

THE INTERROGATIVE SOUL:

LEADERSHIP, CRITICAL THINKING AND EMPATHY IN THE INFORMATION AGE AND THE ERA OF FAKE NEWS

INTRODUCTION: Leadership is a Rare Commodity

Whenever I facilitate leadership workshops for the youth, I always start with an activity. I put into practice the value of hands-on learning, quality mentor interaction, and wisdom gleaned through self-realization.

One of these activities involves the proactive use of the participants' imagination.

"Everyone close your eyes," I'd say. "No peeking!"

They'd laugh.

"There's no right or wrong answer, and I want you to be completely honest with yourselves," was my gentle reminder. "Raise your hand if you think you can change the world."

Regardless of the size of the crowd, the number of hands gingerly rising up to the air could be counted by my fingers. Unfortunately, I only have ten. This is going to be my baseline for the level of success that the workshop will have.

"Okay, put down your hands and open your eyes now. If your seatmate fell asleep, please wake them up."

Laughter again. Their eyes, bright and shining like stars, would peer from behind closed lids, now curious about the activities we are going to undertake for the next few hours or so.

"Today we're going to talk about youth leadership," I'd commence, "and how we can change the world one step at a time, a little bit every day.

"Are you guys ready?"

I usually give talks to universities and international organizations, but in some instances, I also organize these workshops for out-of-school youth in underprivileged communities, particularly in the Philippines. I'd invite my network of student leaders and young professionals to volunteer. Through these platforms, they can share their own skills and experiences from their various fields, in order to train and inspire these young people to become the leaders that society desperately needs, especially at this point in time.

To say it very kindly, the past few years have not been very pretty. Populism is on the rise, with the ascension of incompetent and greedy politicians from all over the world. Their abject focus on their self-interests leaves a particularly foul taste in the mouth. They ride to power by stoking voter emotions through misinformation, riddling the public with fears they purport only they can solve. It has since resulted to disgusting violations of basic human rights, the decay of social decency and respect, and the crumbling of democracy.

2020, in particular, has been trying to murder the human spirit. Aside from these atrocious heads of state promoting racism and the rule of violence, the world is

suffering from the coronavirus pandemic experience, which is traumatic at all levels: from the individual to families to international trade and the global economy.

The past few months have proven to be a gift that keeps on giving. There are 44 volcanic eruptions happening at present. One of them, Taal volcano in the Philippines, is feared to trigger the El Niño phenomenon. Countries face billions of dollars in damages due to upcoming typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones, with 2020 reported to be an above-normal season for tropical storms. Melting permafrost in the Arctic has caused massive infrastructure damages to Northern countries, resulting to widespread oilspill in Siberia. The state of climate and the global environment is collapsing.

We need a new breed of leaders to rationally and effectively address the dilemmas that we face. We need leaders who can stoke the fires of collective action, those with the political will to follow through their promises despite irrational opposition, and who we can count on to make sound decisions at the right moment.

But really, what makes a great leader?

ETHOS, LOGOS AND PATHOS

The word 'leader' is derived from the Old English word 'lædan', which means to guide.¹ Its use picked up in the 14th century, but only first appeared in an English newspaper in 1837, nearly five hundred after.

There are many ways to describe an effective leader. In essence, however, because a leader is nothing without followers, the leader must first and foremost be an effective communicator. In other words, a good leader should be a good persuader.

In my Psychology days back in the university, my primary area of study was the science of persuasion. It remains useful and relevant to this day. I find that many of the lessons therein are applicable to leaders who can spur people to action. As Sun Tzu says, "He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks."

Aristotle notes that this persuasive manner is driven by three main factors: ETHOS, LOGOS, and PATHOS.

