

**RATIONAL, YET COMPASSIONATE:  
THE NEW ERA OF STEWARDS FORGED IN FIRE**

**WHY DIGITAL NATIVES ARE THE FUTURE LEADERS WE NEED  
TO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE OUR CRISES AHEAD**

**June 2021**

*This essay has been exclusively produced by the author for the specific purpose of this competition  
and has not been published elsewhere.*

## A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE-DOWN

The nature of trauma is such that the emotional resonance of an event will often sear itself into your brain, leaving it difficult to forget where you were when you first learned that the world had changed.<sup>1</sup>

I remember sitting at my clunky wooden desk in my college room, notebooks and post-it notes and print-offs of peer-reviewed articles strewn about, when I learned that the University of Cambridge was shutting down – its first ‘red phase’ in contemporary memory. The lights in official buildings were to be turned off, all doors locked, all staff and professors and students sent away as the giant institution settled in to hibernate through the worst of what was yet to come. As an international student, I remember the feeling of panic rise within me as I realized I needed to decide *within the next few hours* whether to fly to my family or stay in Cambridge through whatever came next. I didn’t know how long that would be. A few weeks? A month? Maybe half a year at most? At that time, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic was merely a confusing email. I remember the late afternoon light pouring in across the industrial grey carpeting that some contractor had added in the 1970s and hearing the empty groans of my office chair as I shifted my weight, trying to find a comfortable position. It wasn’t my body that was restless; it was my mind. I read over the Vice Chancellor’s email once again. It didn’t make sense, any of it. It seemed as if the whole world has suddenly, unexpectedly, turned upside-down.

Judith Herman describes traumatic events as “extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (1992). Such was the case with COVID-19. In the subsequent days at least once element of the unfolding crisis became clear: What had originally promised to be a pleasantly stressful (yet ultimately fulfilling) few months of qualitative research spent interviewing employees engaged in Net Zero-aligned<sup>2</sup> innovations for

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<sup>1</sup> Physically, the thalamus and hypothalamus – parts of the forebrain responsible for regulating hormones and specifically, emotional reactions to situations – engage with the hippocampus and amygdala to transfer moments of high emotional resonance from your short-term to your long-term memory (Rajmohan and Mohandas, 2007). As Joshua Foer describes in his book, “Moonwalking with Einstein: the Art and Science of Remembering Everything” (2012), the power of tying a moment to an unusual or surprising memory has been a technique used since the days of Ancient Greece to train human memories; the more powerful the emotion, whether it be joy, surprise, disgust, or fear, the more tightly seared it becomes in one’s head. The individual experience of collective trauma is no different.

<sup>2</sup> CO<sub>2</sub>e-mitigation “Net Zero” energy systems refer to the 2015 Paris Agreement-supported goal of reducing global GHG emissions to a *net output* of zero (via GHG-mitigation and -sequestration techniques) by 2050 (IEA, 2021). Such a dramatic reduction in GHG emissions has been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as necessary if there is to be a chance of global warming related temperature increases being limited to the target of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

large, active fossil fuel producers – my PhD research topic – had suddenly spiralled into an unfathomable global crisis. (As I later quipped dryly to my supervisor, this had not been accounted for in my study’s risk assessment.) Through my narrow window of focus over the next few months I juggled re-tooling my study while watching, stunned, as society entered a situation of constant high uncertainty, international restrictions, and – on a more immediate, local level – access to my initial interviewees suddenly dried up, as they now found themselves coping with a volatile oil market, general uncertainty, illness, and unexpected childcare responsibilities.

Like others, I had obsessively read the news in the days before the Vice Chancellor’s announcement, seeking some sense in the noise. It had become clear early on that many in positions of leadership had little better understanding of the situation than those of us outside of government meeting rooms. We were all waiting for more information, for some sense of certainty. In those few hours after learning of the University’s impending shutdown, though, I pulled out a sheet of paper and drew up a list of facts I knew about the situation. At that time, there wasn’t much: There seemed to be an air-borne pandemic unfolding where its symptoms chocked away its victims’ air supply; nations were shutting their borders; repatriation flights were increasingly expensive and few and far between; and, at least for the time being, I was safe in the strange, ancient walls of my Cambridge college, no matter how many thousands of miles my family was away. I reflected on these facts for a couple of hours, breaking down the logic behind each possible pathway forward were I to stay versus leave. Eventually, I came to a decision. I called my family and, with heavy heart, shared that I had chosen to remain where I was, explaining to them why and how I had come to that choice. To their credit, my parents were supportive of my decision despite expressing dismay that I wouldn’t be physically there with them to shelter from the upcoming storm. Yet, in my transparency of process for how I had arrived at my choice and by walking them through the core factors effecting my decision, I could ensure they felt respected and included in my decision-making process. They were aware, too, of the metrics I would be systematically paying attention to in the days ahead to adjust this plan as necessary. Emotionally, though, this knowledge did not make the circumstances any easier; we all agreed wholeheartedly on this, and so arranged a regular time to call and talk for an hour every day. This call, seemingly small, would become a grounding anchor for me amidst the months ahead.

