

LEADERSHIP

THOUGHTS, QUESTIONS, IDEAS

MDES 06 - Learning Log
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Graca Machel

Her thoughts on leadership today

A few days after Fiona mentioned the relationship between courage and the French word for heart (Cœur), I came across this interview. Graca Machel, Nelson Mandela's widow, remarks that what current world leaders lack is courage. She didn't say educational qualification or resources, she said courage.

Machel uses what's going on in Syria and Yemen and the inaction towards addressing these problems as an example. Two things jumped out at me when she talked about courage and leading with the heart:

- One is that the heart is a powerful source of direction. Yes, we as human beings are meant to be rational beings, but gut feelings, and our ability to discern situations goes beyond the reports we will ever produce with numbers and analytics
- Two is that leadership is having the inner strength to ask the questions that everyone wants to ask but is afraid to do so. It is not about having the answer, it is more about inspiring people to kick-start the conversation

"...courageous leadership, to do the right thing at the right time."



Glow

What does it mean for leadership?

It may seem like common sense, but I think this is a powerful paragraph. I've observed many people, including myself, waiting for a far-off energy source to rub off on us so we can become the best version of ourselves. Yes, I do believe that the energy that for example, the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia radiates is infectious and inspiring. But I fear and have noticed that people still rely on a continuous supply and start second-guessing everything when they sense weakness.

But I think the point is to take the energy they give us and multiply and interpret it in our own lives, to help motivate us to translate our good intentions into good deeds.

What I most appreciated about Lynda Gratton's concept of Glow is that it recognizes and emphasizes the alignment between one's internal positive energy and glow, with the external environment. The Glow/ positive energy/ drive/ motivation cannot be complete if we as individuals cannot learn to develop a cooperative mindset, work across boundaries and spark energy. Nor can it be complete if the environment around us cannot support and cultivate these traits.

I do see a bright future for my country, but I also recognize that there is much to do both at the individual as well as at a societal level to enable and nurture this kind of thinking. We owe it to all these great leaders, to take after them and start becoming our own source of positive energy and innovation.

"You can find visionaries who ignite the latent energy around you. Think of how Al Gore ignited thinking around the world on climate change. Or how Nelson Mandela ignited thinking around equality and peaceful coexistence. These great charismatic sources of ignition are wonderful to experience, but because they are distant, they are unlikely to be sources of Glow in your own life. To Glow, you need to tap into your own personal source of igniting vision."

Lynda Gratton
Glow: How You Can Radiate Energy, Innovation and Success

1: Fairness 🌐

Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

2: Honesty 🗣️

Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.

3: Judgment 🧠

Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.

4: Leadership 👤

Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

VIA Character Strengths

So what?

The managers at my previous job always said it is better to excel in your strengths rather than to focus entirely on getting your weaknesses to an average level. Although this does somehow conflict with my belief that it is a good thing to be good at everything, when it comes to character strengths, you can't be great at everything. Being aware of your weaknesses is critical but being aware of your strengths is particularly important for understanding what you can, uniquely, bring to the table. Used

consciously and humbly, they can become the traits that people come to you for.

But such tests shouldn't be taken as absolutes. The first few times I took psychometric tests, I had become defensive and not particularly satisfied with the results. I never really liked to label or attach myself to one thing, and this idea of being labelled as one thing didn't really go well with me. Lately though, I'm beginning to understand that my results are slightly different and seem to evolve each time I take a different test (it also helps that different tests use different words to describe similar traits and characters).

The lesson here is that it's important to understand that we can learn to appreciate our nature and work towards making it better. These tests don't define you, but you can choose which ones you'd like to be. Better yet, they can help you identify other people's strengths, identify the type of people that can complement you so that you can celebrate and bring each other up.

FAIRNESS

Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance

Rickardo Stewart

At some point during the question and answer session, Rickardo said, "...how is this journey being facilitated?", referring to the journey that the young people he works with go through. He didn't seem fixated on how they would turn out, nor did he seem to insist one way of doing things. He was talking about process, guidance and support. At the same time, he talked about empathy and respect, showing that a leader is there to acknowledge the experiences of individuals and their ability to think for themselves, if given the right circumstances.

