
How Leadership Can Emerge From the Trauma of History



By Erik van de Loo , Lara Tcholakian (INSEAD EMCCC '16) and Roger Lehman , INSEAD

Victims of intergenerational adversity can channel the darkness of the past into five uniquely positive values.

Nineteen-year-old Shinji Mikamo paused for a break from his morning labours. He had been helping his father work on the roof of his home in Hiroshima that balmy, cloudless day of 6 August 1945. Dabbing sweat from his brows, he barely saw it coming: a blinding burst of intense light and burning heat emanating from the first atomic bombing in history. It blew him off the roof and left him for dead.

Against all odds, Mikamo survived. But for months afterwards, he suffered excruciating pain from his burns – alongside hundreds of thousands of others in a ravaged city paying the price for Japan’s aggression in the second world war. He never knew what became of his father. His mother, who had been nursing ill health in the countryside, died shortly after the bombing. His brother was killed in battle in the Philippines.

Despite the tragedies he suffered, Mikamo – who married a fellow survivor and has three daughters – taught his children to love and collaborate, rather

than blame or hate, because **“these were the blinders that provoked conflict, not soothed it”**. Akiko, his second child, has taken his teaching to heart. Born and raised in Hiroshima, she moved to the United States to train as a psychologist and now leads initiatives to promote Japanese-American understanding and peace. She graduated from INSEAD’s **Executive Master in Change (EMC)** programme in 2011, and has since published a book on her father’s story, **8:15 - A True Story of Survival and Forgiveness from Hiroshima**.

Mikamo’s influence on his daughter is an example of how trauma trickles down generations, nurtures positive leadership values including empathy and perseverance, and metamorphoses into a force for good. Trauma, and its impact on leadership, is more common than one might think. Many executives of today are second-, third- or fourth-generation descendants of victims of calamities of the 20th century. The atrocities of World War Two were unquestionably horrific, but China’s Cultural Revolution, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, genocides in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia, South Africa’s apartheid and segregation in the United States each exact their own toll on millions of people.

Together with Svetlana Khapova from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, we examined collective trauma’s impact on leadership development. Our conceptual analysis, **“Collective Traumas and the Development of Leader Values: A Currently Omitted, but Increasingly Urgent, Research Area”**, shows how collective trauma resides in cultural rituals and artefacts, community commemorations and family narratives, and is transmitted to younger generations through social learning, social identity and psychodynamics. We identify five values born of the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma: resilience, forgiveness, empathy, justice and perseverance.

Lest we forget

Trauma is as sweeping as the fire that razed Hiroshima; it spreads through entire nations and generations via at least three channels. Observing artefacts and rituals such as religious rites help individuals relive the past, feel connected to the deceased as well as maintain a sense of belonging to a group (social learning). Taking part in community events and commemorations can cause an individual to identify with a group and experience their emotions (social identity). Within the family, trauma is

transmitted regardless whether family members talk about it or not. Even if left unspoken, one's sadness and pain can be felt by loved ones and are often unconsciously passed down to children and grandchildren (psychodynamics).

Successful leaders descended from survivors of traumatic events can take rich material from their history and transform it into something positive, productive and results-driven. We identify five positive leader values or traits in our analysis, published in *Frontiers in Psychology*:

Resilience: A trait that helps one adapt to stressful events or rebound from negative circumstances, resilience has been shown to be widespread among children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. The prevalence is attributed to national and culture values as well as collective connections linked to the genocide. Resilient leaders are adept at dealing with change and innovation challenges due to their adaptability and ability to rebound from adversity.

Forgiveness: Forgiveness helps to restore peace and create a culture of empathy. When leaders have latent vengeful emotions due to a traumatic past, their ability to exercise authentic or exemplary leadership may be hindered. Literature on transformational and ethical leadership shows that family and community influences as well as cultural beliefs can nurture forgiveness in leaders.

Empathy: Leaders who are descendants of trauma victims are sensitive to circumstances such as discrimination or harassment, and may feel the need to help members of a disenfranchised group or a collective.

Justice: When individuals share collective trauma, they can be motivated by a sense of justice or purpose, and when they are in a position of authority, have the power to establish a fair and just environment for their followers.

Perseverance: The leader who grew up in a family or community with a background of collective trauma will have heard about a parent, grandparent or community member who lost their livelihood and had to work hard to rebuild their lives or sustain a cultural or ethnic legacy. Such a leader is likely to develop perseverance due to a sense of purpose and a need to triumph over pain or failure he or she has experienced vicariously.

Making peace with pain

Having worked with executives from 80 different countries in the course of the EMC programme, we would argue that very few people in the world today don't carry elements of some sort of collective trauma. But instead of shunning the past, many EMC participants want to delve into the trauma in order to mourn and integrate it into their lives. Often third- or fourth-generation descendants of direct trauma survivors, they find it easier to process the trauma due to the time that has lapsed. Their grandparents or great-grandparents, who experienced the traumatic events first-hand, are also more willing to talk about their experiences and pain towards the end of their lives.

One such EMC participant was Christiane Wenckheim, chairwoman of the **Ottakringer brewery** in Vienna. The brewery was bought by her grandfather in 1938 from Moriz von Kuffner, a Jew forced to flee the Nazi regime. Although Wenckheim's family made restitutions to the Kuffner family a few years after the war, Christiane always sensed that something was amiss in the family business. She felt it was held back by something, but she could never put her finger on what it was.

While attending the EMC course, Wenckheim was inspired to connect the dots. She realised that her family remained plagued by guilt and shame over **Aryanisation** of the brewery. After discussing with her parents and executive team, Wenckheim sought out Kuffner's descendants. She organised a ceremony at the brewery in 2018, 80 years after Kuffner was forced to give up his cherished business, to memorialise the Jewish employees who lost their jobs or were killed during the war. The ceremony was attended by the great-grandson of Moriz von Kuffner and the descendants of the Jewish employees, as well as representatives of the Jewish community in Vienna.

Wenckheim demonstrated how transgenerational trauma could evoke the leadership value of justice. Akiko Mikamo channelled trauma into empathy and forgiveness. Our preliminary research on leaders whose grandparents survived the Armenian genocide points to the development of perseverance – both as a modelled behaviour and as a mechanism against the victim mentality. Much good can come out of facing past hurts squarely.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-leadership-can-emerge->

About the author(s)

Erik van de Loo is an Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He is also a programme director of the Executive Master in Change (**EMC**), an executive degree programme at INSEAD.

Lara Tcholakian Lara A. Tcholakian is a PhD student at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Head of the Human Resources Department at VivaCell-MTS in Armenia. She holds an Executive Master's degree in Consulting and Coaching for Change from INSEAD.

Roger Lehman is an Emeritus Senior Affiliate Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at INSEAD and a programme director of the **Executive Master in Change**, an executive degree programme at INSEAD.

About the research

"Collective Traumas and the Development of Leader Values: A Currently Omitted, but Increasingly Urgent, Research Area" *is published in Frontiers in Psychology.*