



Why the World Needs Self-Reflective Leaders

The coronavirus crisis facilitates the rise of autocratic and narcissistic leaders just when we least need them.

When asked what the post-Covid world might look like, French author Michel Houellebecq said, “**The same – only worse.**” While the quip is funny on the surface, there is indeed reason for all of us to wonder where the world is headed.

In a recent webinar, Manfred Kets de Vries, INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change, shared his thoughts on what the current crisis means for leaders. Drawing from the teachings of the early Greek philosophers, he said that the inscription on the temple of Apollo in Delphi, “Know thyself”, remains utterly relevant to this day. Indeed, a large part of his life’s work has been to help executives become more self-reflective leaders.

“Most people are strangers to themselves,” he said. A lot of them resort to the **manic defence** – filling their calendar with a flurry of activities meant to prevent them from having any time to reflect. They are always running, without knowing what they are running for or running to. Also, they **feel drained**, but they don’t know why. Others, having reached the pinnacle of professional success, fail to find **meaning**. All too often, excess **greed** has left them very **lonely**.

Looking inward

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Kets de Vries promotes what he calls the clinical paradigm as a channel of self-reflection for leaders. The paradigm, in technical speak, involves a psychodynamic-systemic orientation to organisational analysis. “Much of what happens is beyond our conscious awareness,” he said. Fantasies, **dreams** and symbolism are ways to access this kind of self-knowledge and to reveal our blind spots. Another is **reflecting on one’s past**, which can form a “lens through which we can understand the present and shape the future”.

Unfortunately, there is no magic pill to become a self-reflective leader, he said. It requires a journey and quite a bit of “Sherlock Holmes” detective work. That is why transformational programmes such as the one for MBAs are often organised in modules, to give participants time to process new information, decipher what’s going on in their inner theatre and ultimately change. The same is true for the programme he has been running at INSEAD for many years – the longest-running programme by the same professor – that one of his colleagues once called the “CEO recycling seminar”.

But why is it so necessary to know thyself as a leader? Essentially, the world has reached an unprecedented level of complexity and the pace of change is dizzying. While the Covid-19 crisis is particularly salient, in that it threatens lives and

livelihoods, it is but the latest in an unending **stream of disruptions**. In such a state of affairs, it is critical for leaders to realise that they can't be good at everything. It is time to do away with the myth of the CEO as hero.

"Leadership is a team sport," said Kets de Vries. Leaders need to know their strengths so they can best use them. At the same time, they need to humbly recognise their weaknesses so they can build and empower a team that **fills those gaps**. And to help leaders to assess their strengths and weaknesses, Kets de Vries has even developed a number of diagnostic **tools**.

The humility that comes with self-awareness is also critical to fighting off the rise of autocratic leaders, the kind that lives in echo chambers of their own making. Kets de Vries reminded the audience that the sirens of hubris are always beckoning. Many leaders can become **self-destructive**.

Also, as Kets de Vries pointed out, with crises often comes social regression. People suddenly feel more dependent and start looking for messiahs. The most striking examples of this phenomenon can easily be seen in the **political realm**. But it is also commonly observed in organisations, where there is natural tendency for people to tell their higher-ups what they want to hear. And after a while, leaders "like it", he said. **Truth tellers** aren't wanted. Even in the best of times, this combination of narcissism and sycophantic behaviour has led to the **downfall of giants** such as Nokia.

What does meaning mean?

The pandemic is an inflection point. To turn it into an opportunity and a force for good, CEOs need to provide meaning to their employees. Meaning, as Kets de Vries explained, is comprised of purpose ("a forward-looking concept"), a sense of belonging ("we are very social animals"), competence ("what are we good at"), control ("people like to have a voice") and transcendence ("going beyond the self").

In an INSEAD Knowledge **article**, Kets de Vries described his vision of the ideal organisation and even coined a term for it: the authentizotic organisation. He defined it as a trust-based organisation where people find meaning in, and are captivated by their work. It is also a place where people feel safe to speak their mind. Today this is as needed as ever, with a Gallup poll showing that **85 percent** of the global workforce is disengaged. According to a Gallup blog, such employees "likely come to work wanting to make a difference – but nobody has ever asked them to use their strengths to make the organisation better".

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The litmus test of a great organisation, Kets de Vries says, is: Would you recommend your workplace to friends and family? Sadly, a lot of organisations are fairly **toxic** and filled with depressive anxiety and **paranoia**.

The webinar was also an opportunity for Kets de Vries to reiterate some of the tips he had previously shared in a **Knowledge article** for leaders in the Covid era:

- If layoffs are in the cards, don't hide in your office even though you feel bad. Now is the time to communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Don't cut training and development. As the saying goes, don't let a crisis go to waste. Make the most of this period to develop your employees' creative thinking. Discover new avenues for growth.
- Think long-term. Family-controlled companies might do better than publicly listed ones in this crisis because of their longer-term view, especially if they are value-driven.
- Cost cutting by itself is far too easy a way out. It doesn't build for the future. What's more, it has **serious implications** in terms of corporate culture.

Although the pandemic is a tragedy and many people have died, it's also an opportunity for the world to **rethink its future**. The attitude of employees – particularly individuals in leadership positions – determines how an organisation will perform. According to Kets de Vries, good leadership involves a "delicate dance between disposition and position", i.e. the ability to resist the intoxicating effects of power. It always requires checks and balances. And above all, it needs self-aware and vulnerable leaders who, to paraphrase Napoleon Bonaparte, can be dealers in hope.

*In his latest book, Journeys into Coronavirus Land, Manfred Kets de Vries takes us through his ruminations during confinement, widening his explorations into group phenomenon, leadership, organisational dynamics as well as economic and environmental crisis. The central question is, how have each of us responded to this adversity and where will this journey lead us, individually and collectively? Journeys into Coronavirus Land is **free to download**. A donation to Unicef's Save Generation Covid campaign is strongly encouraged.*

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, one of

INSEAD's top Executive Education programmes.

Professor Kets de Vries's most recent books are: **Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life; You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges; Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organisation Lives Happily Ever After; and Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide.**

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