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Now. Bridge. Reboot. Thought Paper Series

Leading through the chasm and into the future economy

Multivoiced Leadership



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With thanks to Stefan Krummacker

*In the beginning was the word.
And the word was encounter.*

— **Martin Buber**

This is the world of superfast contingency — a world of multiple and often instantaneous bifurcations. A world of accelerated uncertainty bundled within uncertainty, bundled within uncertainty. How do we make sense of this experience of compression? How do we make sense of a world of seismic disruption, rapid online transition, the transformation of our towns and the digital exclusion now aggravating economic or cultural exclusion? Forking paths appear to open onto globalisation (pandemics, social media, the carbon crisis, environmental degradation) and deglobalisation (economic protectionism, sectarianism, the breakdown of multilateralism). Onto this global stage strides the leader as a strong hero with a vengeance, his performance playing out in various responses to the pandemic. And yet the loud voice and charismatic posture seem out of joint with the multiple crises we face — and not least along the fault lines of ever deepening racism, exclusion and intolerance.

But what is good (as opposed to strong) leadership, and how do we know when we see and feel it? What kind of leadership is needed to make a lasting impact on racism, exclusion and intolerance? I would argue that too much leadership practice satisfies itself with rhetoric, or

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structural change or static categories. All are susceptible to an inertia that will ultimately prevent leadership from becoming embodied, or from being — literally — brought to life.

Multivoiced leadership (the term derives from the writings in the 1930s and 1940s of the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin) recognizes that static or inert rhetoric cannot bring about embodied change. The assertion, the vision statement, the mere claim to superiority or uniqueness is inadequate. The multivoiced leader is comfortable with uncertainty and contingency and comfortable — no, wait: more thoroughly engaged — with the multiplicity of voices of others inside and outside a given organization. Tellingly, the same multivoiced leader is comfortable with the multiplicity of voices they embody and articulate in the leader as the self and the other. Such a profoundly open attitude toward ego and alter calls for an ethics of interac-

About this paper

This paper is an outcome of the GFCC Now. Bridge. Reboot. conversation series (conversations.thegfcc.org), which featured business, research, policy and thought leaders from 30 countries in eight live dialogues on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis and the trends emerging for the future economy.

We invited the participants of this dialogues series to reflect on the challenges and issues associated with leadership during the current crisis and in the world that we are seeing emerge out of it.

Learn more about the GFCC Now. Bridge. Reboot. conversation series at conversations.thegfcc.org.

Watch the conversation

Professor Colin B. Grant participated in the "Turning knowledge into impact" conversation May 27. Watch the session on the [GFCC YouTube channel](#).

The Global Federation of Competitiveness Councils

The GFCC is a global multi-stakeholder membership organization that has universities, corporations, government agencies and private sector industry organizations and councils as members. Combining its members and fellows, the GFCC has a footprint in more than 30 countries. Leaders and organizations in our network strive to advance innovation, productivity and prosperity in their nations, regions and cities.

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tion; a heterarchical and not hierarchical approach that privileges listening and learning from others irrespective of apparent status or background, and seeks actively to build trust and truth as a collective undertaking. We could call this a dialogical process of validation. It is this openness that gives multivoiced leadership its resilient force, for it embeds leadership in dynamic cognitive, emotional, social and cultural networks – none of which is endlessly stable.

Our upended world creates an ideal, albeit brutal, opportunity to re-imagine leadership. The resilience of citizens is under severe strain in the face of economic or digital exclusion, the threats to the rules-based international order, and the silent threat of COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 trauma. The resilience of our systems of national and international governance is threatened by fakery, quackery and malevolent intervention. Rational debate is being eclipsed by the appeal to the visceral. And the resilience of our planet with its precious and varied natural resources cannot be taken for granted. And I understand resilience here not as self-reliance, but as the capacity to deal with uncertainties and the deepening contingencies of everyday life.

And so how might one enable or translate a radically multivoiced leadership culture into practice? Here, too, an immediate qualification is called for: "culture" is not a static resource that can be mechanically applied. It emerges from multiple and complex encounters. Forms of organization need the space to allow for multivoicedness and such emergent cultures. Organizational innovation would therefore mean replacing systems of transmission or application or imposition with circulatory systems sustained by an ethics of interaction. These circulatory systems would in turn challenge fast-frozen forms of what could be termed monological leadership by disrupting hierarchy through innovative budding schemes and other forms of inclusive

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engagement that break down siloes – and siloed thinking – across seniority, authority, and role profile and create a sense of belonging.

Multivoiced leadership is taken here to be distinct from concepts in the leadership literature such as "shared leadership" and "co-production of leadership." For all can contribute. Novartis has, for instance, started a cultural transformation process designed to steer away from the hierarchical model under the change motto "unbossing."¹ Multivoiced leadership shares with these approaches a challenge to the hierarchical dyad of leader and led. For not only is this monological model not inclusive, it also posits or implies the CEO as a heroic leader, in command of all the uncertainty the world can muster. This results in the closure of opportunity for others, especially perhaps those in early careers or entirely different parts of an organisation. Unlike shared or co-produced leadership, multivoiced leadership stresses the multiplicity of voices within each actor, as well as within and beyond an institution.

Leadership in the age of contagion calls for openness to others, creating a culture of belonging and the combined sense of self- and other-awareness. Multivoiced leadership embraces the charitable act of welcoming; of listening and learning from others and the self.