



ON BEING THE CHANGE

BALANCE AND PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

TEXT: ANNETTE REISSFELDER PHOTO: DREAMSTIME.COM

We are living in times that have brought unsettling experiences in many parts of the world, including our own for a change, and have set the course for even deeper shifts. No doubt about it, collective security is harder to come by these days.

Socrates (in *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman) remarks “If you don’t get what you want, you suffer; if you get what you don’t want, you suffer; even when you get exactly what you want, you still suffer because you can’t hold on to it forever. Your mind is your predicament. It wants to be free of change. Free of pain, free of the obligations of life and death. But change is law and no amount of pretending will alter that reality.” Timeless truths, and if we believed that a negative experience of change is somehow linked to the present, well, it’s not.

While being out of our comfort zone can be a good thing, being thrown

into completely new contexts without any counterbalancing forces can also lead to paralysis. Leaders need to boost balance and lead the way emotionally so that they maximize their impact. How can we boost balance, now that what happens in the world out there can so easily bring us out of our comfort zone.

Change is not something our brain is fond of; while change is their everyday business, brains are busy creating stable environments. We easily forget that, grossly simplified, the basic interest of brains is energy efficiency. 90% of the processes our brain is constantly engaged in are about keeping a stable internal environ-

ment. All this is completely independent of our control, requiring zero input from “us” (i.e. our prefrontal cortex). The biochemistry gets pretty complex, but you get the idea. There has been a lot of talk recently about how “being out of our comfort zone” is actually a good thing. In reality, this uncomfortable state is the very thing our brain is avoiding – which is why it will revert to its “old ways of doing things” when it is off-balance, if given half a chance.

For the simple reason that it costs more energy, brains don’t like change. Time after time, they look for the most effective, energy-saving ways of operating. This doesn’t include developing a taste for ambiguity, or complexity... There is, however, one powerful and under-appreciated exception: *we can outsmart this mechanism simply by connecting to some higher idea(l)*: a self-concept, an aspiration of who we want to be, our values, or goals. In short: *as far as our brains are concerned, meaning beats efficiency.*

People who feel in charge of their lives tend to have that higher ideal, and most of those tend to be leaders, if not all in business. People who have in practice connected events and personal experiences to bigger goals (or better still, to individual ambitions) can help others tone down their feelings of losing balance and keep making an impact. It requires some translating, hard thinking, AND having really listened to other people in the first place, but none of this should surprise leaders... *Leading the way emotionally in times that require frequent readjustments* naturally favours people who embrace change effortlessly. Just because you are reading this, it is very likely that you are better equipped to deal with ambiguity and complexity than most of the people around you. How is that? Simply because you read *Business Woman*, you will have attained a certain career level, and probably experience yourself as the creator of your own circumstances in life, rather than a passive “object”. You have an idea of what your life should be about, and take active steps to make that happen. The point is: if it’s *your* ideals, values, and goals that drive your actions, you are displaying one of the most important characteristics of leaders.

Another characteristic is that leaders are more likely to ask: “Is what I’m about to do a reflection of who I am and who I want to be?” While we all become more and more easily distracted, personal leadership is about stopping and remembering that whenever we act, we are exercising choice, whether we like it or not. Holding up the mirror can be uncomfortable, and takes courage. As Max de Pree put it: “Management has a lot to

do with answers. Leadership is a function of questions. And the first question for a leader always is: Who do we intend to be?”

Having a personal ideal to live up to, and working on projects in which these ideals can materialize is a powerful antidote to experiencing feelings of emotional imbalance and anxiety. Otherwise, how well people can keep themselves in check is informed by a pretty complex set of factors like personality, gender (yes!), attitude

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and skill sets. Proneness to imbalance and anxiety is a good example of an area where it makes no sense to compare ourselves with others. Keeping track of our states, and acting early on perceived imbalances, is a much wiser option. Anxiety is typically fear-related; while fear cannot prevent suffering, or death, it can prevent embracing life.

