also need to quell the growing fear and distrust among the public. While doing so, they are trying to figure out where the virus came from, how it is spreading, and most importantly, how to find a cure. And like has been happening with the coronavirus, it takes much teetering before anyone realizes the gravity of this infection. The fictional virus portrayed in the film originated from a bat, which then jumped to a pig, to move on to a human. Very much true to life, it reflects the fact that 75% of new diseases in people come from animals (according to the CDC). And these diseases include HIV, Ebola, Swine influenza MERS, SARS and now, Covid-19.

In the film as was the case in Camus' novel, as people panic, societal order begins to unravel. As the highly contagious pandemic spreads, the worldwide medical community races to find a cure and control the panic that is spreading faster than the virus itself. And like is presently the case, the film makes clear how ordinary people struggle to survive economically and psychologically.

Clearly, with the benefit of hindsight, people should also have taken this film more seriously. As I mentioned in Chapter 10, medical experts have warned for a long time that a pandemic like the coronavirus was bound to happen. Unfortunately, nobody paid attention.

The warnings to the governments of the world of the likelihood of such a catastrophic event—and the need to prepare for such a crisis—went unheeded. Instead, both the novel and the film were seen as science fiction. But after what’s happening now, denying the reality of pandemics is no longer an option.

How we will respond after this pandemic will have an enormous effect on the future of humankind. More than anything, the coronavirus has highlighted existing political, economic, and social dysfunctions. It has also shown the crisis of leadership. Despite all the human suffering, the pandemic is also an invitation to make radical changes in our social behavior, economy, and the role of government in our lives. The question we should ask ourselves, when the crisis subsides, do we go back to normal? Is doing more of the same an option? Or does Covid-19 provide us with an important learning experience?

Looking at what’s presently happening in the world—I suggest two scenarios: a rather pessimistic and a more optimistic one, leaving the option open that parts of these two scenarios could overlap.

Starting with the pessimistic scenario, in situations of crisis, it is a psychological reality, as I described in Chapter 2, that most people tend to regress to a state of greater dependency. Crises very rarely contribute to the development of a greater sense of maturity. On the contrary, what usually happens is a cry for the kind of leadership that can provide guidance to help master collective fears and anxieties. It may explain the paradoxical phenomenon that even when leaders have proven to be highly incompetent, they still may see a rise in their popularity during crisis situations. When we feel helpless, we have this great desire to have people tell us what to do, making autocratic or even despotic leadership more likely.

Due to people’s sense of helplessness, the appeal of national identity politics is likely to rise, with a regressive move towards the nation state. We can expect that identity politics will become even more salient, with each country looking out only for itself. And this scenario is already playing out, if we consider the way various countries have been trying to acquire badly needed items to combat the pandemic.

Sadly enough, this pessimistic scenario plays neatly into an agenda of totalitarian control—a fact that autocratic leaders are fully aware of. As I suggested in Chapter 2, the pandemic can turn into a very convenient excuse to channel people’s growing sense of helplessness into autocracy or even despotic leadership. In general, populations will be more willing to hand over the control over to governments to run their lives. When we are scared, we are more willing to cut down on civil liberties. And even if some of these leaders pretend to be democratic, under the right conditions, the inner autocrat will emerge. What’s also likely is the search for scapegoats to blame for present misery. After all, nothing is more effective to unite a population than to find or create outside threats. Thus, apart from regressive processes, paranoid reactions will also come to the fore.

The means for the creation of control-oriented societies—the infrastructure, technology, and the legislative framework for martial-like laws—has been in existence for many years. We can imagine how this will be rolled out, where what was once considered an exception can easily transform into something permanent. I am referring to such things as the abdication of personal liberty (even extrajudicial, indefinite detentions), the censorship of the press and the Internet (supposedly to combat disinformation), the denial of freedom of assembly, the tracking of movements at any time, and restrictions on travel. It may even include giving the state greater control over our bodies, as reflected in compulsory testing, vaccinations, and other medical treatments.

