

Integrated Leadership: The Leader as Astronaut, Artist, Alchemist and Athlete

By Wayne Visser

In times of crisis, new leaders emerge. And make no mistake, we are in such a time of crisis right now – a time of danger and opportunity, as the Chinese pictogram for 'crisis' would characterise it. We face a perfect storm of economic crises, humanitarian crises and ecological crises. The best leaders will be those who can help us survive and thrive through the storm – to navigate around the dangers and towards the opportunities.

But what kind of leaders are these, and do we see any good examples? To answer this question, we need to look beyond the narrow-minded, bigoted, egotistical leaders that have been stealing the headlines of late. Given the nexus of our global challenges, we need a special type of response, which I call integrated leadership. These comes from leaders who can integrate at four levels: personal, organisational, societal and planetary.

Planetary Integration: The Leader as Astronaut

As we enter what geologists are calling the Anthropocene – an epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the environment, we need leaders who can integrate an understanding of planetary dynamics. This consciousness began to emerge in the 1960s, with luminaries like Buckminster Fuller¹, Barbara Ward² and Kenneth Boulding³ writing about 'spaceship earth'.

Boulding describes this as recognition of the earth as a closed system "without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution, and in which, therefore, man must find his place in a cyclical ecological system".⁴ Following the Apollo missions and its stunning photographs of our blue-green orb from space, in the 1970s former NASA scientist, James Lovelock, proposed his Gaia Theory (named after the Greek goddess of the earth), which describes how our planet acts like a self-regulating organism.⁵

Fifty years since 'spaceship earth' entered our consciousness, our knowledge of the planetary biosphere has become much more detailed and sophisticated – and yet our actions still lag behind our intelligence: since 1970 we have destroyed 58% of the earth's populations of vertebrate life in what is rightly called the sixth mass extinction in the earth's history⁶; and we have degraded 60% of 24 assessed planetary ecosystem services.⁷

In response to these challenges, we need leaders who are like astronauts, in that they can see the earth as an interconnected whole and take action to prevent what planetary systems modellers call 'overshoot and collapse'.⁸ A key attribute of these leaders is the ability to think in systems, which

¹ Fuller, B. (1968). *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*.

² Ward, B. (1966) *Spaceship Earth*.

³ Boulding, K.E. (1966). *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*.

⁴ Boulding, K.E. (1966). *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*.

⁵ Lovelock, J. (1975). *Gaia, A New Look At Life On Earth*.

⁶ WWF. (2016). *Living Planet Report 2016*.

⁷ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. (2005). *Synthesis report*.

⁸ Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L. & Randers, J. (1972). *The Limits to Growth*. A report to the Club of Rome.

MIT business professor Peter Senge describes as an understanding of “the reality that we live in webs of interdependence”.⁹

One of the first business leaders to embody planetary integration was the late Ryuzaburo Kaku, former Japanese chairman of Canon. He explained that, in the highest stage of evolution of a corporation, “a global consciousness emerges and the corporation sees itself contributing to the whole of mankind”. This became the essence of Canon’s corporate philosophy of *kyosei*, which they define as “living and working together for the common good”.¹⁰

Another business leader who represents this planetary consciousness is Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever. Speaking to *The Guardian* about their ambitious Sustainable Living Plan, he says: “The world is in a more challenging situation than many people realise ... [and] one of the key issues right now [is] the lack of global governance in a world that has become far more interdependent. ... We are often trapped in short-termism.” This is why Polman stopped quarterly reporting, saying “we have deliberately sought longer-term shareholders.”¹¹

Societal Integration: The Leader as Artist

In much the same way as we face interconnected environmental challenges, our global society is battling with the problems of residual poverty, growing inequality, ideological extremism and mass forced migration. It is true that under the UN Millennium Development Goals, the world made major strides in the right direction, such as cutting extreme poverty and infant mortality in half since 1990, but major challenges still remain.¹²

For example, according to the UN, 2.4 billion people are still without improved sanitation and nearly 800 million still suffer from hunger.¹³ And accordingly to the Global Wealth Report, 8% of the world’s population own 85% of global wealth, with 71% holding only 3% of global wealth.¹⁴ Inequalities are also still seen in the lack of diversity among those in positions of power. For example, only 26% of seats in the world’s parliaments are held by women¹⁵ and women only represent 16% of executive teams in the US¹⁶.

Leaders who recognise these social challenges and the importance of diversity are like artists, in that they have heightened perception of the world around them. They are like the painter that pays attention to the varied palette of nature, or the jazz musician who improvises to stay in harmony with the overall ensemble. Hence, societal integration requires leaders who can tune into the *zeitgeist* and cultural patterns of their time and place.

Niloufar Molavi, a global leader at PricewaterhouseCoopers, says: “It’s difficult to be a true leader in today’s world without a minimum level of cultural dexterity,” by which she means “the ability to connect across myriad areas, backgrounds, and focuses that are different”¹⁷. In fact, recent research shows that inclusive companies are 1.8 times more likely to be ‘change-ready’ and 1.7 times more

⁹ Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

¹⁰ Visser, W. (2012). *The Quest for Sustainable Business: An Epic Journey in Search of Corporate Responsibility*.

¹¹ Ruddick, G. (2016). Unilever CEO Paul Polman – the optimistic pessimist. *The Guardian*, 25 January.

¹² United Nations. (2015). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*.

¹³ United Nations. (2015). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*.

¹⁴ Credit Suisse Research Institute. (2015). *Global Wealth Report 2015*.