I learned from Rickardo's story, that a leader doesn't necessarily need to enforce her/his vision on people but is instead there to facilitate the journey. Then again, she/he will only be able to let go of the need to control everything with a clear sense of self.

Empathy &
Respect

James Scroggs

I learned from James's story that a leader must have this strong sense of commitment and conviction to her/his vision. With this said, it is important to bear in mind that, this conviction must be held with humility, constantly being challenged and refined by a supportive group of people.

Commitment

Henry Stewart

The notion of believing in the best of people seems to be highly overlooked in the place of work. Just like laughs are contagious, I believe that people reciprocate the type of treatment that is thrown at them. I believe it's very important to get this right, as the need to control can partly stem from this inability to trust people based on the assumption that they have malicious intentions or have the same weaknesses that we ourselves have.

We all have our biases and our experience, sometimes leading us to expect to see things unfold in disastrous ways. Therefore, the ability to comprehend and to acknowledge that each one of us is different and not necessarily bent on ruining things is crucial to creating a supportive environment of work. At the least, this requires empathy, self-regulation and optimism.

"Laugh, and the world
laughs with you; weep, and
you weep alone."
Ella Wheeler Wilcox



My Changemaker “Stick Person” Me in the World

What institutions am I a part of?

- My family
- Ravensbourne, the organization I will join/build/ATA
- My neighbourhood
- My city
- My country

What are my ambitions? What do I want to achieve?

- Contribute to a change in the mindset of Ethiopians
- I want to see a lively and beautiful Addis Ababa
- I want to make books available, self-learning easy
- I want to help people get the foundations, opportunities I was able to enjoy, and more

Be Respectful:

Choose your words carefully. You don't want to seem like you want to tell what people what to think and have them think like you. Allow people to think for themselves.

What concerns me? What are my fears or worries about my community, society, the world?

- My community: we try to mimic the rest of the world and fail to find out our own identities, we make the same mistakes and deprive our children the opportunities they deserve to have
- My society: we remain a hundred steps behind because we fail to think collaboratively, everyone of us selfishly trying to achieve superficial goals, stifling others and leaving behind millions of people who are so clueless and content, and yet lack the most basic things in life, such as water and education
- The world: we become different classes of the same species... those with and those without

What am I up to? What drives me? What am I angry about?

- I'm angry about corruption, lack of empathy, selfishness, pessimism, idleness

What are my key relationships in work and life?

- Family and Friends
- Acquaintances from ATA
- Mentors: Brook
- Role models/ people I admire: Bobo, Raru, Khalid
- People I know through my siblings
- EiABC

What are my defining moments?

- Not being able to choose what to learn coming out of high school
- Being introduced to ATA

Who are the people who have shaped my values?

- My mom and my whole family
- MAGiS and church
- Nazareth school, EiABC
- My close friends

What do I spend my time, energy and money on?

- Time: Work, Leisure, Side projects, Recharging
- Energy: Work,
- Money: School, Food and Leisure, Travel, Clothes

Could I spend more of my time nurturing my relationships with people rather than mostly pursuing solo projects?

When you have to
pretend you're in a good
mood at work



Jeffrey Pfeffer Business and the Spirit

Coming out of university and joining the world of work, there's this expectation that we grow up observing, one that says that you become a different, boring person, with a routine. I was of this opinion, until very recently. It was even one of the biggest topics of discussion at our weekly friends' gatherings. But I was starting to unconsciously adhere to it, accept it as an unchangeable fact. I realize this now, remembering how I managed to spread it too.

Perhaps because I adapt quickly to most environments, I wasn't consciously aware of how much I was being affected by my work, until a friend, one year my junior, joined the same organization I was working in. When I knew him in university, he was always bubbly in a child-like way and lived in a positive and lively aura. I had come in a year ahead of him and during the first couple of months, he found it challenging to fit in, adhere to office norms and essentially, 'behave' a certain way. After observing his struggles, a colleague and I wanted to extend our advice; we told him to forget who he was when he comes through the door. After a few months, he had a noticeable change of mood, he was 'behaving', but he was also bored, unhappy, and demotivated.

