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NEW NORMAL, NEW LEADERS? TIME FOR RESILIENCE AND POST-HEROIC LEADERSHIP

Introduction

As a part of his penance, Greek hero Heracles was sent to perform a series of twelve difficult labours (Hesiod, 1914). During his second feat (Britannica, 1911), he faced the multiheaded monster Lernaean Hydra, a guardian of the Underworld, with poisonous breath, deadly scent and a nasty capacity to regenerate. Upon reaching the swamp near Lake Lerna, Heracles covered his mouth and nose with a cloth to protect himself. When finally arriving to the Hydra, Heracles started shooting flaming arrows into her lair to tease her out and the fight began. Despite the fierce combat, the struggle seemed to be hopeless. Each time he chopped one head off, two new would grow instead. The turning point was the moment when Heracles was given a golden sword by Athena and helped by Iolaus, who cauterized the neck stumps after each beheading. The myth of Heracles and the Hydra (Ruck, 2016) is an indicative allegory of our dealings with the COVID-19 situation.

COVID-19 is a crisis in a multidimensional space that has thus far largely been treated with unidimensional measures. Its medical aspects are immediate and so seem to be the economic costs. This is exactly where the emphasis has been so far. It is less evident and therefore largely underspecified what the pandemic brought in terms of psychological, technological, sociological, and environmental considerations. Many of us wonder what the interdependencies, loops, and complexities among those dimensions are, both in short and long terms, and what the organizational and leadership implications of COVID-19 are. Organizational literature (Crowley and Head, 2017; Rittel and Webber, 1973) refers to those multidimensional issues as “wicked problems”, a class of



ill-formulated social-system problems characterized by ambiguous information, multiple clients and decision makers with conflicting preferences, and thoroughly confusing ramifications for and within the whole system.

COVID-19 took a VUCA (volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous) world (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) from a buzzword to the next level. Oftentimes called “the new normality” (Harari, 2020; Žižek, 2020), it is characterized by a variety of complex problems that are by definition (Wood, 1986) those whose outcome of actions is unpredictable and interdependence in solving them is required. This chapter has three goals. First, to analyse the new normal and treat COVID-19 within a multidimensional problem space. Second, to analyse the new reality for organizations, largely from the resilience point of view, with the main research question being how to build up resilience of individuals, teams, and organizations to face the new normal. Third, I will particularly argue that mainstream leadership needs to change from ego-centred, heroic leader figures to post-heroic leadership process of co-creation and involvement.

1 New normal: A multidimensional problem space

Dealing with COVID-19 means dealing with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, paradoxes, and other demands on organizations and their decision makers. It is a daunting task. In a humble attempt to identify and highlight several relevant aspects of COVID-19, I turn to a sample of experts from the fields of epidemiology, economics, business studies, sociology of pandemics, psychology, technology and organization, and environmental studies to get a glimpse over the most relevant dimensions of the problem at hand.

Medical aspects. Despite its media prevalence, at the time of writing, the virus has been with us for slightly more than half a year. This means a great deal of uncertainty even for the experts in the year(s) to come. One thing is certain though. The virus and epidemiological discipline has already had a profound impact on our lives and work. Many of us have adopted a significant part of the epidemiological vocabulary, including the terms “*flattening the curve*”, “*second wave*”, “*cycles of suppression and relaxation*”, “*asymptomatic patients*” and more. As modelling predictions by Imperial College London and Harvard College scholars (Enserink and Kupferschmidt, 2020; Kissler et al., 2020) show, the period of uncertainty will continue to have a profound effect on our work and lives until the time safe vaccines are discovered, tested, produced, distributed and taken up to a significant portion of the population.

Economic and business aspects. Another certainty in the times when all the pieces are moving is that it is and will be an expensive one. It would be even costlier not to intervene. Even most neoliberal governments and supranational institutions around the world are intervening to act counter-cyclic and are often introducing ad-hoc industrial policies. At the same time, businesses across industries are experiencing the situation in notably different ways. Some organizations and even industries like tourism, hospitality, and the aviation industry have been hit hard. Other industries and organizations are thriving by rapidly introducing new business models and innovations that have addressed opportunities provided by the crisis. Cards are being reshuffled.

