Reflections on Leadership

I am thinking lately that abstraction does not do leadership any favors. Leaders, in the sense of being a person with power at the top of whatever hierarchal structure they are active and have a stake in, can and do affect generations of people with the actions they take. The consequences of the decisions of the leader are not isolated occurrences and often reflect and reinforce the norms and ideas of other institutions adjacent to them. This ripple effect can quickly become a poison, and for example, in the case of racism, thrive and mutate for hundreds of years, settle into the very foundation of society, and become seemingly impossible to remove.

In the past decade with the boom of start-ups out of Silicon Valley in the United States we have faced acute ideological issues with the cult of personality which has attached itself to the founders of some of the biggest start-ups in the world. "People see these leaders as the personification of their ambitions, goals, hopes and desires" (Young) which I think is problematic with regards to what the true nature of leadership is. I believe that leadership is not something only for the extraordinary; it is has been and is going to be, more often than not, something very ordinary people have charge of. We need to move away from the idea that leaders are always at the top of their institutional structures and always have the best outcomes. While the twentieth century dubbed the "century of management" (Straub) certainly achieved what it set out to in terms of manufacturing and corporate efficiency, it is conversely marked by the backlash of the labor movements by workers who suffered through what it took to reach those achievements. How do we understand the role of leaders? How do leaders come to know what the right decisions are? Are emerging leaders prepared to reckon with the future ahead of them?

The Spectre of the Past

Straub states that "the twenty-first century should be proclaimed the century of leadership" but when I think of leaders I am often thinking of the looming figures of the past. "The century of management" itself occurred in the backdrop of two world wars, a great depression, and rapid industrial growth and technological change. Do we not have some of recent history's most iconic figures from that time? Are leaders more crucial now or actually just as crucial as they ever were?

Much of the American identity and consciousness is still shaped by the actions and dialogues of men 243 years ago that dictate the parameters of our political discourse to this day. How much can the ideas of slaveholders truly inform what justice and equality should look like today? How many of the current failures of leadership across industries are actually just contemporary iterations of problems that have existed for generations?

People have always needed good leadership, it is not that exponential technological growth creates a demand for it. Rather our technological advances run at the expense of the marginalized and if we do not change our course now we rightfully fear what the long term outcome for society and working population is. If the handling of COVID 19 in the United States is any indication of the societal regards for the backbone of our economy, which are the poor, the working class, the marginalized, then we know there is serious trouble ahead and that in fact there has been serious trouble here for a long time. We are not just looking to the future and managing future events; we cannot build new systems which are more holistic, fairer, freer if we do not fix what ails us from the past. Racism, sexism, ableism, and all the forms by which we oppress and

discriminate will not magically disappear in the imaginings and dealings with the future, we carry them with us, side by side with every decision we take.

We have the abstraction of the institution, of the idea and the ideal, but the reality of the transgressions of power are very real. Undoubtedly, we need our visionaries, but often they are people like you and me also then supported and co-led by people like you and me. Leadership has transformed into a grassroots initiative and something we all can and need to take part in.

Critical Thinking & Decision Making

Making the Effective Decision at its foundation requires that you classify the problem you face correctly, "the wrong decision will be made if the situation is classified incorrectly" (Drucker). Classification rests on the ability to correctly observe what is happening and since we are in age where "challenges . . . cannot be tackled from a technical perspective" (Straub), then our perception of complicated social phenomenon needs to be spot on. The business sector is as of yet, in the United States, predominately white and male. The inequalities that exist today have persisted and been exacerbated and purposely expanded under many a iteration of the white, male CEO. Tech companies today are notorious for being overwhelmingly male and outright hostile to the women work there. Anecdotally, we can look at Stack Overflow Exchange reporting of internal data stating that "developers who are men are more likely to want specific new features, while developers who are women are more likely to want to change norms for communication on our site". Diversity and Inclusion are often half-meant buzzwords with no concrete and meaningful action behind them. Leaders cannot even begin to classify the problems they

need to address because they cannot adequately see them for what they are, and more importantly, acknowledge and abolish the role they play in perpetuating them.

The Effective Decision by Peter Drucker was published in January 1967 and I can only think of how small the scope of effective decision making must have been then at a time when Martin Luther King Jr. would be assassinated only a year later, where schools, workplaces, were still in the struggle of integrating even though the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964. How useful and effective are your decisions when an entire segment of the population is not fully included and acknowledged? In the name of objectivity, it seems, Drucker makes no explicit reference to social or political structures that could affect decision making aside from a brief nod to FDR in this article.

Today, recent high school graduates have admissions to universities rescinded due to hateful speech (Anderson) and gives many a reason for pessimism about how much change to expect, but the environment of constant change and unfettered information support the ability to think critically and more comprehensively understand what is occurring around us. We have to be increasingly agile and have to think critically by the nature of the challenges present in our lifetimes. Of course, the flip side to this is the sheer amount of misinformation that is easily available and how people become entrenched in enclaves of dangerous false narratives. Previously we could rely on a centralization of leadership, one person to guide the way, but there is a case to decentralize and encourage individual autonomy, contribution, and leadership.

Are The "Kids" Are Alright?

Millennials are "a more diverse generation and overwhelmingly believe that diversity and inclusion lead to innovation and they're far more likely to stay in jobs where they feel valued and accepted. Better yet, their definition of diversity is not limited to gender and ethnicity but includes LGBTQIA+, veteran, and disability status as well" (Baron). Not to mention that Generation Z . . . the most racially diverse generation in American history . . . are young, educated, socially active and they are ready to change the way we all work" (Baron). However, Millennials are overwhelmingly saddled with debt, the student loan crisis in the United States is no secret, and "the inequality among millennials is even more evident when race is taken into account. Young black families at all educational levels have fallen further behind their white peers over the last two decades in measures like household wealth and homeownership, according to research from New America" (Popper). Not to mention that despite being in their 20s and 30s Millennials are often infantilized, "have become a convenient scapegoat for a host of modern societal ills" and that "millennials' worse-off financial status is less about moral failing and more about the fact that, as compared with earlier generations, millennials have more student debt, lower earnings, and fewer assets" (Boone).

Millennials and Generation Z alike have icons that have been activists since childhood like Malala Yousafzai working for the right to education across the world and those like 13 year old Mari Copeny (Little Miss Flint) who has been fighting to address the lead in the water in Flint, Michigan for years now. At the moment across the United States and in cities around the world people are protesting with Black Lives Matter (#BLM), wanting to change a fundamentally broken system where decades of racism, police and

state aggression, often ends in deadly encounters for Black people. The verdict is still out if these efforts passed and to come have made a lasting and tangible change where most needed, but at the very least, due in part to social media, these happenings stay with us and we have a larger part in writing and curating the historical record. Are we the solution to society's problems though? Not if our actions are not fundamentally different from our predecessors. If we are complacent and uphold flawed, oppressive, power structures, if we continue to allow the exchange of human life and dignity for profit, then we do not progress.

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, I think that the discourse around the development of human capital beyond "having workers produce goods or execute tasks" and shifting to awareness that "value was also created by workers' use of information" (McGrath), is well intentioned but misguided, if at the end the main focus is the bottom line. Leadership in business extends much beyond the parameters of how to run a business and profit margins; if we are not fighting for a free and fair society then we fail. We live in an unequal world and the work of leadership is a group assignment. Despite the ideological progress of Millennials and Generation Z there is no "leadership guru", no "management prince charming" that will magically arrive on the scene and tell us all what do to or effectively decide us to utopia. The work ahead is challenging and it is transformative not just for us, for business, but for society – but only if we actually engage with the radical changes needed for the world to be a place we can all live in.

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