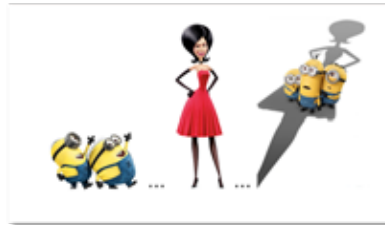
In my defence, I was never aware of the alternatives, especially living in a city where getting a professional job is a huge privilege in itself. But sitting here now, I regret having told my friend to leave himself behind when he comes to work. I'm thinking of how liberating it would be, if we could bring 100% of ourselves into work (i.e. if the working environment is designed to support different personalities and working styles). But managing to make this happen, is to me, changing the whole notion of work and its role in one's life.

"the ability to live an integrated life, so that work roles and other roles are not inherently in conflict and work roles do not conflict with the worker's essential nature and who the person is as a human being."

Jeffrey Pfeffer



But what of the leader? Is she/he allowed to bring 100% to work? How would we react to the idea of the leader being fully present? Would we feel she/he was being competent? Serious enough?



Personal insights

Feedback and lessons learned

The discussion after my presentation was very helpful. It helped me see the story from another perspective, one I had not allowed myself to see.

Do my assumptions
of what a leader is
need to change?

Who was
meant to be
the 'leader in this
case?

Are people like me, back
at home still afraid to take
on leadership positions
because of this type of
mental barrier?

Were we not empowered
enough to have thought of
ourselves as the leaders? Or is
it that our environment led us to
believe, because of May's age,
precedence and experience that it
would be only natural to consider
her the leader?



Positive thinking in Leadership

Working in a public institution back home, I've often felt helpless when dealing with some of the challenges we were working to solve. It was very hard to picture whatever I was doing making a difference in the huge system that was the Ethiopian Agricultural Sector. But it's not just the Ethiopian Agricultural Sector that seems vast and unwavering, the world is currently characterized by entangled and wicked societal problems. The challenges we face as a species and as individuals can be so complex, they can be paralyzing.

Paralysing as they might be, we can't all be sitting in the comfort of our homes, binge-watching post-apocalyptic movies, waiting for them to solve themselves. We must find the inspiration to work towards change. However,

embarking on this journey is not easy. It is unpredictable and possibly treacherous. It is very testing to get up every day to face these challenges, let alone try and motivate a team/ an organization/ a country towards some distant/ purpose.

That is why, it is imperative to keep a stock of positive energy... Although much talk of positive thinking has focused on the fuzzy concept of just 'being happy', recent evidence shows that positive thinking has proven effects on subduing the fight or flight response that takes over when we are faced with challenges. Instead, positive emotions allow us to open up the mind and heighten our awareness, see the big picture, think in systems, become more creative and innovative, empathize and become more resilient. Furthermore, in the workplace people become more trusting and come to better win-win solutions and negotiations in the presence of positive thinking.

So, what does this mean for today's leaders? How can they leverage positive thinking?

Assuming that the role of today's leader is to facilitate and to bring out the best thinking of individuals in a team, then today's organizations should strive to build leadership models that use positive thinking as a foundation. By having a healthy and optimistic view of the purpose (WHY), the journey there (HOW), the people (WHO) involved in the journey and most of all, the self (the strengths and her/his ability to lead). And by practicing optimism, as illustrated by the quote above, through thoughts, words, and actions. (Of course, not to a point where they cloud our judgement and our over-optimism leads us to tame problems that are not meant to be simplified.)

"Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become your words. Keep your words positive because your words become your behaviour. Keep your behaviour positive because your behaviour becomes your habits. Keep your habits positive because your habits become your values. Keep your values positive because your values become your destiny."

Mahatma Gandhi

But a positive thinking habit doesn't just form overnight, it takes practice and a nurturing environment.



As a country, how can we create environments that cultivate positive thinking? How can we develop the habits of positive thinking in children, so they grow up to become more resilient leaders?



Leadership in Traditional Ethiopian Organizations

ማህበር, ዕቅብ, ዕድር

Ethiopia is growing fast, and new organizations are being setup daily. Housed in glass buildings, these organizations are characterized by western hierarchical org-charts and leadership models. At the same time, several traditional and informal organizations such as Mahibers (ማህበር – social networks), Iqubs (ዕቅብ – credit unions) and Idirs (ዕድር – Insurance) play a crucial part in the everyday lives of Ethiopians.