Can we learn from the previous economic crisis? Boston Consulting Group (Fæste et al., 2020) studied the winners of the 2008 crisis in Europe. Being aware that parallels are only partial, there are some interesting patterns to consider. The year 2008 was brutal for most businesses; however, in the subsequent twelve years some companies managed to dramatically bounce off from their competitors. The top 25 companies in Europe would demonstrate five times higher EBITDA compared to the benchmark S&P Global 1200 (S&P Capital IQ; BCG analysis). In terms of responding to the macroeconomics conditions, they knew how to react by being somehow more conservative during the depth of crisis and much more active once the immediate storm was over. Faeste et al. (2020) suggest five lessons. First, leading companies show above-average proactivity and a “fix-before-it-is-broken” mindset. Second, they focus on improving vitality by heavily investing in their innovation capabilities, testing new ideas, and are prepared to reinvent their strategies to respond to the newly-emerged market opportunities. Third, a clear vision and a strategic focus are another trait that means persisting with a smaller number of longer-term projects to concentrate resources where they add value. Fourth, they are constantly optimizing organization by process redesign and digitalization. Fifth, the best European companies are being aware of the importance of building organizational resilience to be able to face current and future shocks. Some of the approaches they are using are stocking up on financial reserves, scenario planning in strategizing, and developing a wider set of talents and knowledge than laggards. Despite the different nature of the crisis this time around, the lessons still apply.

Sociological aspects. Emerging diseases are sources of societal instability, uncertainty, and even crises. About a decade ago, a group of sociologists (Dingwall et al., 2013) gathered their forces to study most of the pandemics over the last half a century (among them West Nile virus cases, the 1918-19 Spanish flu, H1N1 and H1N5 influenza, and SARS). In order to understand pandemics,

we also need to understand societal processes. When facing the pandemics in the period from the Black Death (14th century) to HIV (1980s), societies are demonstrating a predictable pattern. Immediate reaction is an emotional swirl (fear, panic, stigma, moralizing, and call to action) (Strong, 1990). By activating social agents and institutions, we can manage these emotional responses (Dingwall et al., 2013). Complex societal systems require cooperation among various professions and organizations (Jerolmack, 2013). Organizational networks that have important elements of decentralization, as well as coordination and trust, are better apt of timely response (Steyer and Gilbert, 2013). In times of pandemics, science is gaining respect (Mansnerus, 2013). Moreover, the media may shorten the period of panic (Staniland and Smith, 2013). With the resources available, business organizations are important actors in the modern world, and their leaders should act as responsible change agents.

Technological and organizational aspects. Some trends that started beforehand have gained considerable acceleration during the times of the COVID-19 crisis. Digital transformation (e.g. Galunic, 2018) has been put on steroids. More work is done from home (Bick et al., 2020) and we can justifiably expect many more hybrid ways of working in the future. While new business models emerge from necessity and opportunity, organizational cultures are changing faster than before. Users are impatiently expecting smooth and seamless experience when interacting with organizations. Communication should be ubiquitous, available always, everywhere and immediately. In response, organizations will have to become much more agile, collaborative, and innovative in terms of their cultures, processes, and structures.

Environmental and sustainability aspects. When trying to understand complexities of the COVID-19 situation, should we by no means forget any of the 17 goals of the United Nations' sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). The problems of universal health, clean energy and water, preventive actions against climate change, reducing inequality, and decent work are still with us. At the level of business organizations, these goals are also reflected in the goals of social and environmental responsibility. As an example, NASA (2020) satellite photos showed cleaner air and significantly lower CO₂ emissions during lockdowns and an immediate bounce back when the lockdowns were over. Furthermore, it might be dangerous if the environmental agenda will lose its ground due to different prioritization. Therefore, the EU plans for a green bounce back in making, and framework for those investments are eagerly anticipated. The crucial component will be, as ever, how the policy and intervention will actually be implemented. The contradiction between short-term political

wins of infrastructural projects and long-term gains of green technologies and projects will determine the environmental consequences of the new normality.

