CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CREATIVE LEADERSHIP IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

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Abstract

In these times of ongoing uncertainty, it is critical that leaders build capacity with multicultural workforces that can function effectively in multinational environments. It is only with the adoption of an attitude of world citizenry and a global perspective that today's organizations are well-positioned to thrive moving forward. Thus, it becomes imperative that we challenge traditional mental models and adopt more expansive, more fully creative ones so that we might strategically enhance our corporate positioning and readiness to meet the demands of the future.

Creative Leadership in Exceptional Circumstances

The world economy has had scarce time to fully recover from the financial crisis of 2007 that rocked world markets (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). A recent International Monetary Fund survey predicted a global slowdown of growth to 2.9% with rising inflation and cost of living. We are still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic which saw world-wide shutdowns and severe economic downturn (Braga, 2022). A current publication by The World Bank remarks that COVID-19 triggered the largest economic crisis in nearly a century. Poorer countries saw inequality worsen, and very few households were in any way prepared to endure such an extended period of economic downturn and income shock ("World Development Report 2022," 2022).

Compounding the financial difficulties, new reporting on the mental state of the world indicates that family relationships keep deteriorating, and the idea of a *social self* followed by *mood and outlook* have deteriorated the most (Thiagarajan & Newson, 2022, pp. 5-6). A troubling downward trend shows that friendships are deteriorating as well, with less people likely to confide in their friends about personal issues and troubles. This trend is particularly troubling in light of the fact that the risk of mental health issues are ten times higher in individuals who lack close relationships with family or friends (Thiagarajan & Newson, 2022).

A growing disconnect between individuals and groups is having notable impacts on the health of the world and its citizens. The war in Ukraine has had a particularly large impact on world affairs, coming so shortly after the world had begun to slowly recover from the COVID-19 pandem-

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ic. In Africa alone, the war has threatened food security across the region as both Ukraine and Russia are major food suppliers to the continent. Pandemics, policies, wars, and political instability are simultaneously contributing to the current state of world affairs.

We are indeed in exceptional circumstances. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *exceptional* as an exception to the norm, something that one would not consider or expect to happen in normal circumstances or something that is unusual ("Exceptional," 2023). In 2015, there were 52 armed conflicts being fought across the world ("Global Peace Index 2022," 2022). In 2020, 335 million people lived in extreme poverty (Baier, Kristensen, & Davidsen, 2021), and those living in war and poverty ravaged countries were then forced to live through a global pandemic, food scarcity, increasing poverty, and economic despair.

Exceptional circumstances can also be viewed as instances when people find themselves facing uncertainty in much less dramatic forms of extremities. Uncertainty is defined by the University of Michigan's Counseling and Psychological Services as

> the result of having limited knowledge about an occurrence or event, making it difficult to control, plan, or predict a future outcome, which can often be distressing. Most people are creatures of habit and prefer to have a plan or routine in place. When things deviate from our plans it can feel like losing control, contributing to increases in anxiety or stress. (*"Coping with Uncertainty,"* n.d.)

The impact of uncertainty can manifest itself in a variety of ways, not least of which is anxiety and thought distortions, such as exaggerating the impact of events and jumping to conclusions about stimuli ("*Coping with Uncertainty,*" n.d.). Thus, uncertainty can lead to the creation of limiting beliefs which misform one's mental models. These beliefs, if left unaddressed, can lead to opportunities not taken and challenges unanswered.
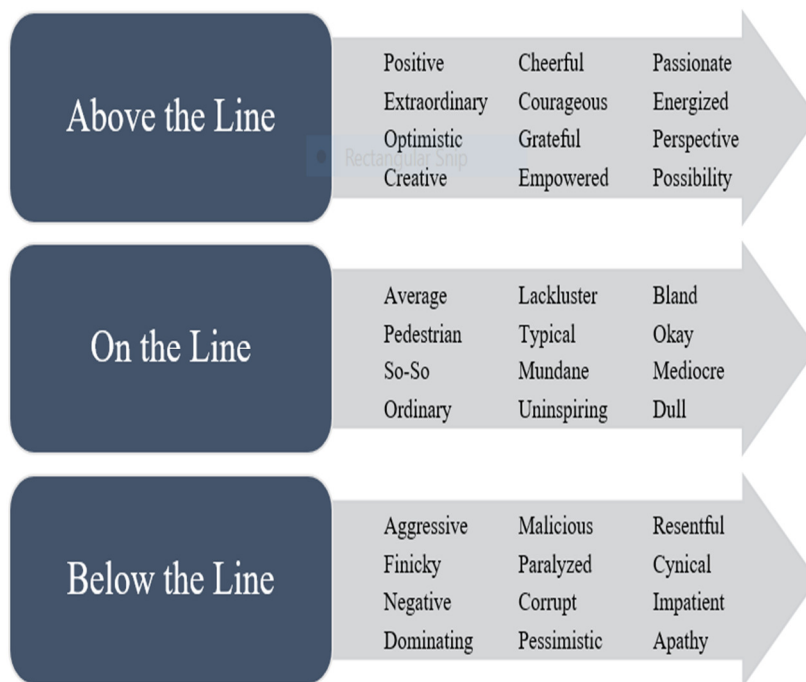
In contrast, history is ripe with those who thrived in uncertain environments, those who handily embraced ongoing uncertainty with "other" peoples and environments. People who were creative, assertive, and confident were able to negotiate the uncertainty surrounding them. These were our creative leaders over the centuries.