¹ Macmillan (2018). Word of the Day: Leader. Macmillan Dictionary Blog, available at <https://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/leader>

The first one, ETHOS, would rely on the speaking person's expertise. In order to persuade the reader, I would, for example, introduce myself as a lawyer-economist, extensively educated in both Asia and Europe, in addition to holding a Latin honors degree in psychology. This introduction would most likely boost the trust that the reader has in my abilities and what I have to say.

But mere accolades are not enough to make a great leader. In the recent period, much focus has been given on LOGOS: leadership which is facts-based and data-driven. While emphasis has been given on big data and statistics, it is however important to look not only at the bigger picture, but also remember that the devil is in the details.

Peter Drucker mentions this as early as 1967, in his article 'The Effective Decision.' According to him, leaders should not merely rely on reports to see how their decisions are carried out; it is crucial that they go in person and look.²

This means that the LOGOS approach should involve not only statistics and big data in strategic planning and

² Peter Drucker (1967). *The Effective Decision*. Harvard Business Review: Cambridge, MA.

implementation, but also hands-on management. Doing so enables the leader to glean wisdom not only from the view from the top, but also through personal observations and self-realization. This combination enhances the leader's perspective in order to critically assess the situation and propose feasible plans of action. Armed with this varied, self-authenticating set of data coming from both the macro and micro levels, leaders who practice this consistently can make better, more informed decisions in the time to come.

Such critical thinking is both an approach and a process integrating logic. After all, many of its popular definitions involve the use of reason. For example, Barry Beyer describes critical thinking as the process where ideas are reasoned, well-thought out, and judged.³ It has further been illustrated as “the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement.”⁴

³ James Elkins (1999). *The Critical Thinking Movement: Alternating Currents in One Teacher's Thinking*. Legal Studies Forum, available at <http://lawlit.net/critproj/overview.html>

⁴ John Ager (n. d.) *Critical Thinking Requires Knowing What Questions to Ask*. Kepner-Tregoe, available at <https://www.kepner-tregoe.com/blog/critical-thinking-requires-knowing-what-questions-to-ask/>

In this tradition, Drucker proposes an outline for management and leadership, to wit:

1. *Classify the existing problem.* Is it generic or exceptional? The approach to addressing it will be guided by this classification.
2. *Define the problem.* This involves understanding the problem in-depth.
3. *Specify the answer.* Drucker proposes setting limits to the solution, what he calls ‘boundary conditions.’
4. *Decide what is right.* Think of compromises, adaptations and concessions to be made.
5. *Build into the decision the action plan.*
6. *Test the validity and effectiveness of the decision against the actual course of events.* This will inform and provide for a comprehensive portfolio for future actions to be taken.⁵

Though primarily identified with LOGOS, it is interesting to see that both leadership and critical thinking requires a certain sense of PATHOS as well. Why is this so?

⁵ Supra Note 2.

Linda Elder, in her article 'Critical Thinking and Emotional Intelligence', suggests that we cannot be in full control and supervision of our beliefs and actions unless we continually assess not only our cognitive abilities, but also our emotional states. The latter may include our moods and feelings, in addition to understanding our intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors.⁶

Emotional intelligence may be manifested at the levels of both the interpersonal and intrapersonal.

In 'Managing Oneself,' Drucker agrees, and notes that "success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves - their strengths, their values, and how they best perform." In order to improve, it is essential that we know the areas we can further develop to help us achieve our potential and become the best type of person that we can be, including being an exemplary leader.⁷

⁶ Linda Elder (1996). *Critical Thinking and Emotional Intelligence*. Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines, available at

<https://www.criticalthinking.org/resources/articles/ct-emotional-intelligence.shtml>

⁷ Peter Drucker (2008). *Managing Oneself*. Harvard Business Review Press: Cambridge, MA.

He further reminds us that we have to understand where our intellectual arrogance can cause disabling ignorance within our mindset. This is something we have to overcome.⁸ Doing so requires intellectual humility, again a manifestation of advanced emotional intelligence.

