

The ever evolving leadership journey



By Pratap Nambiar

My two year old granddaughter just learnt how to put on her jacket and shoes, all by herself. She also knows she has to ask for facetime when she wants to talk to me. This is clearly a triumph of development as her mind continues to evolve and grow, transitioning from one growth edge to another.

Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget a pioneer on cognitive development and conservation theory refers to logical thinking ability which, is not present in children during the preoperational stage of their development at ages 2–7, but develops in the concrete operational stage at ages 7–11.^{[1][2]} Conservation refers to the ability to determine that a certain quantity will remain the same despite adjustment of the container, shape, or apparent size.

As we grow into adulthood our thinking ability is constantly evolving and becoming more and more complex as we assimilate more information and insights from the external environment. How we process this and how the structure of our minds develops is also something that Professor Robert Kegan has researched to create different stages of adult development.

A socialised mind is subject to the pressures of external expectations and will not be able to think on its own. The locus of control is purely external and if you ask them who they are, they will usually respond by telling you what their business card says. A more evolved self-authoring mind has an internal locus of control and has a clear destination and ability to make decisions independent of external pressures. A self-transforming mind can reconcile polarities and is able to face dilemmas not based on the either or thinking of the previous stage but with a more evolved “*and and*” process- like managing the short term *and* the long term, achieving higher gross margins *and* market shares.

When we invest in the development of leaders, what we are doing is to help them achieve their growth edge and transition into the next structure of mind. It is the structure of mind that drives performance. The more developed mind makes far better choices, manages time better and has much better quality of interactions. Critically, evolved and enlightened leaders have developed more complex thinking, keeping pace with the ever increasing complexity of doing business.

The former head of civil service Peter Ho in his recent speech refers to Stephen Hawking’s quote of the 21st century being the century of complexity. He distinguishes the difference between complexity and complication. A system may be complicated in that they perform pre-determined functions that are predictable and repeatable, in which input leads to a predictable outcome. In contrast, a complex system will not behave in a repeatable and pre-

determined manner. They have many autonomous parts interconnected which behave in many different ways. You need a whole new mind to be able to deal with complexity.

Navigating the murky waters of today's business world, many leaders find themselves ungrounded, overwhelmed by circumstance. Their minds have not quite evolved to deal with the complexity. The tools from the complicated space do not work in the complex space. Working harder and longer hours does not help. What got you here, the old tried and tested methods will not quite work anymore. The overwhelming variables, the ambiguities, the volatilities, require a whole new way of thinking.

Facing adaptive challenges requires the enlarging of the capacity of the mind to accept uncertainty, experiment and take greater risks, let the solutions emerge without trying to predict the future. To be comfortable with not knowing all the details, not even knowing the possible outcomes, yet moving forward with conviction and leading from inside out requires a much more complex thought process that comes from a different state of being. Like the next generation of computers, leaders too need a new operating system.

I have recently been having many conversations with my 29 year old son and his colleagues who after five years of work and completing their MBA are joining the workforce again.

They were very clear that they wanted to work for a company that pursues a higher purpose in addition to profits. My son has given up on the world of finance and potentially larger bonuses, to work for a medical services company that is one of the world's largest manufacturer of dialysis equipment. He finds that fulfilling. The management consulting firm Bain in their white paper on the firm of the future, has written that CEOs are becoming acutely sensitive to what today's talent is looking for. Enlightened CEOs they say are looking to engage and inspire team members with a vision of making a difference in the world.

Jack Ma, founder and executive chairman of Alibaba Group, in recognition of a changed business environment recently said "Customers are No. 1, employees are No. 2, and shareholders are No. 3." Even Jack Welch, the shareholder primacy era's greatest maestro as CEO of General Electric, has more recently reflected, "Shareholder value is a result, not a strategy.... Your main constituencies are your employees, your customers and your products." A growing number of CEOs see a higher purpose not as a side issue or fluffy topic but rather as a central element of their culture, people and customer strategies.

Leaders have to think differently. Certainty is a cruel mind-set. It hardens our minds against possibility. We need leaders who delight in the unknown. Those who have learnt that the past is not a good guide for the future. Those who are not afraid to fail, and have the conviction to make the leap of faith. Those that understand the words of Goethe: *The dangers of life are infinite. Safety is one amongst them.*

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