Creative Leadership

But what is creative leadership? The field of creativity has yet to come to a universally embraced definition of the term, but a fairly standard definition is that creativity is about making changes or producing ideas that are novel and make a difference (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011, p. 13). The definition of leadership is also fuzzy and often depends on context. Leadership on a global scale would include the ability to work across cultures, whereas public leadership might focus on the ability to marry public opinion and public talking points. However, leadership in general is usually associated with the ability to motivate and empower individuals to engage around issues (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011, p. 13).

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Creative leadership can be defined as the ability to guide groups toward a new or novel idea or goal by deliberately engaging their imagination. This ultimately culminates in a positive and creative change (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011, p. 13) that can have a remarkable impact on the members of the group within the context. In order to create new futures, we must develop leadership flexible and engaging enough to act effectively in all types of circumstances, even those that are exceptional.

When working with leadership teams, we ask them to consider whether their thinking is "above or below the line." The foundation of this exercise can be found in work presented at the time of the origins of positive psychology. Positive psychology emerged in the early 1990s and focuses on "strengths, virtues, and talents that contribute to successful functioning and enable individuals and communities to flourish" (Walters, n.d., History of Positive Psychology section). As you can see by the image below (which builds upon the work of Pransky & Mills, 1995), above the line thinkers situate themselves to make a difference.

Above the Line			
Positive	Cheerful	Passionate	
Extraordinary	Courageous	Energized	
Optimistic	Grateful	Perspective	
Creative	Empowered	Possibility	

On the Line			
Average	Lackluster	Bland	
Pedestrian	Typical	Okay	
So-So	Mundane	Mediocre	
Ordinary	Uninspiring	Dull	

Below the Line			
Aggressive	Malicious	Resentful	
Finicky	Paralyzed	Cynical	
Negative	Corrupt	Impatient	
Dominating	Pessimistic	Apathy	

On the other hand, individuals below the line can become paralyzed by pessimistic thinking. Below the line thinking is driven by negativity and influences our expectations of the world around us. Individuals who spend more time below the line tend to view the world gloomily and expect failure

more often than success. Individuals who slip deeper below the line tend to become resentful and show general apathy to most situations. Individuals who have slipped deeply down below the line tend to lash out at others and can become a toxic influence on others.

Those on the line are committed to protecting the status quo, keeping their environments steady. They are comfortable with just managing and getting by. These individuals experience moments of optimism and moments of negativity, and they don't get too excited by opportunities. Their attitudes are often tempered with below the line thinking, even if they don't always live below the line.

Our creative leaders, those above the line, will see the big picture, connect the dots, and find the opportunities. They are empowered and courageous, actively seeking the extraordinary. Individuals who spend more time above the line acknowledge negativity and negative situations, but they are able to focus on the actions they can take to address those situations. They do not view themselves as victims of their circumstances but rather as champions of their own fates.

Mental Models

Key to the success of this championing is a robust understanding of the cultural forces that press against behavior and decision making. Culture is often described as "how things are done around here" and incorporates the hidden assumptions and meanings that guide how members of the culture interpret and react to what's happening (Anderson, 2020, p. 40). A culture can be defined in many ways, but it usually refers to larger entities (from the national to the organizational). However, there are many subcultures that exist as well. It is these cultures and sub-cultures, this diversity of lenses, that lead to the richness of perspectives in which creativity lies.

Diversity is key to the creative landscape. It is often conceived of as differences in race, class, or gender, but that imagery is an over-simplification of a much more complex issue. The concept of self is one that is embedded deep within individuals, and people often have multiple affiliations that shape their sense of who they are. Simplifying the concept of diversity can cause leaders to seek fits for a "correct" culture rather than valuing a complexity of input (Anderson, 2020, p. 41). The creative leader sees the "other" as a resource rather than a threat, a new perspective on the environment under consideration.

Sadly, othering is a concept well established in modern psychology. The concept was first coined by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Boyce & Chunnu, 2019, p. 7) and is used to explain how we create barriers between "us" and "them." Othering is commonly weaponized to help divide people and garner support for a particular perspective. It shapes individuals' mental models of the world and themselves. Challenging these models, or even becoming aware of these models in the first place, often leads to significant discomfort. Change often depends on the belief that change is possible (Berwick, 1998, p. 135).