Psychological aspects. Changing of our living and working habits post COVID-19 will be equally important. The longer the crisis lasts, the more likely it is that the changed routines will remain rooted in our daily behaviours. Professor, doctor and psychiatrist Gianpiero Petriglieri from the INSEAD Business School coined the word *zombies* (Kale, 2020). Petriglieri sees us as half-living, half-dead creatures, spending endless hours in front of our own screens, trying to communicate and do business with the world through our zoom profiles and other similar virtual communication tools. The first response to the new situation was - as expected - excessive activation, or in other words, panic work (Petriglieri, 2020), which is nothing but a manic-defensive response. In the initial stages of the epidemic, well-known Slovenian companies also reported opening the scissors between high levels of job satisfaction and low levels of life satisfaction in general. Which is by no means a sustainable situation, as such discrepancies are also associated with poorer mental health (especially anxiety, stress, and burnout), resulting from social distancing and significantly reduced socialization (e.g. Galea et al., 2020; Venkatesh and Edirappuli, 2020). Already Aristotle knew that we humans are social animals, and neuroscientist Mathew Lieberman (2013) showed that the density of our brain connections correlates with the density and quality of our social connections with fellow humans around us. We are wired to connect and researchers are calling for measure to replace social distancing with spatial distancing only when absolutely necessary (Abel and McQueen, 2020).

Somewhat in the shadow of daily media reports on the health status of the population and regular speculation about economic intervention measures, interest in the psychological or human dimension of the problem has also grown. Zacher and Rudolph (2020), for example, monitored nearly a thousand German individuals and their subjective perception of well-being through the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the period between December 2019 and May 2020. While there were no changes between December 2019 and March 2020, the differences between March and May 2020 are obvious. On average, life satisfaction deteriorated, with positive emotion levels lower and negative emotion levels higher among the German survey participants. The pandemic continues, as does the research. It is already clear that the German study is mostly about the effects of reduced socialization and increased uncertainty. Therefore, it is interesting that a neuroscientific research showed that highly anxious people have more intense neurological reactions to uncertainty than to

negative feedback (Hirsh and Inzlicht, 2008). When we are anxious, we need more certainty, even if it is bad news.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 situation is not a sprint but an increasingly obvious marathon, or at least a half marathon if any of the vaccines prove appropriate in an exceptionally short time. Domestic (Ihan, 2020) and foreign (e.g., World Health Organization) epidemiologists are warning us that the period of uncertainty will continue for quite some time and so will the multiple layers of uncertainty. Figure 1 is summarizing the main elements of this multidimensional complex system that organizations and their leaders should consider when making decisions about possible future scenarios and strategies for their organizations.

Figure 1. A multidimensional problem space of COVID-19 for organizational decision makers



Source: Own work.

2 New organizations: Resilient individuals, teams, and organizations

The new normal has a toll to pay. It has reduced subjective well-being due to diminished opportunities for socializing, increased uncertainty, as well as objective stressors, including jobs and contracts lost. How is it that individuals, teams and organizations can prepare for the period ahead? There are promising scientific findings in the field of resilience, which Southwick and colleagues (2014) define as “... *healthy functioning after a very unpleasant event; a conscious effort to move forward in a smart and positive way as a result of lessons learned through difficult times; the ability of the system to successfully adapt to disturbances that threaten its survival, functioning, and development*”.

First, resilient organizations and teams are formed by resilient individuals. Facebook Vice President Sheryl Sandberg and Wharton Professor Adam Grant (2017) wrote a touching personal story in the book *Option B*, which is about Sheryl being left alone with her two young children after her husband’s tragic death. With Adam’s help, she wrote a diary, a rather classic psychotherapeutic method that helped her find sources of resilience within herself, as well as in the support provided to her by her family and friends. The book not only describes the process of finding the resilience of the person concerned, but also presents the findings of research that help us understand and strengthen the resilience of individuals, teams, and organizations.

Sluss and Powley (2020) argue that leaders in organizations can strengthen team resilience in two main ways. The first one is to focus on people. You need to know the resilience factors of your own team. These are, above all, a high level of self-confidence, disciplined work routines, and social and family support. Resilience can be strengthened with a relatively simple measure such as time blocking. The director of AMZS, the largest provider of roadside assistance in Slovenia, and the winner of the Young Manager Award 2019, Lucija Sajevec, confided during the School of Economics and Business webinar series SEB LU Contributes that they have also used the time blocking technique (Aleksić et al., 2020). Shortly after the epidemic was declared, they established a morning hours routine as a time for meetings, blocking lunch time, and then an afternoon hours routine as a time to follow up on appointments and implement the agreed actions. All of this provides at least some degree of predictability in times when everything else is unknown.

In addition to a sincere concern for high-quality relationships and understanding, special care is needed for the profile of people who are by nature very helpful and conscientious. This is a combination of personality traits that is typically a characteristic of successful people and is beneficial to the organizations in which they operate. Paradoxically, in challenging times of over-activation, this same combination of helpfulness and diligence poses a significantly increased risk of burnout. To avoid panic work and to increase predictability, Sluss (2020) for people with such a profile suggests focusing on long-term, strategic initiatives..

