

The Consciousness of Leadership in the 2020s

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Let's face it, despite decades of economic growth, technological advancements, new political and legal frameworks and trade agreements, etc. around the world, recent generations of leaders have created a world, a planet, a global society etc that is in a bit of a mess.

Now, no one sets out consciously to create societies where the very factors that make them livable, even enjoyable, are in a state of decline or crisis. No one planned to melt the icecaps, to increase the occurrences of flood, fire or drought, to kill bees, to need masks to walk around major cities or to have family units and communities disintegrate. In addition, no one deliberately intended to leave the economic and technological "have-nots" even further behind, indigenous languages and cultures threatened with extinction, millions of people unemployed (or even unemployable), electorates feeling disenfranchised, or whales starving or suffocating to death as their stomachs and lungs become clogged with plastic waste. Nevertheless, this is what has happened. It is easy to either feel powerless or to cast blame far and wide, but the fact is our past and current leaders have created the current world state due to their limited level of consciousness.

Consciousness can be defined as "the state of being aware of one's internal and external worlds". When applied to political or business leaders, this definition can also include the degree to which this awareness is integrated into a leader's reflections, decision-making and actions in their official roles.

Unfortunately, even today, the consciousness of many leaders begins and ends with using the left-hand side of their brains to provide for their own families, tribes, companies, shareholders or communities. Their consciousness ends there. They do not see things outside of this limited "bubble" as their concern or responsibility.

Perhaps many of them discuss diverse, global social or environmental issues freely at home, with friends etc. but often, due to self-filtering and the pressure of the organizational cultures where they earn their living, they check their humanity at the door as they enter the office/work environment. They become almost "unconscious" from nine-to-five.

This article proposes that to change the direction in which the world is heading, leaders in the 2020s will need to radically improve their awareness in three distinct domains of consciousness. These domains are a) being fully present in our Self, our Physical Bodies, b) Being more aware of our Social Bodies, the social fields in which we operate and live, and c) an increased awareness of the interconnected, global system of the entire body of the planet. To be part of the solution to the world's problems, leaders will have to radically broaden and deepen their consciousness from the narrow and shallow levels witnessed in the past in all these three areas.

The following paragraphs take a closer look at these three realms of consciousness.

1) The Physical Body: Being Fully Present

A high-level of consciousness of our Self means that we are acutely conscious of what we, as human beings, are experiencing at any given moment, be it thoughts, emotions or physical sensations. It also implies that we can detect, process and act on this data in “real-time”.

As leaders, we need to be not just aware of what our brains or intellect are telling us, we also need to be in contact with and sensing what our heart, guts or even our entire body is telling us. After decades of being told to leave our “emotions” at the office door, it is now recognized that other internal cues and signals can be equally informative in decision making – if we are even aware and listening to what information might be there. After all, the answers to the big decisions as to whether a country should go to war, a company should enter a new market or sell a business, or whether Anna should marry John or David, are not in a spreadsheet. Data analysis might be useful or required, but ultimately, we have to take the decision based upon the maximum amount of information available -and it is often our bodies or guts, not our heads, that can tell us what to do - if we are open to hearing what they have to say.

But, how can we be fully-present – mindful even – of what our emotions, gut and bodily sensations are telling us? Just being aware of all this internal data on its own is not easy. For a leader to accept that unexplainable feelings, emotions, visions, intuition, gut or bodily sensations are valid, legitimate sources of insight and wisdom represents a significant challenge to many people leading teams and organizations today. It takes real courage to listen and act on this form of intelligence in the organizational cultures prevalent in many companies today.

2) The Social Body: Awareness of Others

When we are called upon to play a leadership role, it implies that there are some “followers” or others involved too. Indeed, it is now extremely rare that major organizational or political decisions are taken by one person alone. Major decisions are now made in multi-stakeholder decision-making processes where individuals with diametrically-opposing points of view might need to be fully implicated and participating in the process. These are more complex, nuanced decision-making processes and explain why most of us spend between 50-80% of our time at work in meetings, i.e. with other people, trying to move some issue or another forward. And, while it remains crucially important to be aware of our own internal state at any given moment, it is also vital that we have a sense of what is happening, stirring, being blocked or facilitated, energetically in that meeting space created between us.