While this experience of choosing whether to stay or leave one’s home to be with family during an “unprecedented and uncertain” time is, at one level, very personal, it also surfaces two

important dimensions I believe transfer more generally to the demands that crisis requires of the manager. In imagining how our leaders of tomorrow will rise to meet the challenges and future crises ahead, it is critical that they be able to pair rational decision-making processes with the deeply human ability of compassion. Furthermore, in this essay I argue that our generation of so-called “digital natives” may be uniquely equipped to pair these two in their style of management due to the multiple “once-in-a-generation” crises they have endured while growing up, unexpectedly shaping them into becoming the future stewards<sup>3</sup> we will need to successfully navigate our years ahead.

### **RESPONDING TO CRISIS’ DEMANDS**

To best respond effectively to crisis not only as a leader, but as a steward with a keen eye to one’s organization’s future, two primary needs must be addressed: First, the immediate needs of the crisis; and second, addressing them in a way that enables one’s organization – meaning, the people who comprise a given organization, their values, and the ways in which they do things – to recover in the crisis’ aftermath and maintain resiliency in the long term. These notions echo Drucker’s work arguing that management must think through the long-term strategy of the organization while also setting clear, actionable, and measurable short-term objectives – in short, embracing, “analytical thinking and commitment of resources to action” (Drucker, 1993). While this may seem obvious, times of crisis (such as we continue to experience during COVID-19 times) reveal to us how difficult this path may in fact be.

Drucker also notes that, in addressing any management issue, it is first necessary to define the precise nature of the matter at hand. During crisis periods, there is often little time to do so. Yet, successfully defining the core of the matter at hand rather than being waylaid by the noise of its symptoms also assists in achieving consensus towards timely action (as occurred with my family) since it forces agreement on the specific, concrete matter that must be addressed. In implementing this resulting decision and/or action, managers must have (a) defined which variables were actually relevant to the situation and ‘core’ issue at hand; (b) reduced these variables

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘steward’ here to refer to the ethic of stewardship, whereby an individual or group takes on the responsibility to responsibly plan, manage, and safeguard valuable resources for present and future generations in the spirit of Rawls’ “intergenerational justice” (Meyer, 2021) and Tobin’s “intergenerational equity” (1974).

to their first principles; (c) ensured that managers within the organization were seeing the situation clearly and not ‘climbing the ladder of inference’ (Tompkins and Rhodes, 2012); and finally, (d) implement the final decision with haste. As the old saying goes – and I paraphrase here – it is wise to take time to identify the *actual* problem at hand; once understood clearly, swift action to address it may then follow.

**PRINCIPLE #1: RATIONAL PLANNING...**

To address the first of these guidelines for the manager navigating crisis – *that of addressing the immediate needs of the crisis at hand* – requires speed and rational decision making, the latter of which will undoubtedly be done with less than perfect information. To cultivate the ability to engage in rational planning based on clearly identified, relevant first principles to the situation at hand is not an easy task. Yet, for the manager, this is one part of their two-fold responsibility: first, to identify and stop the (metaphorical) blood spurting from the wound; then second, to assist their organizational members in making sense of the situation. As Drucker succinctly summarizes in his 1985 *Harvard Business Review* essay, “the soldier has the right to competent command” (1985), suggesting that leadership in times of crises comes with such duties and obligations as offering a sensemaking framework to those whom they are asking to trust them. This may be achieved through an emphasis on transparency, maintaining their legitimacy as a leader, and remaining accountable in their actions.