The second way to strengthen team resilience is to change perspective. Meta-analytical research (Vanhove et al., 2016) shows that quality and personalized coaching is invaluable in strengthening resilience. U.S. marines who have been subjected to numerous psycho-physical trials have shown 20 percent greater resilience and endurance using the coaching method. Fear and anxiety dampen the ability to look to the future and find much needed creative solutions. On the other hand, asking the right kind of questions helps. Interestingly, these are not the ones that show us the world through rose-coloured glasses, as superficial believers in positive psychology might imagine. Interviews among World War II camp survivors, for example, showed that the greatest optimists died first. The reason was the broken heart syndrome. Survivors were those who knew how to face reality immediately (Coutu, 2002), and then realized that they were not alone and that they could rely on and cooperate with others in overcoming the accumulated problems. The last set of measures to strengthen team resilience is learning. Leaders of resistant teams find opportunities to learn because of the crisis, not in spite of it. Identifying the hidden champions and special talents that show up in changed circumstances, is the key. All of these measures help build resilient individuals, teams, and organizations, who do not only face but also shape the new normal.

Let us have a look at an example from the culinary world. While it is not unusual for top chefs to possess the uncertainty mindset (Tan, 2020), the world's best female chef Ana Roš and her two Michelin star restaurant Hiša Franko showed some remarkable resilience during the lockdown (Sajovic, 2020). In March 2020, her international team just gathered after the winter break to face COVID-19 with devastating consequences for the whole hospitality industry. Instead of sending people off, most of the team decided to stay in the “green jail”, as Ana Roš liked to put it. Not being used to sitting idle, Ana engaged her team in ideation workshops that resulted in a series of products and even business model innovations. Wild grass kombucha, fermented flowers of wild

magnolia, garum from local lamb, and forest-taste popcorn all led to developing an offering of high-end mountain “fast food” that is being packaged and sent across Europe to foodies unable to travel in person. To deal with the excess of wine (Hiša Franko works with natural wine producers from across Slovenia), the sommelier team also set up an online wine shop. Partnering with the local dairy farm Planika, which was left with a surplus of fresh milk, Hiša Franko developed an offering of mountain ice-creams with forest and mountain flavours, such as bee pollen or sour milk with candied pine cones. True enough, these are not activities to replace but rather complement the core business and predominantly serve as a tool to build a resilient organization.

3 New leadership: It is not about the leader

When societies and organizations tackle wicked problems, there is no room for the ego. Instead, we need leaders who know how to actively involve, engage, and connect all relevant stakeholders with knowledge and resources. We need responsible people who know how to put the task and the team of experts in the foreground and stay in the background themselves. The mistakes of “macho” leadership are unfortunately counted in human lives today. In fact, Sergent and Stajkovic (2020) empirically demonstrate that U.S. states led by female governors have significantly less fatalities due to COVID-19 compared to male-led states. The ideas of post-heroic, healthier, humble, inclusive, and less ego-centred leadership (e.g., Dutton, 1996; Kelan and Wratil, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2020; Schweiger et al., 2020) are by no means just an academic debate anymore.

Images of heroic, macho characters of leaders who have answers to all the problems of this world, domestic and foreign, are still predominant and lists of 100 exceptional individuals are not rare (Allison and Goethals, 2013). Heroes with superpowers promise heaven and earth. Each time we are disappointed to find that their promises have not borne fruit. In fact, we should not even be surprised that is the case. The challenges of the modern world, including COVID-19 and SDGs, are anything but simple. Authoritarian and populist leadership styles offer simple solutions, but in practice they turn out to be anything but that. The uncertainty we face in today’s societies and organizations requires smarter approaches to leadership. It also requires a change in the expectations that co-workers have of their leaders or voters have of their elected representatives.

An interesting question is why do we still insist on such outdated and counter-productive leadership models. Especially given that we have enough practical experience as well as empirical insights that archaic, authoritarian types of leadership do not lead to viable nor healthy solutions (Bodla et al., 2019; Gu et al., 2018; Kiazad et al., 2010; Li and Sun, 2015); moreover, they usually add to mounting new problems. A large part of the answer to this paradoxical question can be found in a recent publication (Ronay et al., 2019) by a group of Dutch and German researchers. In a series of five different and extensive studies, the authors are again and again finding that leaders' excessive self-confidence outweighs their competence. When we are choosing leaders, we tend to make the same mistake over and over again — we choose the most convincing over the most competent. To exacerbate the problem of overconfidence, it turns that it is socially transmitted and even contagious (Cheng et al., 2020).