The term Social Body or Social Field is defined as being “the dynamic energy of life space that interacts with human consciousness” or as the constant “invisible conversation” going on, with everything and everyone. It is what happens (or can or cannot happen) between a group of people in a given space. To illustrate: Just imagine, when you and a friend, walk into a church or mosque. What happens? When you accidentally meet a work colleague in a social situation, in a bar or restaurant, what changes? Or imagine you and your wife or husband are in the kitchen having a serious conversation about financial issues (or COVID-19) and your 6 years-old daughter enters. What changes? We can all probably agree that something does. The range of possibilities of what might happen, given the change in the Social Field, can either contract or expand.

The awareness and management of this Social Field in meetings, teleconferences and phone calls, during the entire decision-making process, has become a major attribute required by a leader. Unfortunately, today, many leaders are wary of openly discussing such phenomena or are not even conscious of this field nor that the responsibility for its management will be a major determinant of the success of a leader.

The form and texture of this “Social Body” ultimately dictates what is possible in any given meeting or exchange – whether we are aware of it or not. Hence, we can shape, or be shaped by it, consciously or unconsciously. It depends on our level of consciousness in this realm.

3) The Global Body: Our World View

The third realm of consciousness, is the level of awareness of what is happening in the larger interconnected system of the planet or eco-sphere. When taking organizational decisions, what is the level of consciousness of any leader? What are they aware of in their macro-environment and what do they consider pertinent factors in their decision-making?

Corporate Leadership

It is clear, that even in 2020, there are still corporate leaders and some management academics who will argue that the role of business is solely to “make money for shareholders”, and that it starts and ends with that. This very limited world-view is showed in Diagram 1.

In this paradigm, which I will describe as “Pre-2000 World View”, corporate leadership was straightforward. There were really only two key stakeholders: customers and shareholders. Providing that customers were happy and purchasing our products and services – and shareholders were happy with their financial return - a corporate leader was perceived to be doing a great job. At this level of consciousness, concern over corporate social responsibility, the fate of whales or polar bears, the “haves and have nots” of our society, the local town’s drinking water, the loss of languages and traditional cultures, etc. was someone else’s job – unless it impacted on our ability to provide a good return-on-investment to shareholders.

A more expansive, systemic and holistic view of the corporate “Global Body” (Diagram 2) is much more complex and the challenges and demands on corporate leadership grow exponentially. The “Post 2020 World-view” is a complex, interrelated and unpredictable system. It resembles an almost organic, constantly changing jigsaw of market, environmental, political, technological, customer, competitive and societal forces that no one individual can ever really grasp and understand. Yet, organizational decisions impact on, and are impacted by, these large, ever-changing forces, on a continual unpredictable basis. What and how can we factor all of this into our decision-making?

Otto Scharmer, a professor at MIT, and one of the founders of Presencing Institute, has coined the expression of needing to move from an “Ego-to-Eco” pathway of leadership mindset.

Thankfully, there has been some evidence of the evolution of the consciousness of corporate leaders over the past decades – as evidenced by the advent of significant Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, the emergence of “B” Corporations and the adoption of the “triple-bottom line” as measurements of corporate health. However, the change has been ad hoc as opposed to systemic, and has been happening far too slowly.

Government Leadership

In government circles too, the advent of concepts such as Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the indicator of a country's standing and progress as opposed to GDP or GNP is also pushing politicians and public servants to broaden their concept of the systemic challenges and responsibilities facing their respective governments (See Diagram 3). Initially laughed off around the world, the concept of GNH has seen acceptance grow in government circles and delivering healthy economic growth in a country is no longer deemed success if corruption is rampant, the environment is degrading, the indigenous culture is being lost, children are not being educated and the judiciary is only available to - and favours - the wealthy or powerful. Every country, state, province, even township, needs to decide what will be their unique pillars of GNH.