Changing people's mindsets, how they think about issues, is challenging, but it is ultimately the most important way to modify behavior and

achieve positive results (Pfeffer, 2005, p. 125). To do so, we must adopt an adaptive approach. Adapting to this challenge requires that leaders manage themselves within a complex environment, as well as helping others deal with their discomfort (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 29). Our complex global context requires a complex cognitive response (Osland, 2018, p. 98).

Understanding individual's mental models starts with genuine engagement and dialogue, gaining insight into individuals' preferences in how they think about the world and illuminating their expectations. When engaging in a dialogue cognizant of "the other's" mental models and preferences, it is important the leader highlight that separate individual efforts don't translate into collective productivity. In essence, it is the willingness to engage and understand the other that is at the heart of collective achievement. Scharmer refers to this process as presencing (2018, p. 27), a state in which there is genuine engagement, a suspension of personal beliefs and assumptions to effectively collaborate with others so that we may cooperatively create new futures. It follows then that to commit to the challenge to change mental models, ongoing and deep dialogue needs to be had. Clearly, creative leadership in exceptional circumstances requires a flexibility and a dedication to these engagements.

Although this exercise might start with dialogue, what must follow is a suspension of personal beliefs and assumptions so that people can engage in "thinking together." These engagements allow for a growing awareness of patterns of interaction and require practice and a commitment to continuous learning. Open and genuine interactions across boundaries and philosophical divides will provide an opportunity to create new futures together and allow ongoing learning between individuals, teams, and organizations.

In truth, it is a continuous effort to seek clarity of vision, develop patience, and engage with the world objectively. In growing a global perspective, leaders must possess an ongoing dedication to enabling individuals to engage within a system, to recognize how their mental models have a space within it. Systems thinking is about seeing and understanding that everything is connected and has an impact (Senge, 2006, p. 6), how existing structures mediate behavior and how operations interrelate. Thus, building a shared vision requires fostering those skills that aid in unearthing shared pictures of the future (Senge, 2006, p. 9), crafting a common identity and understanding of the future that brings people together to realize this future. Creating a shared vision across deeply embedded boundaries might seem a large task, a utopian vision of the future that seems unattainable, but it can be done.

Whole Brain Thinking

We utilize an eight-dimensional model when working with organizations and their executive teams to explain thinking preferences and how they influence behavior and decision-making. The model consists of four quadrants and eight-dimensions which can briefly be described as follows:
- L1—L1 thinking is associated with a preference for performance and efficiency. L1 thinkers are focused on the result. The
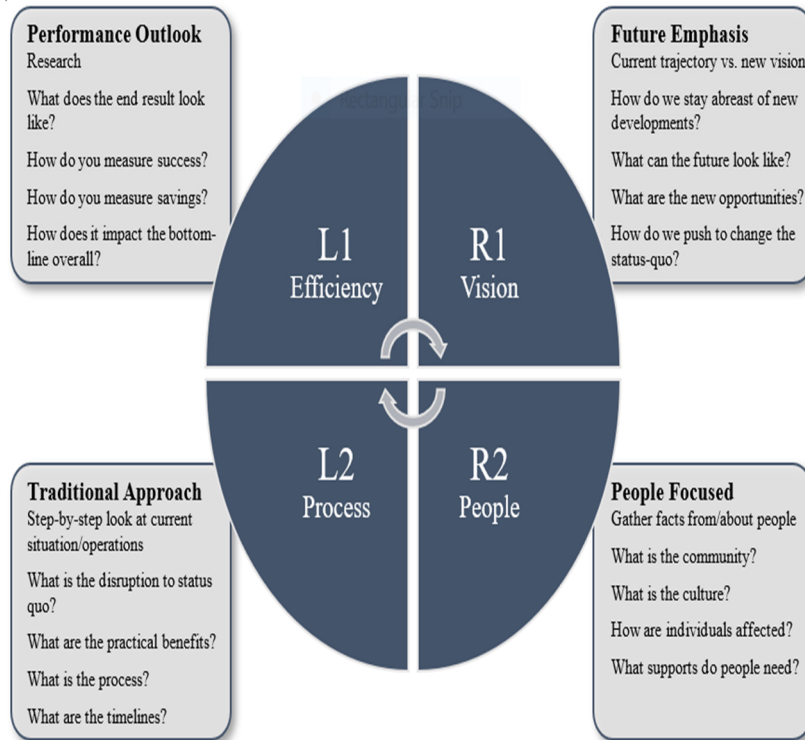
two types of people who primarily utilize L1 thinking are Realists and Analysts.

- L2—L2 thinking is focused on processes and structure. L2 thinkers prefer following a proven methodology. The two types of people who primarily utilize L2 thinking are Preservers and Organizers.