The challenge is all the greater as leaders' persuasiveness is oftentimes in contrast with their actual competence. The so-called Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger and Dunning, 1999), which received the Ig Nobel Prize for Alternative Scientific Achievements, teaches us that people with very low levels of ability show the highest level of excessive self-confidence. The most ignorant leaders are therefore also the most convinced of their abilities, so they are also the most convincing in the eyes of those who judge whether we can entrust them with such an honourable and responsible task as leadership. The vicious cycle of ignorance and poor leadership is thus completed.

Another question that logically arises from this paradox is how to choose better leaders, or in other words, how to overcome the pattern of omnipotent leaders who systematically overestimate their low abilities but convincingly offer their simple (and wrong) solutions. Behavioural science offers quite a few interesting insights in this area. In the theory and empirical research in the field of organizational behaviour, a new type of leadership, called post-heroic leadership, is making its way. It is in fact a family of leadership styles that range from shared (Pearce and Conger, 2002) to servant (Barbuto Jr and Wheeler, 2006) leadership. What these newer-genre leadership styles (Hannah et al., 2014) have in common is that they are aware that there are not enough heroes, and that even the most enlightened individuals do not have all the answers to the complex challenges of the modern world. They are also aware of the fact that the best type of leadership is actually the one that puts the community, organization, and team at the forefront. The post-heroic leaders sincerely wonder how they can contribute, what the point of what they are doing is, and how the world will be at least a little better because of their activity. So, modern,

post-heroic types of leadership are not about the egos of leaders, but about their co-workers. Post-heroic leaders actively care about realizing the full potential of their co-workers and all other stakeholders.

All of us who are meeting young and less young leaders, agents of change and aspiring entrepreneurs on a daily basis, know that, fortunately, the reality is more encouraging than the picture on television screens. Post-heroic leaders are also found in the practice of Slovenian organizations, and in fact there are not so few of them. They just don't like to be exposed. They are therefore so much better recognized and appreciated by the people around them. Still, I would like to demonstrate post-heroic leadership reflections with a couple of examples from podcast Leadership with an ear that I run on national radio Val202 together with journalist Anja Hlača Ferjančič. For instance, humility and reflection shown by Damjan Osredkar, MD and head of the clinical department of child, adolescent, and developmental neurology at paediatric clinic talking about his transition from top expert to new leader: *"In the beginning, the change was really big. I really loved doing my job and then all of a sudden I found myself in a situation where I was completely barefoot. The first thing I felt was that I became completely lonely."* (Hlača Ferjančič et al., 2019). He also talks about the importance of leaders setting up psychological safety and so does Domen Rozman, leader of the world-renowned acrobatic team the Dunking Devils, when he explains their team dynamics and the concept of teasing with love: *"To expose one's weakness means expecting that weakness, working on it, and knowing that the team will cover your back. This all builds a deep level of trust. Precisely trust and sincerity is something that ties the deep connections. ... It is important to tease each other and make jokes in the context of achieving a higher goal and sincere relationships. Without teasing with love, our relationships would remain superficial."* (Hlača Ferjančič et al., 2019). Post-heroic leaders are also driven by the higher purpose and they create cultures of cooperation. As Mic Melanšek, a co-founder of booming scale-up Hooray Studios behind the customized children books *Little heroes*, stipulates: *"We wanted to create something, wherever we would arrive, whomever we would have contact with, that we could always present as something good"* (Hlača Ferjančič et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has and will continue to have health, economic, psychological, sociological, technological, environmental, and other consequences. At the same time, fortunately, it also offers a sea of new opportunities for the most resilient, agile and innovative organizations. In order to face the wicked problems and seize the opportunities, decision makers should be aware of the possibilities of building up resilience and modern approaches toward leadership. The times are decisive, and the actions taken during these turbulences will remain rooted in organizational systems and cultures long when the storms are over. It is time for action and change agency towards a smarter, more humane, and more sustainable life and work. It is also time to build helpful and collaborative cultures. A careful reader of the introductory allegory might notice that even hero like Heracles had help in defeating the Hydra of Lerna.

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