This process also demands that politicians and bureaucrats also need to be able to sit down and dialogue with members of different parties, tribes, villages, NGOs, global corporations, representatives of the informal and traditional sectors etc to harness their collective intelligence to arrive at workable solutions. Being able to read, navigate and shape Social Fields full of other stakeholders holding valid, strong and diverse opinions is a very different challenge that is facing us all called to serve and lead our respective communities.

The Challenge:

Our level of consciousness is our awareness of what is happening. It is not what is happening. We have emotions and physical sensations whether we are aware of them or not. The positive or negative changes, blockages or lulls in energy, direction etc in a meeting occur whether our antennae can sense them or not. Low-wage employees will be exploited, suppliers will pollute, ice-caps will melt, wild-fires and floods will occur, democracies and societies will fail, quasi-dictators will rise, whether we are aware of it or not.

Our level of consciousness directly impacts on our decision-making. Ignorance is but short-term bliss. The challenge for every leader is to have the maximum depth and expansiveness of consciousness in all three of these realms, the Physical, Social & Global bodies – and then to be guided by them in their decision-making and actions. It certainly becomes a much more complex and powerful “way of being” for leaders -and it is not easy. It is perhaps not for everyone.

However, unless more of us assume the responsibility and accept this leadership consciousness challenge, the world will continue on the dangerous “messy” course it is on today.

Sitting in my office today, a haven of peace amidst the chaos created by the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that the actions of one person, “Patient Zero”, anywhere on this planet can affect billions of others at the other side of the world.

Narrow and shallow “Ego-consciousness” has to become a thing of the past; three domains “Eco-consciousness”, encompassing the three different “bodies” described above, is what the world is crying out for. The question is: Are we each ready to step out of our comfort zones and fill that role? As we slowly emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic into a “new normal”, there is a great opportunity to shape what that new “normal” will be. Hopefully, it will include a level of consciousness worthy of the 2020s where such incidents in the future can avoided.

Diagram 1

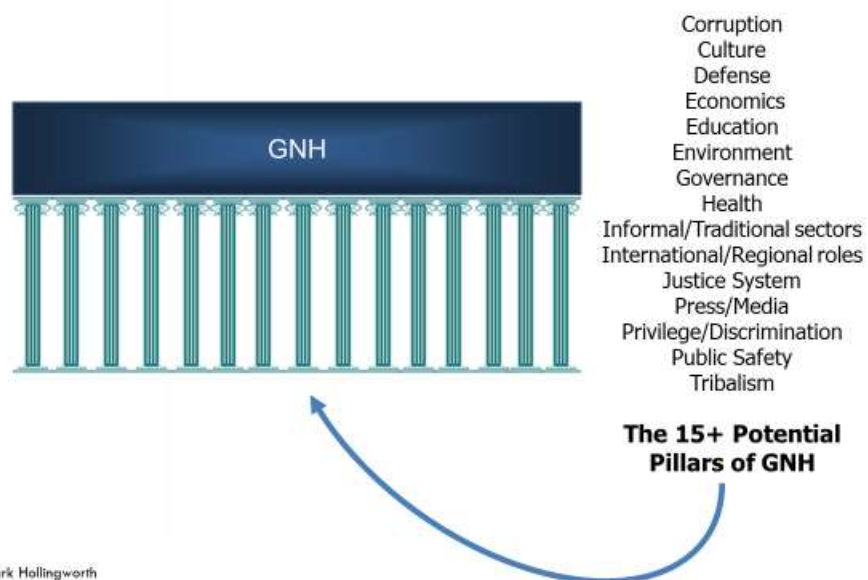
Diagram1: "Pre-2000 World View"



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Diagram 3

Diagram 3: Gross National Happiness (GNH)



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Diagram 2