Furthermore, this more pessimistic scenario may also imply cutting down on people’s sense of community through the use of even greater virtuality in commerce, the transfer of work onto screens, children playing mainly virtually, a focus on online learning as opposed to more traditional classrooms, the use of online forums, and the remote viewing of sports and entertainment. An idea that originally had been unimaginable—a tightly controlled Orwellian 1984-like society—is becoming reality. The idea of *Gemeinschaft*—a society where people have a great degree of social community and direct face-to-face relations with each other—may have become a relic of the past.

Many of these developments were underway before we witnessed the arrival of Covid-19. But with the pandemic some of these trends have

been greatly accelerated. The question becomes, how much of life do we want to sacrifice at the altar of greater security or pseudo-security? Do we want to live in a world where human beings can rarely congregate? Do we envision a future in which our activities are tracked at all times? Do we want to live in a society where nearly all of life happens online: shopping, meeting, entertainment, socializing, working, even dating? Is this the kind of future we desire?

In the more optimistic scenario, I appeal to the more positive side of human nature. Disasters not necessarily only bring to the fore the forces of regression and paranoia; they can also create greater solidarity, innovation and change. And as we have seen many times over, when humanity is united in a common cause, miraculous things can be achieved. When people unite, their creative powers can be without limits.

Taking an evolutionary psychological point of view, biologically and socially, health comes from community. Human life doesn't thrive in isolation. The idea of living in *Gemeinschaft*—being part of a community—is important for our mental health. As it is, the people in our societies are already living in much more distant ways than has ever been the case. The question is whether we should continue this path? Instead, could the pandemic give us an opportunity to restore lost connections, create a greater sense of community, and create more interrelated, cooperative societies? A positive sign that such cooperation is possible are the coordinated efforts of scientists all over the globe to find a vaccine for the coronavirus.

The present pandemic could also become a great catalyst to do something about issues that we have been quite aware of but have preferred to ignore. It could give us a chance to prevent dysfunctional leaders to come to the fore; to decrease the inequities that exist in so many societies; to really fight addictions and prevent suicide; and to take measures to avert ecological collapse. But, as I suggested, for many of these kinds of interventions, we need to accept the reality of living in an interconnected world. If we really want to do something about the world problems that touch all of us, there is something to be said about having a more “glocal” outlook, where people think globally and act locally.

To make glocal a reality, we also need to have a serious look at and reset

several sclerotic, but very important international organizations. For example, the United Nations started out with very good intentions, but has turned into a tired bureaucracy lacking the teeth to deal with complex international problems. To create an equitable global world, more work needs to be done at the World Trade Organization to make trade agreements more equitable. Also, the World Health Organization should play a much more important role in world affairs given the likelihood of other pandemics. Furthermore, it is high time that the most important world players also join the International Criminal Court, to be able to deal with people that prevent healthy societies from becoming reality. Furthermore, the European Community leaders should no longer pussyfoot around some of the major offenders against the basic values for what the community stands for. Not taking any action only contributes to slow rot. And, as I dream along, the leaders in the UK should have the courage to rethink what Brexit means to the younger generation in their country. There is a lot to be said by transcending narrow concerns.

To prevent the “tragedy of the commons” [10], it is inevitable that governments at all levels need to play a major role to define and manage our shared resource that’s Planet Earth. In other words, instead of circling the wagons and only looking out for national interests, we need to restore well-functioning international institutions. In spite of the seduction of identity politics and nationalism, only through international cooperation can we live in a livable world. For example, I recall how once upon a time, America took the visionary step to set up the Marshall Plan to invigorate a ravaged Europe after World War II. Something similar can now be done by the leaders of the European Community to save the world at this critical moment in history.

All in all, we should take this opportunity to create more compassionate societies—the kinds of societies that acknowledge that all of us are connected to one another and to our planet which should be managed for the generations to come. Therefore, in choosing for the more positive scenario, we should take advantage of this break in the normal to restore lost connections and to rebuild our communities. The Indian Chief Seattle once said, “Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

I do realize, however, given our attraction to short-term solutions, that taking the steps to create a more viable world will be an uphill challenge. As such, all of us should do our part to prevent depression and despair from ruling the day. If each of us is prepared to take constructive steps to create a better world, we can go a long way. To quote the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”.

