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Ambiguity, Agility, and Leadership—Not Rudderless, but Principled

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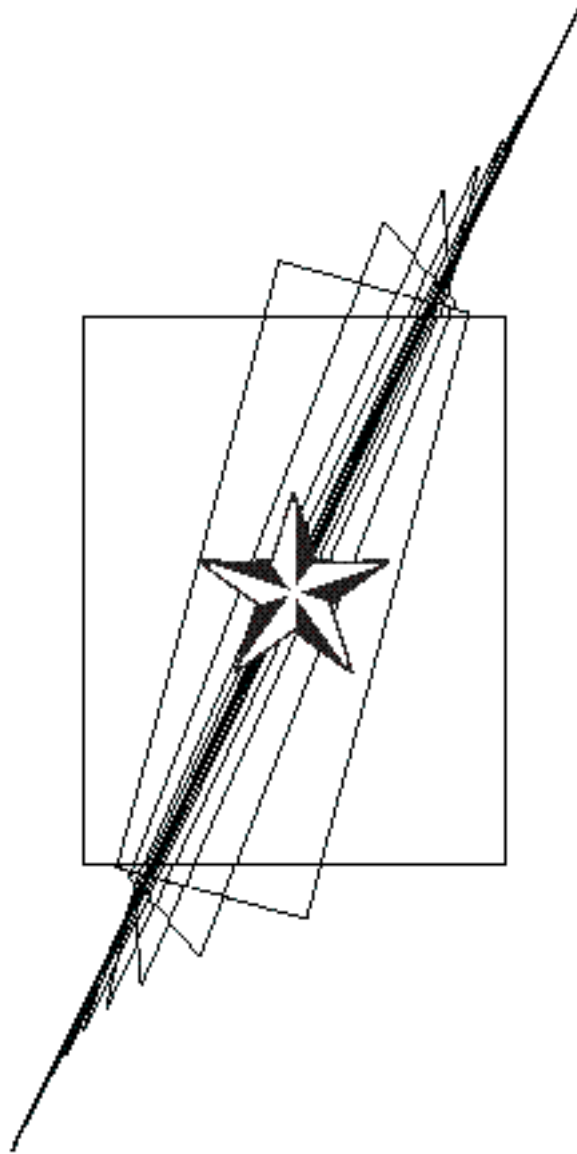
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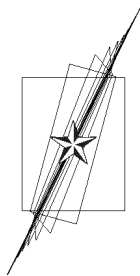
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From the Editor

Ambiguity, Agility, and Leadership—Not Rudderless, but Principled

There is so much ambiguity nowadays. *Psychology Today* author, Jim Taylor, Ph.D., describes our world as ever-changing, unfamiliar, unpredictable, uncertain, uncomfortable, and uncontrollable. In plain terms, our world is restless, agitated, and seemingly incapable of possessing a reliable mind or of standing on the same spot. Incessantly, our world voices out numerous prescriptions and dumps them at the same time in one day, and then alters or expunges them the next day, only to introduce or resurrect some other versions a few weeks or days after. These prescriptions revolve around a wide spectrum of human life areas, of which leadership is one in its broadest sense. We citizens receive innumerable prescriptions on leadership from varied source, and, although these prescriptions are attracting a great deal of public attention for the truth, hype, noise, controversy, or confusion that they help create, these are failing to truly provide us with principled prescriptions. Our world is blabbering so intensely about leadership, but with nary a marked provision of any related principled guideposts, it mainly creates ambiguity. Ambiguity prevents us from seeing through our futures, thereby constricting our capacity to lead ourselves and others effectively.

How must we citizens respond to ambiguity? Must we stop the world—and everybody else in it—from rattling? Impossible. Must we censor human expressions? Only to an extent, but hardly totally. Must we block all these prescriptions from assaulting our senses, 24/7? Unsustainable. Must we give in to a global power, such as China, to turn off the internet and allow the State to be the sole source of prescriptions? Unlikely. Many of us are simply in a quandary as to what to do with ambiguity. Some of us even help entrench its foothold by adding our own unrefined cacophonies about these leadership prescriptions into the world's social spaces. Is our joining the fray a sign of our utter surrender, that ambiguity is here to stay? Some authors would point out that ambiguity is part of the world's current drama and is a good thing in that, it offers everyone a chance of having their me-too moment, akin to being under the spotlight, having a license to say something—and to be heard. Rather than be discombobulated by ambiguity, these authors suggest that we can ride these constant flows of prescription, by becoming agile—that is, by thinking, deciding, and acting quickly and easily. Agility, they add, will enable us citizens, to swiftly adjust to the demands of these multi-tiered guideposts and then help us better lead our own and other people's lives. Because agility—or to be agile—has the potential to give us citizens a social mileage, this trait is now widely prescribed.

