

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

Leadership that Generates Resilience: An Introduction to Second Resilience Forum

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In challenging and strenuous times such as during the current pandemic, public and private leadership is faced with extraordinary pressures on their leadership. On what basis should urgent yet critical decisions be made? And practically, how to legitimately lock down a society, closing down businesses and educational institutions, or decide to leave them open when such decisions carry heavy costs to people and organizations?

In the context of resilient leadership, Hamel and Välikangas (2003) proposed the concept of ‘Zero Trauma Transformation’ as foundational to the quest for resilience. The notion was premised on being able to meet major changes before they turn into crises, including conquering denial of the need for change, valuing variety in strategic options and liberating resources to their most innovative uses, and embracing both efficiency and renewal. These four leadership challenges were identified as cognitive, strategic, political, and ideological, and meeting such challenges was suggested necessary for continuous strategic renewal.

In a societal crisis situation such as the current COVID-19 epidemic that has profound implications for people’s livelihoods, well-being, and even political stability, there may be a further challenge worthy of contemplation. Namely, on what moral grounds may leadership be built? Even further: how might those decisions, and the accompanying leadership, be generative of resilience – strengthening the society – rather than diminishing future capability for coping? Such societal, and economic, resilience is about to be tested should the second, or third wave, of the COVID-19 virus spread.

We conclude leadership is to become a moral endeavor should leaders wish to generate resilience in a major crisis. The exercise of leadership under such conditions can be informed by moral philosophy. Consider the perspective provided by John Rawls, a leading American philosopher known for his theory of justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971). Beyond everyone having equal claims to basic liberties, Rawls formulated the much debated second ‘difference principle’, which stated that any

social and economic inequalities ought to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of the society (Rawls, 1971; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/>]). There are of course ongoing arguments about who are the most deserving (e.g., Schaller, 1998).

Nevertheless, standing on the side of the weak, this perspective gives a platform to evaluate government leadership in different countries and societal contexts. What decisions have been self-serving, or giving aid to those benefitting from the crisis, and which decisions have supported those in need? Beyond the moral implications, the leadership approach may be of practical value, as Rawls suggests, in supporting the weakest in staying or becoming productive and prudent members of the society. Hence society can benefit from its diversity while still have a moral grounding.

Such leadership would likely send an important message. You will not be left alone in the moment of the greatest need. This builds trust in the society, and generates resilience in risk taking and innovation, potentially contributing to creative advances in technologies or transformative business models. Novelty may become something to engage with rather than resist in a society.

The Rawlsian perspective then opens up new vistas for generative leadership that aims at zero-trauma. The cognitive challenge of conquering denial should include overcoming affected ignorance (Moody-Adams, 1994) – turning away from suffering and declaring ignorance. As Leo Tolstoy beautifully phrased the moral responsibility: ‘When the suffering of another creature causes you to feel pain, do not submit to the initial desire to flee from the suffering one, but on the contrary, come closer, as close as you can to him who suffers, and try to help him’. The Rawlsian call also suggests that valuing variety is at the core of a resilient society but it requires decision making that is to the benefit of those most exposed. Liberating resources to innovative ends may be a reminder of the difficulty of implementing the difference principle, with questions of who are the most deserving, or most innovating, and how to judge such a position in a fair way. The ideological challenge is a reminder of the need to see leadership more broadly than a technical discipline seeking short-term optimization.

Leadership in a crisis emerges as a moral activity that is foundational to societal and economic resilience, something on which leaders will be judged in an environment of radical uncertainty amidst deepening societal divides. Does the leadership generate or deprive societies of resilience, is the question now in urgent need of evaluation. For leaders, such a quest for resilience poses a fifth, moral, challenge.

Management and Organization Review's Resilience Forum opened with perspectives to societal changes due to the pandemic crisis. The lingering new normal was found to require candid learning and scientific reasoning. Depending on the political leadership, the crisis may enforce a sense of community or it may add to the societal divisions. New ways of thinking of organizational relationships are likely needed, to allow for loose coupling and improvisational capacity.

We conclude the second Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion Forum with resilience becoming the competitive imperative (Jacobides, Lang, & von Szczepanski, [this Forum](#) and Hu, Zhang, & Yang, [this Forum](#)), enforcing innovative digital business models (Kenney & Zysman, [this Forum](#)) and requiring societal leadership that somewhat paradoxically in times of social distancing, is built on collective action (Barnard, [this Forum](#)). Part of that collective action is learning together: as speed in developing vaccines against the COVID-19 is of essence, it is crucial not to accelerate development efforts by simply taking more risk (Jarvenpaa & Välikangas, 2020). Learning collectively to meet future challenges is another moral imperative that leadership must now take on. Living in a fish bowl as we find ourselves at a time of a global crisis, it is better to be learning than racing.

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