Built on voluntary membership, the goals of these organizations is to provide support to members.

For instance, in terms of strengthening social ties, in the case of Mahibers, or supporting economic endeavours, in Iqubs. But they also serve different purposes. These associations become platforms for discussions and dialogue, and members have been cited saying that they contribute to personal development (self-confidence, leadership roles, etc.).

What's interesting about these organizations is that, even though membership numbers can range from a handful of individuals to several families in a neighbourhood (especially for Idir and Mahiber), financial and other decisions are discussed and made in the physical presence of all members, enabling every member to attempt to influence outcomes. This means although there are 'leaders', the environment is characterized by participation and leadership is characterized by more responsibility rather than power. Furthermore, these organizations/ associations are based on mutual support and are characterized by "mutual respect, recognition of elders, and subordination of individual priorities to collective concerns in relation to organizational goals and objectives."

Although these organizations are more social and are not for profit, they still make me wonder how much we can learn and adapt from the way they are initiated and to their leadership models. I will leave a couple of questions here, that will hopefully be answered after some more investigation.



What can we borrow from these traditional organizations and their leadership model to much greater initiatives?
Can we design our organizations so that they can cultivate/accommodate these types of leadership approaches?
Which comes first, the leadership approach or the organization type?



Ezio Manzini

Politics of Everyday

In a talk about his book *Politics of Everyday*, I asked Manzini what he thought leadership will look like in the collective scenario he envisions in his books.

He said,

“A good leader is the one that is capable to reduce her/his leadership and to create a structure that works ... so probably, our work as designers if we want to look at the society and find who is doing something new is to help this kind of transition. From what is now called the “social hero”, the super leader, towards a condition that is normal.”

Your participation
as a leader can be
normalized.

You don't need to be
a big leader, you don't
need to have extra, super
commitment.

In this case, is the word “LEADER”
even appropriate?

Chevening is looking for individuals that will be future leaders or influencers in their home countries. Explain how you meet this requirement, using clear examples of your own leadership and influencing skills to support your answer.

OVERRATED

Is leadership overrated?

Discussing leadership on a daily basis

A few weeks ago, I was chatting with two friends of mine on the topic of leadership and our conversation led to the question that appears in university and scholarship applications, regarding leadership. Our conversation started criticizing whether this question was valid, or if it was setting expectations that may make it harder for leadership to be a topic of discussion on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, we came up with more questions than answers.

Is leadership overrated?

Who is to define at which age one is supposed to become a leader?

Does it enforce a narrow perspective of leadership?

Perhaps it's actually underrated and portrayed in a very shallow and superficial way ... Whereas real leadership has so much depth that we are led to believe...

Does this statement push the concept further away and make it seem even more unattainable?

What can we do to broaden the understanding of what a leader is, from a young age?

Emotional intelligence and leadership

- ? Is work life designed to rob us of our emotional intelligence, because it requires a certain type of behaviour to take over?
- ? Does being and acting “professionally” influence our ability to be emotionally present?

Leadership and governance

- It is my opinion that term-time is affecting the decisions leaders in government positions make about creating long-term improvement. Because officials want something to show for their time in office, they resort to approving and implementing barely baked-in initiatives. They also fail to build on existing initiatives and start new ones in order to associate any changes with their name, and only their name.
- ? How can future leaders avoid making the same mistakes?
 - ? Will taking personal ego out of leadership and the notion of success start to bring a better approach to leadership and governance?

Youth and leadership in Ethiopia

- ? How can we empower Ethiopian youth to think for themselves? To be their own leaders? To be “the change they want to see”? To shift their perspective from expecting others to take leadership, instead to take up leadership themselves?
- ? What are the conditions we can build for them to become empowered? What is missing? Is it even fair to ask so much of them?

Ubuntu and similar notions of African Leadership

- ? How can we strike a balance between group-think (because we are communal, depend much on our society) and a strong base of independent thinking that can foster great leaders who are able to ask transformational questions?

Embracing ambiguity and uncertainty

- ? Are digital natives and people who have grown up with information at their finger tips capable of doing this?
- ? Can our relationship with real-time information and the habits around consuming information affect our perceptions towards uncertainty?

Sources of inspiration

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