Interpersonal intelligence is equally important. Part of this, according to Drucker, requires taking responsibility for relationships.⁹ Successful relationships, for its part, rely on two very important factors: communications and empathy. Ergo, from this train of thought, it is apparent that critical thinking is dependent on communications and empathy as well: the ability to listen to what other people have to say, and to put ourselves in their shoes to understand why they think the way they do. In other words, to be effective, critical-minded leaders, we must be able to think outside our current frame of reference.¹⁰ This encourages us to look beyond our presumptions, and in the process widening our perspectives.

⁸ Peter Drucker (2006). *Classic Drucker: Essential Wisdom of Peter Drucker*. Harvard Business Review Press: Cambridge, MA.

⁹ Supra Note 7.

¹⁰ John English (2017). *Leadership: Polarization Threatens Critical Thinking*. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Business, available at

This concept is very much comparable to John Rawls' proposition where he encourages leaders to make decisions from behind a veil of ignorance: they should be able to put themselves in the position of the various stakeholders regarding the matter at hand. This way, they can see issues from different perspectives, identify areas of commonality for cooperation and compromise, and make the most balanced decisions. Choices made from behind this veil are characterized to be rational, free and moral.¹¹

These two types of emotional intelligence, knowing one's self as well as knowing others, has had a good track record in history. Even as far back as Sun Tzu, who states:

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”

<https://ancientwisdomformodernbusiness.com/leadership-polarization-threatens-critical-thinking/>

¹¹ Samuel Freeman (2019). *Original Position*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>

In sum, leaders who can think critically and communicate effectively through the use of ETHOS, LOGOS and PATHOS are more successful, whether in the political, social or commercial sectors. This is why we should strive to understand the different thought processes behind them, and engrain them in our minds and in others in order to create better leaders, and therefore a better society.

BACON'S IDOLS: CHALLENGES IN THE STATUS QUO

From the illustration above, it is clear that many philosophers and social scientists have already attempted to create parameters of excellent leadership. But despite all this body of knowledge, why is there a dearth of qualified individuals in key leadership positions at current time?

In the *Novum Organum*, published in the 17th century, Sir Francis Bacon identifies four fallacies which defeat critical thinking, which he calls 'idols.' Idols of the tribe refer to self-defeating assumptions; idols of the theater are those which allow us to be trapped within the boxes of convention. Idols of the market-place denote the misuse of words, and idols of

the schools are the ways of thinking unquestionably imposed by institutions on the citizenry.¹²

While the *Novum Organum* was published four centuries ago to the year, the ideas therein can still be said to mirror the challenges currently faced by individuals when it comes to critical thinking. The Information Age, while bringing to many a massive amount of data at a mere touch of a finger, has also brought with it unique challenges.

Indeed, the amount of information has increased, which could potentially provide for a good foundation for an informed citizen of the world; however, at the heels of this data, and even sometimes leading the pack, are pockets of false information and fake news, both unwittingly and deliberately spread. All the idols that Bacon has identified are still present at modern time, except now they are in digital form.

¹² Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and Ted Bartell (1997). *A Brief History of the Idea of Critical Thinking*. The Foundation for Critical Thinking, available at <https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/a-brief-history-of-the-idea-of-critical-thinking/408>

This is why critical thinking should be taught, especially at intellectually formative ages: to balance the different perspectives of propaganda, and to filter out what is true from what is not.

This is of special concern because of the human tendency to construct echo chambers within our social spheres, especially in areas of interaction both online and in the real world. Social media algorithms ensure that people only hear what they want to hear, despite the lack of credibility of some of the sources of information.

This unique set of scenarios contributes not only to the gullibility of the general population, but also, even worse, to the rise of bad leaders. Bad leaders, in turn, contribute to the degradation of society as a whole.

As Alexander the Great stated: “Remember, upon the conduct of each depends the fate of all.” The failure of individuals to critically think and vote wisely, as well the failure of governments to properly manage its affairs and citizenry, creates a negative externality which causes everyone to suffer.