To close, the story of the sea stars comes to mind. Once upon a time, an old man was walking on the beach. The previous day, there had been a terrible storm that had blown to shore thousands and thousands of sea stars. At one point during his walk, he saw a young girl standing at the edge of the water. Looking closer, he realized that she was picking up one sea star after the other, and throwing each back into the water. He asked her, “What are you doing with all these sea stars? You can’t throw them all back. They’re just too many of them. You can’t make a difference.” She replied, while she threw another one back into the sea: “It is making a difference to this one.”

[10] Kets de Vries, M. (2016). The EU cannot be at the mercy of a few. *INSEAD Knowledge*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manfred Florian R. Kets de Vries brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the psychological dimensions of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (Membership Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Paris Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association), he explores the interface between management science, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, psychotherapy, executive coaching, and consulting. His specific areas of interest are leadership (the “bright” and “dark” side), entrepreneurship, career dynamics, talent management, family business, cross-cultural management, succession planning, organizational and individual stress, C-suite team building, executive coaching, organizational development, transformation management, and management consulting.

The Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, he is Program Director of INSEAD’s top management program, “The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders,” and the Founder of INSEAD’s Executive Master Program in Change Management. He was also the Founder-Director of INSEAD’s Global Leadership Center. As an educator, he received INSEAD’s distinguished teacher award six times. He has held professorships at McGill University, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Montreal, the European School for Management and Technology (ESMT), Berlin, and the Harvard Business School. He has lectured at management institutions around the world. The Financial Times, Le Capital, Wirtschaftswoche, and The Economist have rated Manfred Kets de Vries among the world’s leading management thinkers and among the most influential contributors to human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, co-author, or editor of 52 books, including *The Neurotic Organization*, *Leaders, Fools and Impostors*, *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*, *The Leadership Mystique*, *The Happiness Equation*, *Are*

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In addition, Kets de Vries has published more than 400 academic papers as chapters in books and as articles (including digital). He has also written approximately 100 case studies, including seven that received the Best Case of the Year award. He is a regular writer for various magazines. Furthermore, his work has been featured in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times* and *The Harvard Business Review*. His books and articles have been translated into more than thirty languages. He writes regular blogs (mini articles) for the Harvard Business Review and INSEAD Knowledge. He is a member of seventeen editorial boards and is a Fellow of the Academy of Management. He is also a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), which has honored him as a lifetime member. Kets de Vries is also the first non-US recipient of International Leadership Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development (being considered one of the world's founding professionals in the development of leadership as a field and discipline). In addition, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Germany for his advancement of executive education. The American Psychological Association has honored him with the "Harry and Miriam Levinson Award" for his contributions to Organizational Consultation.

Furthermore, he is the recipient of the “Freud Memorial Award” for his work to further the interface between management and psychoanalysis. In addition, he has also received the “Vision of Excellence Award” from the Harvard Institute of Coaching. Kets de Vries is the first beneficiary of INSEAD’s Dominique Héau Award for “Inspiring Educational Excellence.” He is also the recipient of two honorary doctorates. The Dutch government has made him an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau.

Kets de Vries works as a consultant on organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management for companies worldwide. As an educator and consultant, he has worked in more than forty countries. In his role as a consultant, he is also the founder-chairman of the Kets de Vries Institute (KDVI), a boutique strategic leadership development consulting firm.

Kets de Vries was the first fly fisherman in Outer Mongolia (at the time, becoming the world record holder of the Siberian hucho taimen). He is a member of New York’s Explorers Club. In his spare time, he can be found in the rainforests or savannas of Central and Southern Africa, the Siberian taiga, the Ussuri Krai, Kamchatka, the Pamir and Altai Mountains, Arnhemland, or within the Arctic Circle.

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