# The Covid-19 Pandemic and Leadership

By Rajendra Patil Hunma

## Introduction

Leadership experts like Warren Bennis refer to major crises as "crucibles of leadership" – situations that makes it possible for great leadership to emerge. The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one such event. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is potentially a turning point in human history – one that we have all been experiencing for the last few weeks. As such, the handling of this crisis will probably become one of the most quoted examples in discussions about leadership in the coming years. There are already articles comparing, for instance, New Zealand's PM, Jacinda Ardern's handling of the crisis with Donald Trump's.

Patil Hunma

## The Exercise of Leadership vs. the Exercise of Power

Before going further, let us first agree on what we mean by leadership so that we are all on the same wavelength in this discussion. Leadership has been defined as 'the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations' (Kouzes and Posner). The key word in this definition is 'want'. This is of utmost importance in a complex crisis when desired results cannot be achieved without the willing collaboration of one and all, when we are dealing with a situation where no quick fix is available (the vaccine is still 12 to 18 months away), when innovative approaches are required, when our well-being is dependent on the well-being of others. No one has the answer. This requires delegation, but more importantly trust. The main thing to bear in mind in this definition is that leadership is **not necessarily linked to titles or positions in the hierarchy** and is a process that is required in all types of organisations (including government) if we want to 'make extraordinary things happen' (Kouzes and Posner), or when we are dealing with extraordinary challenges like global pandemics.

Dealing with a major crisis would initially involve a directive style of leadership and quick decision-making even in the absence of complete information. It would also require transparency and the humility to acknowledge one's mistakes, continuous learning and adjustment. This should be accompanied by a concern for people's well-being and compassion resulting in an active endeavour to alleviate their suffering and sense of loss, as well as a significant investment in their development and empowerment. The goal is to foster the **co-creation of solutions and commitment**.

The exercise of leadership should **not** be confused with the exercise of power which often smacks of arrogance, a 'know-it-all' attitude, a tendency to 'talk down' to others and a generally autocratic approach. While this autocratic approach would appear to produce short-term results, it is not sustainable and is likely to be counter-productive in the medium term. It is based on **ensuring compliance by instilling fear** and in the process, making others feel powerless. It is not conducive to innovation and collaboration as it tends to foster confrontation / silent resistance. Moreover, in democratic systems, autocratic approaches are politically risky in the long run.

**Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges**

The exercise of leadership (as opposed to the exercise of power) is all the more critical in the case of the current pandemic if we bear in mind the distinction that Ronald Heifetz makes between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems have known solutions and we only need to find people with the appropriate expertise who will 'fix' it FOR US. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are sticky problems. It is difficult to completely get rid of them. This is the case with the Corona virus. It will be around for years to come. Worse it could mutate, so even when we think we have found a solution, it would have transformed itself into something different against which our new found solution would not work.

In this context, one may question the appropriateness of the war analogy used by many heads of governments across the world when referring to the pandemic. It not only generates fear which triggers a fight or flight response. It also creates the illusion that we know exactly what we are dealing with and that we only need to find the appropriate weapon to wipe it off the surface of the earth and then get on with our lives as before.

The fact is that in the case of adaptive challenges, we need to change **ourselves**, our priorities, our lifestyle and our mindsets if we are to thrive in the new world which would result from this crisis. This self-transformation is the first mandatory step in inspiring others to change. For example, one of the many consequences of the pandemic would be that working from home (WFH) would become the norm for many. This would require different mindsets from all concerned, including even family members. It would also necessitate a management style characterised by a high level of trust and clearly defined outputs. Micromanagement will become irrelevant. So would clocking in and out at certain times. What would count more would be the quality and volume of outputs. The temptation to implement surveillance systems to replicate the office environment would need to be resisted not only because they would soon reach their limits but also because of privacy concerns.

These changes in mindsets, priorities and lifestyles cannot be brought about through legislation and coercion. They would require leadership <u>at all levels</u> based on role-modelling, trust, caring, respect and the ability to create an environment where people feel that they are valued. These are unfortunately not elements that are traditionally found in many organisations. And yet if we want a highly engaged population / workforce, one that would readily 'want' to give the best of itself when 'no one is watching', the kind of leadership described above would become a 'sine qua non' condition. This leadership does not come naturally. It is learned. Thus the need for leadership development at all levels.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the above that while traditional command-and-control management approach may suffice in stable environments with known variables, it would not take us far in the kind of volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world in which we are currently operating. Management would need to be buttressed by a highly effective leadership, one that would bring out the best in our people and will be conducive to high engagement levels and innovation. It is also clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is more of an adaptive challenge than a technical problem. This reinforces the need for real leadership that would result in people being highly motivated to 'want to struggle for shared aspirations', in a safer world, in more effective organisations and ultimately, in a better life for us all.