
Reflective Leaders Needed for the Age of Rage



By [Graham Ward](#) , INSEAD

When collective emotions gather steam, knee jerk reactions can make a bad situation worse.

In the comedy western *Blazing Saddles*, one seminal moment has the sheriff point a gun to his own head, threatening to blow his own brains out if everyone doesn't do as he says.

There have been echoes of this persuasive technique recently in the U.K., whose populace voted to exit the EU. A cabal of leaders fell on their own swords like dominoes in the days after the referendum, the biggest casualty being the Prime Minister, David Cameron. Was such a bloodbath necessary? I would argue that in critical times, the case for reflective rather than reactive leadership, in society and organisations has never been stronger.

Much has been written recently about the notion of empathy. According to psychologist **Daniel Goleman**, there are three types: cognitive, emotional and compassionate. Most leaders can easily articulate what empathy is. Defining empathy, however, is not the same as deploying it. In fact I've found that many executives I have worked with do not even have the basic

emotional vocabulary necessary to understand the broad landscape of emotions that exists in organisations and society.

Keeping in touch with changing emotions

Humans are, at an anthropological level, reflexively programmed to recognise threats and act on them. Fight, flight, freeze! Daily, we see instances: the angry soccer player fronts up and butts heads with an antagonist. The small child runs from the playground bully. The brain reacts, the person acts. In these cases the Delphic maxim “know thyself” is redundant, “save thyself” being the wiser option. In organisations, however, strong emotional reactions take longer to emerge and build gradually below the surface. As in Newtonian physics, emotional reaction is subject to the same laws: an initial impulse or changing circumstance is required, a causal link: change causes reaction, which causes emotion.

The challenge is that leaders enacting change (their primary task) are not only slow to recognise what is going on, they are also generally ignorant of how to deal with it. Why? For one, there is a constant pressure to act. We have become “human doings”, not human beings. Reflection is undervalued and frequently impossible in a world where leaders are incessantly battered with new information. As a consequence, the rage, anxiety or sadness often residing in the substrate of organisations, like volcanic magma, is both invisible and untapped. And like volcanoes, it has the potential to explode out destructively. In stressful environments, the pressure to act can lead easily to intellectual arrogance and dominance in decision making, rather than taking the slower (and often more painful) process of deductive dialogue. It requires effort and focus and can signal the death of what Ludo van Der Heyden defines as **fair process**.

The power of collective emotion

Leaders protest that diagnosing organisational systems is complicated and there is insufficient time. Symptoms of dysfunction however, are often hidden in plain sight. In 2015, Marissa Mayer, struggling at Yahoo! described a rash of departures from her senior bench as “**part of the design**”. It is plausible to believe that this was simply an expedient public rationalisation of the deep problems that Yahoo! was facing. However, the welter of departing talent should have signified that something was rotten. It was reported at the time in **Business Insider** that “the world is crashing in on her...she has stopped listening to what people have to say”. A few weeks

ago, less than a year later, the company was sold to Verizon. One wonders if Ms Mayer, beset by pressures, ever stood still to consider what was happening.

Worse still is failing to reflect on the emotional landscape of your customers. Seaworld Inc. is a salutary example. If you are unaware that people are concerned with our ecology, then you have been living under a rock. Yet the company took three years to announce the cessation of the breeding programme for orcas, after the damning 2013 documentary [Blackfish](#) revealed how these magnificent animals suffer in captivity. In spite of the outcry, it failed to act. It has now missed forecasts in seven of its eleven quarters as a public company. It remains to be seen whether the company can reinvent itself.

Reflective action

Jack Welch [said](#) many years ago: “The problem is that leaders fail to ask often enough the question: What is wrong around here?” Upon reflection the answer to that question is more likely to be felt in the leaders’ gut than seen in the company accounts. The feeling is likely to show up way in advance of the earnings miss.

To pre-empt disaster, I would like to suggest that actions should be “reflective” not reflexive.

- First, leaders need to make an imaginative leap into the emotional world of their followers, to identify the prevalent feelings. In town halls and in small groups they need to call those feelings out. If they are wrong they will stand corrected, both vulnerable yet courageous.
- Secondly, and importantly, leaders need to learn the habit of listening both actively and critically, recognising and acknowledging their own defensive formations as they do so. To that end, they need sparring partners with whom they can parse information, offload their own feelings and problem solve. This can take the form of a coach, chairperson, mentor or trusted advisor. Ironically, the higher the position, the more likely this will be both necessary and useful.
- Finally, leaders need to take into account the other constituencies that connect them to the outside world: customers, shareholders and broader society. Reflectively seeking to understand will mitigate misjudged

statements such as that of BP CEO, Tony Hayward, who notoriously said after the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe “I want my life back,” in spite of the oil spill having destroyed the livelihoods of thousands along the Louisiana coast. He got his life back: it cost him his job.

The danger of failing to listen

Political leaders who fail to do the hard work of comprehension allow demagoguery in through the backdoor, permitting crafty opportunists to tap in to popular anger, polarising opinion and creating exclusive “others” who are the enemy. Even worse, they can end up on the end of a “Brexit style” backlash, when the silent majority is finally given a voice.

Similarly, organisational leaders who misread smoke signals in their organisations will be subject to sabotage of their plans, passive resistance, whispered treachery and ultimately oblivion. In a globalising world, individual scrutiny is increasing, societal disparities are growing, and the actions of organisations become daily more visible in social media.

Leaders, therefore, should keep close to society, their teams and themselves through “reflective” action, if they are to avoid stigmatisation and remain at the vanguard of value creation.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/reflective-leaders-needed-age-range>

About the author(s)

Graham Ward is an Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, an executive education programme for senior leaders.