¹⁵ United Nations. (2015). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*.

¹⁶ Hunt, V., Layton, D. & Prince, S. (2015). *Why diversity matters*. Report by McKinsey & Company.

¹⁷ Hunt, V., Layton, D. & Prince, S. (2015). *Why diversity matters*. Report by McKinsey & Company.

likely to be innovation leaders in their market¹⁸, while gender-diverse companies are 15% more likely to outperform their peers and ethnically-diverse companies are 35% more likely to do the same.¹⁹

A leader who understood and powerfully demonstrated societal integration was the late Wangari Maathai, who started the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya to simultaneously tackle poverty, women's empowerment and environmental degradation. Accepting the Nobel Prize in 2004 on behalf of the grassroots movement that has planted 51 million trees to date, she said: "I'm especially mindful of women and the girl child. I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership."

Organisational Integration: The Leader as Alchemist

In our celebrity culture, we are obsessed with leaders who are charismatic and larger than life, the so-called visionaries. And yet a visionary without execution is simply a dreamer. By contrast, the most effective leaders, according to Jim Collins, business author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, are able to combine "humility, will, ferocious resolve, and the tendency to give credit to others while assigning blame to themselves".²⁰

According to one model taught at Cambridge University, leaders who master organisational integration are able to strike a balance between top-down commitment and bottom-up passion; and between compliance processes and creative innovation. They provide a purpose to believe in, but back this up with reinforcement systems, capacity building and consistent role-model behaviour.²¹

Integrated leaders, who are able to transform their bold vision for the future into practical solutions, be they policies and programs or products and services, are like the ancient alchemists who sought to change base metals into gold. They recognise that they are creators of higher value, but that transformation requires constant experimentation, failure and adjustment.

One of the exemplars of the ability to turn ambitious dreams into reality is Elon Musk, co-founder of Paypal and CEO of Tesla and SpaceX – a transformer of the finance, automotive, energy and space sectors. Besides delivering high performance electric cars with autonomous capacity, in pursuit of Tesla's mission to "accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy", he recently led the take-over of Solar City and announced integrated domestic and industrial battery packs and solar roof-tiles.

We see other powerful examples of organisational integration in the social entrepreneurship space. For example, the Sabah Women Entrepreneur and Professionals Association (SWEPA) in Borneo, Malaysia have, through their Barefoot Solar project, shown how it is possible to train illiterate rural grandmothers to become solar engineers who install and maintain solar lights in their remote villages. In this case, they have managed to build and integrate six forms of capital: financial, manufacturing, human, social, intellectual and natural capital – a rare feat indeed.

Personal Integration: The Leader as Athlete

Besides planetary, societal and organisational integration, leaders also need to demonstrate personal integration. In order to lead wisely and effectively, they have to be high functioning, yet balanced individuals. Like the ancient Chinese tai-chi symbol of the interacting opposites *yin* and

¹⁸ Bersin, J. (2015). Why diversity and inclusion will be a top priority for 2016. *Fobes*, 6 December.

¹⁹ Hunt, V., Layton, D. & Prince, S. (2015). Why diversity matters. Report by McKinsey & Company.

²⁰ Collins, J. (2005). Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August.

²¹ Ainger, C. (2006). Organisational change matrix. University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership.

yang, integrated leaders are able to find a dynamic harmony between the opposing forces of doing and being, speaking and listening, thinking and feeling, asserting and yielding, analysing and caring.

This process of personal integration is what American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, called self-actualisation, what Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung called individuation and what South African philosopher-statesman, Jan Smuts, called holism, which he described as the natural tendency in evolution to create ever more integrated wholes.

A good metaphor for personal integration is the athlete, since not only do elite athletes develop their physical prowess to a remarkable degree, they are also able to supplement this with mental agility and a sense of greater purpose. The integrated leader must similarly achieve peak performance through cultivating what Maslow called 'being cognition' and 'being values' such as wholeness, justice, beauty and playfulness.

A business leader who typified personal integration is the late Anita Roddick, founder of the global cosmetics company, The Body Shop. She believed that "You have to look at leadership through the eyes of the followers and you have to live the message. What I have learned is that people become motivated when you guide them to the source of their own power and when you make heroes out of employees who personify what you want to see in the organisation."²²

Another integrated leader who is still very much alive and active is Myanmar political leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. After spending over 15 years under house arrest by the incumbent military dictatorship, she led her National League for Democracy to victory in 2015. In a documentary about her life, she describes the four basic ingredients of success, inspired by her Buddhist beliefs, as follows: you must have the will to succeed, the right kind of attitude, perseverance and wisdom.²³

Synergy: The Magic Ingredient

Integration at each of these four levels – planetary, societal, organisational and personal – creates synergy, which the American professor Russell Ackoff described in his studies of purposeful organisations as "the increase in the value of the parts of a system that derives from their being parts of the system".²⁴ This is more commonly known by the catchphrase: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Picking up on this theme in the 1980s, author Peter Russell, in his book and documentary *The Global Brain*, foresaw a future in which the evolution of human consciousness will have shifted from the Information Age into what he called the Consciousness Age. The implications of this transformation are that we will be able to create a 'high synergy society'. And that is, by definition, the goal of the integrated leader.

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²² Walter, E. (2013). 50 Heavyweight Leadership Quotes. *Forbes*, 30 September.

²³ Aung San Suu Kyi - Lady of No Fear, A film by Anne Gyrthe Bonne, 2010

²⁴ Ackoff, R.L. (1994). *The Democratic Corporation*.