- R1—R1 thinking focuses on new opportunities and seeing the bigger picture. R1 thinkers focus less on day-to-day operations and more on vision and the direction the organization is headed in. The two types of people who primarily utilize R1 thinking are Strategists and Imagineers (dreamers).

- R2—R2 thinking focuses on giving attention and taking action to benefit people and communities. R2 thinkers emphasize building and nurturing relationships. The two types of people who primarily utilize R2 thinking are Socializers and Empathizers.

When using a whole brain conceptualization to optimize leadership effectiveness, we seek to consider the kinds of questions asked by people with thinking ranging across the entirety of the thinking preferences spectrum. In this way, we are able to access multiple frames of reference in a systemic fashion.

Of course, no one exclusively utilizes just one thinking preference all the time. In fact, people often exhibit a combination of two or more preferences. However, the thinking preferences model is an effective tool for allowing us to identify potential blind spots in whatever arena they might occur. People with a low preference for a certain quadrant of thinking often do not go to that thinking for a solution, and decisions are often made from the perspective of the quadrant an individual or team prefers. Unfortunately, this often leads to solutions and opportunities being unexplored.

At its very core, leadership involves an awareness of self and self in relation to others. The depiction below explains how one might operationalize whole brain thinking no matter what your natural preferences are.

Performance Outlook
Research

What does the end result look like?

How do you measure success?

How do you measure savings?

How does it impact the bottom-line overall?

Future Emphasis
Current trajectory vs. new vision

How do we stay abreast of new developments?

What can the future look like?

What are the new opportunities?

How do we push to change the status-quo?

L1 Efficiency
R1 Vision
L2 Process
R2 People

Traditional Approach
Step-by-step look at current situation/operations

What is the disruption to status quo?

What are the practical benefits?

What is the process?

What are the timelines?

People Focused
Gather facts from/about people

What is the community?

What is the culture?

How are individuals affected?

What supports do people need?

(adapted from Neethling, Snyman, & Rutherford, 2021)

Let's look at two global leaders who utilized whole brain thinking, Nelson Mandela and Vladimir Zelensky. Nelson Mandela was known for his generosity and drive to create equality and dignity for all (R2). What differentiated Nelson Mandela from his peers, however, was his considerations of the other quadrants as well. He was driven by a vision (R1) for a new South Africa ("Rivonia Trial," n.d.), but he also showed times of decisiveness (L1) and making decisions without consultation (Garba & Akuva, 2020, p. 58) and stayed the course and showed perseverance (L2) over the 60 years he was in a leadership position.

Vladimir Zelensky has been in the news regularly since the invasion of Ukraine. His speeches offer vital inspiration (R1) for a better tomorrow ("What Makes Zelensky," 2023). What makes Zelensky so effective is that he's not afraid to stand his ground and be realistic about what still needs to be done (L1), and he makes a habit of regularly disseminating information (L2) and engaging with families and individuals on the ground (R2). He clearly embraces, and makes others believe, that his and his country's efforts are an integral part of the global ecosystem. In fact, we would all do well to remem-

ber that we are global citizens, with impact extending beyond geographical and political identities.

Global Citizenry

Oxfam defines global citizenry as having an awareness that a decision being made in one part of the world can have an impact on people in another ("What is Global Citizenship," 2023). This implies that a global citizen engages in good faith and has positive engagements with those possessing other identities and cultures to uphold and maintain everyone's equal worth. Global citizenry requires an active cmmitment to "make our planet more peaceful, sustainable and fairer" ("What is Global Citizenship," 2023). The UN expands on this definition by adding that global citizenry enables individuals to "embrace their social responsibility to act for the benefit of all societies, not just their own" ("Global Citizenship," n.d.).

A recent UNESCO publication makes the following argument about the future and our role within it:

> This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavor and a common good. ("International Commission," 2021)

Some see other peoples as extreme because they have made limiting assumptions about them. Those with a global perspective see themselves as aware, knowledgeable, and connected to others in the world. They figure out how to connect with those that are different so that they themselves become aware of larger opportunities and a part of the change being sought. Creative leaders know that global citizenry is not mutually exclusive with national or personal identity, and if we can get beyond that in our thinking, we can flourish.

Conclusion

In what ways might you show creative leadership in exceptional circumstances? Lead with a whole brain approach, with passion and clear purpose. It is not enough to simply implement creative ideas. Ideas must be placed in human context. To get people to follow your vision, they must internalize it, they must feel it. There must be an end goal that everyone can get excited about and see as something that will make a real difference. Thus, truly impactful creative leaders must possess both compelling vision and exceptional discipline so that they can draw and maintain their followers' support. If leaders prioritize people over things, if they look at creativity holistically from a connected global perspective, it is truly possible to better the human condition. The circumstances we face in today's world can seem exceptionally overwhelming, but dramatic results can be achieved.

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