Is all hope lost?

I do not believe so. Education still holds great promise.

Martin Luther King, Jr. poses that “the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.” He believes in intelligence plus character being the goal of true education. William Graham Sumner fully agrees: “Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty.” Indeed, critical thinking should first and foremost be the basis of education.

While there are challenges caused by the current set-up, the Information Age also provides tools by which education and critical thinking can be fostered.

For example, access to opposing viewpoints is increasingly available to more of the global populace. Cultural differences in thinking styles, for example the generally collectivist Asian culture, is much more accessible now to the Western world, while the global West’s tendency to be more outspoken to difference in opinions can inspire traditionally reserved cultures to be more critical and speak out about

their values and beliefs. Recent studies in social, cognitive and neuropsychology can also be a big boost to those who seek to teach critical thinking, communications and leadership effectively.

However, these technologies are just tools. Like all powerful weapons, they can be used for good or for ill, as easily for propaganda instead of being utilized for education and critical thinking.

This is why, as those with the intent to make the world a better place, one small step at a time, it is up to us to provide not only ourselves, but also other people, access to this arsenal of education.

This is necessary in order to emphasize that everyone should be a leader in their own right, particularly within their circles and communities. It is up to us, then, to share concepts of leadership, critical thinking and communications to others, in order to inspire organic change to happen within our respective social spheres. The citizenry, the youth especially, should be taught not what to think, but instead how to critically think, in order to foster the sense of responsibility for the community, the ability to empathize with others, and

the tendency to support decisions made by national leaders which take into consideration the welfare of all stakeholders in the matters at hand.

CONCLUSION: THE INTERROGATIVE SOUL

According to Socrates, for an individual to have a life worth living, it is important to have an interrogative soul: to be a critical questioner. This way of thought is essential to the life of a common individual; moreso is it applicable to leaders.

From the discussion above, it is clear that leadership, communications and critical thinking are all inherently linked. They are essential building blocks of each other, under which the general thread of emotional intelligence runs.

ETHOS, LOGOS and PATHOS are key components to understanding these interconnected skills.

Keeping them in mind enables individuals to navigate through the jungle of information to filter out the truthful from the not. ETHOS, for example, introduces oneself, but at

the same reminds not only others but also ourselves that we have to embrace integrity exactly because of who we are. LOGOS encourages critical thinking both on-the-ground and from the bird's eye view, especially by asking the right questions. Lastly, PATHOS urges us to look deep within ourselves, understand our motivations and accompanying emotions, and then later on do the same for others. This provides a balanced perspective critical of the existing 'idols' in our minds, breaking down mental and social assumptions we would otherwise have unthinkingly accepted.

Whenever I do workshops and trainings with the youth from all around Asia and the Pacific, I tell them three things:

First, that learning is a two-way process. I am there not to impose what I believe in, but to learn from them as well. I encourage them to ask questions, and to challenge the ideas I present.

Second, that I believe in activity-based learning.

This means that more than just the speaker narrating facts, figures, and concepts, I want them on the ground and

moving around. They'd be tasked to handle simulations of real-life scenarios, and later on we'll be processing their realizations and how their new learnings can be applicable to their self-development as well as their interactions with others in the community.

Third, that all our personal life achievements are for nothing if we don't push forward for inclusive growth and the betterment of our underprivileged peers. We all grow together, and we should always strive to lift each other up.

After every activity, I ask everyone to close their eyes again.

"No peeking!" I'd say, mock-strict. "And no sleeping either!"

I'd allow for a moment of silence, enough to fill the venue with a certain sense of eagerness and excitement.

"Who here thinks they can change the world, one small step at a time?" I'd ask.

Almost inevitably, everyone's hands would rise into the air.

"Open your eyes," I'd say. They'd look around, hands still in the air.

Ladies and gentlemen: a new batch of interrogative souls. They are the hope of the future, and of the now.