What makes our experience of life great is celebrating its special moments. This means being open to noticing them, encouraging those around you to look out for them, and, most importantly, sharing them. In a nutshell, it’s about re-wiring our anxiety-driven (“this could be threatening”) reaction to what we discover

in the world, to a discovery-driven one (“look what I found!”). Our little discoveries were what made childhood so exciting! Today, we share “news”: other people’s stories (or catastrophes) that have little to do with our direct experience of life... When we were children, we were able to become so enraptured with our own little world that we’d effortlessly filter out instructions or educational commentary and focus solely on “what was truly important”. Again, the difference seems to be in the stopping

and pausing. Mindfulness reminds us to live in the moment, which now that we’ve become much more detached, worldlier, and settled in our opinions, is so much harder to do... But it’s still possible to look for instances that link up to a higher value or goal of ours, and highlight this to those around us – instead of feeding into “this could be threatening” expectations.

Looking out to others and trying to make everything that is uncertain certain is probably the road to hell. Brené Brown, a researcher into human connectedness shares many worthy messages in her excellent 2010 TEDx talk on vulnerability, one of them being: *“Religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certain-*



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ty. 'I'm right, you're wrong. Shut up.' The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the more afraid we are. This is what politics looks like today. There is no discourse any more. There is no conversation, there's just blame. You know how blame is described in my research? A way to discharge pain and discomfort. We perfect."

Brené spent years refining her central message of 'I am imperfect, and I am enough'. This is not the 'enough' in: "*I don't need to change, and who are you to tell me what to change, anyway?!*", which can seem assertive, and certainly confrontational, but is actually a very insecure stance. Instead, it's more like: "*Since I am enough in my own eyes, and have permission to be imperfect, I can keep learning. I am also interested in your opinions, even in what you think of me. I can truly show up in our encounters, and take responsibility for what is happening.*" Secure personalities accept that they are imperfect and wired for struggle, and yet are worthy of good things.

This is of course not what we witness in the overwhelming majority of our encounters today. What we can observe is what happens when scarcity mind-sets (i.e. fear) take over: simplistic, conflict-oriented binary mine-yours, us-them thinking, with a crude, caveman-esque disqualification of "them". This isn't what will allow us to successfully address the challenges of our times. Instead, we need to replace these narratives with alternatives aligned with the natural complex world in which we live. What Brené suggests is a highly useful attitude around change, where trying to be perfect is a pointless exercise that will only make everyone miserable.

And here the two strands meet: in panic mode, we lose sight of our long-term or deeper ambitions, and our caveman instincts can take over. So we first need to regain our balance. "Balance" or "centre" may not sound very sexy compared to the current lingo of innovation, complexity, disruption etc. But the centre today is no longer the boring, comfortable place for beige-clad people. It is the place where one sits between all chairs; and it is a little harder to be the voice of reason that carries responsibility than reproducing ready-made opinions and slogans. As Dieter Nuhr puts it: "Now that the bullying mainstream is gathering at the edges, perhaps rational people have to meet in the centre: the place where things are not so simple, because from there, one can see both sides and has to make careful evaluations. But if more people embraced this extra effort in 2017, it could become a better year."

Any coach who works with leaders knows that the soft stuff is the hard stuff – when leadership mindsets change, managers "suddenly" drive innovation, growth and engagement successfully. To end with a classic Socrates quote: "*I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.*" That's the whole point. Some people appreciate a thinking partner to improve their results and think not just more creatively, but also adopt thinking skills they weren't using before. For every such person there are probably 10 others who believe the whole idea is at best a distraction from their busy schedules.

The irony is that the best recipe for failure is lack of thoughtfully defined intent: As long as experiences don't

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change (and one way for leaders to experience this change directly is in a coaching relationship), the assumptions of others, and their behaviour, won't change either. Thoughtfully defined intent is simple: it just means that in everyday situations, we step back and think: "Is what I'm about to do a reflection of who I am, and who I want to be?" We all get easily distracted, but we can choose to stop a moment and remember that whenever we act, we are exercising choice, whether we like it or not. Why not practice some joy and gratitude? We can experience each and every day what it is like to be in awe of the many amazing things and people around! /BW