As Drucker also mentions in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1993), it is worth bearing in mind that the nature of crises and other ‘extreme’ contexts means there will be no “perfect” response to the situation as it rapidly unfolds. Instead, a manager must seek a “best possible given the circumstances” response – which, of course, will change as more information is gathered. Here, we see the important role of informed experts who, with their deep knowledge of specific aspects of the situation at hand, may help cut through the ‘noise’ swirling around the circumstances (Silver, 2012) and assist the manager to think through and identify those signals to which she or he must pay attention (Kahneman, 2011). This is the process for how effective managers may best define which variables are actually relevant to the situation and ‘core’ issue at hand. It is the obligation of the manager, in turn, to manage her or himself in the heat of the crisis, stepping into the role of leader as required or delegating such authority to another manager if she or he is unable to fulfil obligations to her or his team. This process aligns closely with what I

believe may be Drucker's core contribution to the discipline of Management: the idea that rigorous activity of mind – as well as awareness of oneself – are necessary to formulate the most effective organizational responses, during both fallow times and heightened episodes of crisis.

#### **PRINCIPLE #2: ... EXECUTED WITH COMPASSION**

The second of these guidelines for the manager navigating crisis – that of addressing the immediate needs of the circumstances at hand *in a way that enables her or his organization to recover in the crisis' aftermath and maintain resiliency in the long term* – requires a lightness of touch and strength of skill I believe is best developed out of a manager's own personal experience – what one might term their character. What I mean when I say this is that to accomplish this second principle requires the manager to engage with her or his humanity – i.e., their ability to empathize with those beyond themselves and be compassionate in even the most trying of circumstances – and maintain this compassionate approach even as they implement the necessary, rational decisions described in the first of the two guidelines presented in this essay. It is a commonly held belief that when reflecting on the past, most people won't necessarily remember the specifics of what was done but will recall how they felt. This includes whether they believe they were respected and valued at the time. Contemporary management research on leadership in organizations supports this more respectful, empathic approach as assisting in fortifying organizational resiliency. Multiple studies have demonstrated that the effective management and the stewardship of resilient teams relies not on strict, authoritarian rule, but rather the empowerment of individuals within a team towards a shared vision and the cultivation of a supportive culture of excellence (Barasa, Mbau and Gilson, 2018; Andersson *et al.*, 2019).

#### **IMAGINING THE FUTURE**

And yet, where do these two guidelines and the lessons we have (hopefully) learned from our shared experience of this COVID-19 pandemic leave us? In *The Theory of Business*, Drucker (1994) argues that we must appreciate both the *historical* universe through which the traditions and structures comprising our organizational lives and practices have emerged, as well as the *cultural* universe of norms and values in which these participate. Following, we must recognize when major historical and cultural shifts within society are at hand, such as our current fourth industrial revolution and the increasing maturity of digital natives who have grown up in the midst

of repeated large-scale societal disruptions. As those who have sat through hours of Zoom meetings will know, this pandemic has made it clear that we are truly in the midst of a technological and social step change – one demanding major innovation in both social and political institutions and driven in large part by the aspirations of ‘digital natives’ for a more just and fair future society. In his analysis of Drucker’s overarching body of work, Kantrow (2009) argues that although our forms of innovation “must follow the new objective reality created by technological change, the values that shape it and the human ends it is to serve still lie within human control.” Organizations – whether they be for-profit, non-profit, or hybrid – must, too, clearly understand and meet obligations to adapt to the objective circumstances in which we find ourselves while still engaging compassionately with the mission of the organization as a vehicle, ultimately, for social purposes. An organization is an intangible entity with physical artifacts making visible its core: the organizing of a group of people. No matter the purpose of the organization itself, we must not lose sight of this human aspect of all organizations.

In short, in this new era we need leaders – nay, stewards – who can and will respond to both the context and the logics at play when dealing addressing management decisions, whether it be a crisis situation or not. Being an effective manager in the modern era is to practice a discipline requiring both clarity of mind and the ability to be both vulnerable and deeply human, connecting to those around us even as we able to identify necessary “constellations of significance” in the ever-increasing noise around us. Our current young generation – that of digital natives who have grown up with societal disruption – are likely to be uniquely equipped to lead the way forward given the disruptive circumstances of their own youth. Experiencing the stressors of multiple once-in-a-lifetime crises – ranging from the 2008 global financial crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic, to the unbearable urgency of climate change mitigation, to social uprisings pushing for a more just and fairer world – creates a cauldron of empathy in which more compassionate, more human, leaders are formed, if only they are able to connect with those around them and make sense of it all, both for themselves and for others. To have experienced hardship with your community, to empathize with those who are also going through hardship no matter how different their background or circumstances may be to yours, is an acquired skill that broadens a leader’s perspective and, I argue, will enables ‘digital natives’ to emerge, forged from the fires of hardship, to lead with the dual rationality and compassion we will increasingly require in the years ahead.

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