Young people are the demographic sector who are advised to be agile. They are the natives of this present-day ambiguity—breathing and living with it—in the vast social spaces comprising epic masses of leadership prescriptions. Also, young people are the next cohort of leaders—for example, as parents, teachers, researchers, government executives, corporate managers, entrepreneurs, capitalists, editors, medical professionals, and social media influencers—who will have their respective sets of human groups to govern. Young people have to prepare themselves, therefore, as leaders. Such a preparation is not so much about upgrading their technological expertise as it is about guiding them to internalize, own—and live with—the core essences (i.e., the major inherent qualities) of leaderships. Contrary to popular notion, agility is not about thinking, deciding and acting on, and adapting to,

just about anything that comes one's way, or that one sees, as a leader. Agility requires forethought and calibration, not as a floating or an anchor-less behavioral trait, but one grounded on the age-old essences of leaderships.

At universities where copious amounts of information on leaderships are taught, many young people are not fully grasping the position-specific essences of leadership, because these essences are either not given prominence or they get drowned in the grand scheme of the daily instruction provided thereat. Many universities seem in a quandary as to what to do with the information overload in their midst (although even if they do, they are likely to abandon any attempt at funneling it, because the attendant workload to fulfill it, in the purview of the non-stop surge of information, is just too onerous). In their own style of institutional governance, therefore, universities tend to leave young people to discern for themselves, based on the information supplied to them, about the essences of leaderships (universities tend to cloak this convenient approach, of giving young people the freedom of choice, in the pretext that it is a part of the liberal, democratic, or laissez-faire approach to education). Leaving many young people to their own devices is absolutely unwise. This demographic sector, with its expansive, dispersed mind-sets, is cognitively unprepared to fathom the authentic essences of leaderships. Born in an era of ambiguity, young people are more likely inclined than not to devise their own platform, thereby diluting or eradicating the original essences of leaderships that are as age-old—as they are universal—as time. Relegating the responsibility of information sifting to young people is tantamount to universities weakening their principled governance—becoming ambiguous themselves, thereby also effectively perpetuating ambiguity.

Universities need to make themselves less ambiguous by professing a more principled leadership; that is, helping young people build a personal foundation on the true essences of leaderships, contingent upon the type of leaders these young people would aspire to be. For example, should young people want to become a president or a prime minister, they must learn that this leadership will essentially call for them to be service-oriented—as servants of the people; should they want to become teachers, they must learn that this leadership will demand them, essentially, to be communicators of knowledge; or should they want to become medical doctors, they must learn that the real essence of this particular leadership is to provide holistic treatment to patients. With these leadership-based essences, young people will be equipped with principled platforms to start self-governing themselves in their current status as learners towards governing others in their eventual status as leaders.

Presently, many universities rarely use these authentic essences as their over-arching platforms to develop leaderships among young people. Instead, the learning of leaderships is anchored on a myriad of disparate issues that are chosen rather whimsically, thereby making the learning too detached from the true essence of every leadership. For example, in developing leadership in teaching, the current practice is to over-emphasize the use of learning-teaching technologies. As such, teaching leadership tends to gravitate so much around the mastering of a number as well as of the varying types of technologies (among many other things), which is pursued independently from the mastering of the leadership's real essence—of being inherently communicative. Furthermore, in developing leadership in public office, the approach is replete with hasty, non-authentic efforts at mastering how to be popular with as many voters as possible, without connecting such efforts with the true essence of political leadership—of being a true public servant. In the same vein, in developing leadership in the medical profession, the overwhelming focus, as well as the default action, is bestowed more on the patients' pharmacological treatment rather than on the true essence of medicine—of providing services for the patients' holistic well-being. Other leaderships are also portrayed in much similar, unprincipled ways—for example, parents excessively supplying their children with material resources rather than with proper guidance and warmth, or company executives expanding aimlessly for more profits rather than optimizing the products germane to their mission. With their rudderless adaptations, these leaderships similarly serve as effective purveyors of ambiguity.

When ambiguity pervades every nook and cranny of the world, it behooves the social institutions such as the university system—as a major source of knowledge—to intensify the formation of principled leaderships among young people. It is on the true essences of leaderships that young people need to kick- in their agility. Universities are far from formative in this mission: for centuries, they have been the bastion for the propagation of principled leaderships. However, in their impulse to be agile in a rapidly-shifting world, many have eventually veered so far away from the very essence of their leadership—of providing young people with the moral, socially- upright foundations of various leaderships. The appointments of non-academics as top university administrators have only

further diluted the leadership of universities in this regard. Apart from some fundamental variations, therefore, many universities at present are undifferentiated from other non-academic establishment, in terms of the use of teaching technologies, being populist, and being non-holistic in their medical and health services for young people. The extended meaning of this is that, for having become just like everybody else, these universities have lessened their significance as the go-to institutions in which to learn about authentic leaderships. Re-embodiment of the inherent essences of leaderships back into their educational approaches could aid universities to re-discover their distinctive competence in the world that is, glaringly, in constant flux. Overall, universities must be a prominent voice on true leaderships in this era of relentless ambiguity.

I checked the internet and gathered that several universities and institutes in the U.S. offer curricular programs in servant leadership (<https://www.modernservantleader.com/academic-programs-list/>), and that a number of higher educational institutions in China have academic programs in holistic treatment (http://www.besteduchina.com/tcm_universities_in_china.html). We need to mainstream more curricular offerings of these kinds to benefit the vast numbers of our young leaders worldwide.

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Romeo B. Lee

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