
What It Means to Lead in a Multipolar World



By [Horacio Falcao](#) and [Marc Le Menestrel](#), INSEAD

By overcoming our fears and creating a brave space for dialogue, we can relate and lead better in the new multipolar world.

Until not too long ago, those of us who subscribed wholeheartedly to a dominant Western narrative lived in the illusion of a unipolar world. Democracy, the rule of law, neoliberalism, globalisation, human rights, diversity, climate change and the internet were considered good, correct or incontrovertible.

We wanted to believe that we had arrived at the “end of history” where, with just a bit more time and innovation, we would enjoy peace and prosperity forever. War, terrorism, discrimination, autocracy, nationalism, intolerance as well as other forms of social, economic and political divide were the unfortunate legacies of an undesirable past, a small bump on our road towards global enlightenment, and unthinkable on a larger scale.

As a result, we became self-righteous and closed our minds. We believed that the world was moving towards a single objective, as if history was pre-ordained. We trusted that our mission was so holy and superior that any detractor would eventually come to see the light. Even as we embraced

VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), it was mostly applied to short-term challenges framed within a single and stable narrative that, while not linear, was ultimately based on certain inviolable rules of right and wrong.

A multipolar world requires a systemic way of thinking beyond the unipolar or command-and-control. Companies must foster multipolar discussions; leaders need to analyse the environment their organisations operate in from different viewpoints.

And yet, for a couple of decades now, we have seen the emergence of those who challenge the validity of that framing and its corresponding narrative. After all, narratives are often self-serving; they shape our thinking in ways that benefit us more than others.

The world as we knew it

In a not-so-subtle way, we resurrected the distinction between civilised and “savage” people rampant in the 18th and 19th centuries. Those who were not yet like us, we reckoned, would eventually be edified and assimilated, or weeded out by evolutionary imperatives that we had mastered.

From our vantage point, the international world order was stable, the EU project would only move forward, China would eventually become a liberal democracy and come to accept its place under the United States’ leadership. We had little doubt that terrorism and religious extremism would be eradicated once the superiority of secular democratic principles was recognised. Russia would eventually acknowledge that it is a has-been hegemon and accept a much reduced international role as a commodity provider. And, should a pandemic break out, our unified world would quickly and effectively coordinate to defeat it.

We were also confident that hunger and poverty would end within a couple of decades. Political consensus and scientific innovation would save us from global warming. Big internet giants could remain completely unregulated as they had vowed to do no evil. The list goes on.

There was almost a sense of inevitability or blind hope that all our good intentions would invariably translate into our desired outcomes. Dissenting

voices were seen as uninformed, radical or evil.

And then the surprises started to emerge.

Reality bites

Britain said no to the EU. People in many countries including the US are beginning to turn their back on globalisation. Covid-19 shows how we still stick to our flags and labels before reaching out to others, and how quickly we distrust science and democracy. Big Tech became the latest exhibit of the constant trade-off between unrestrained corporate profit-seeking and social priorities, **Facebook** being a recent case in point.

Meanwhile China is moving further away from Western liberal democracy ideals. Military budgets everywhere are growing. Millions of refugees are denied refuge in other countries. The US exit from Afghanistan shows that years of fighting and investment are no panacea for extremism, nor are they a shortcut to democracy. France is arguing that it needs to become energy-independent and that French industries should move their overseas facilities home to boost the country's resilience to supply chain shocks and bolster its independence in international disputes. Most recently Russia, as we all know, **started its "special operation"** in Ukraine.

After decades of living under the illusion of a unipolar world, the multipolar reality is hitting us in the face. How did we fail to anticipate, address or mitigate so many challenges?

For one thing, we just did not want to see them. The signs were there. The dissenting voices were begging to be heard. But we did not engage, we did not look twice, we did not hear.

Maybe we were afraid that our mindset, our narrative was wrong or not the sole correct answer. Sometimes we believed the lies we were fed because they were self-serving and allowed us to keep on ploughing forward in our mission and our routines undisturbed. Because we were – are – convinced of the righteousness of our mission, ways and values. Because we have a comfortable life and do not want to risk it. Because we do not want to sacrifice money today for money tomorrow. Take your pick of the many reasons for hiding behind a unipolar mindset.

Our unipolar confidence had turned into a religious belief. But the reality is we cannot will things to go our way. Billions of individuals across cultures

and national boundaries see, feel and think differently. As such we often want different things. But not always are we willing to share or think about how we can really work with one another.

Fear: The emotion holding us back

The multipolar dynamics of power at the global level has implications for the way we think about leadership and governance. In a multipolar world, a functional use of power requires a systemic way of thinking beyond the unipolar or command-and-control. Rational behaviour does not just accomplish goals; it also leads to unintended and interdependent consequences. Multipolar leaders acknowledge that each actor is anchored in a distinct set of values and contexts and thus have their own, and often different, purposes.

In a multipolar world, respect and tolerance are a prerequisite. Accepting others' values and ways of thinking without necessarily agreeing with them is a sign of strength rather than weakness. We need that strength to build a whole better than its parts. We need that strength to be able to hold conflicting ideas without succumbing to the comfort of an easy answer. We need that strength to acknowledge that we cannot be completely right all the time.

We are not advocating for moral relativism but what we call *multipolar morality*, the ability to truly understand and even empathise with how others see, think and feel, even when we disagree with them.

Respect, tolerance and acceptance of differences are just the first steps; they do not automatically lead to agreement. To negotiate workable solutions together, we need to learn to contain our many differences in a neutral, non-judgmental space, without a single predominant view dictating right and wrong.

Imagine having a conversation with people who are either convinced that Russia is completely and solely to blame for its "special operation" in Ukraine, or who believe that Russia is entitled to defend itself from what it perceives to be a geopolitical threat to its sovereignty. Whatever your position on an issue, the ability to consider it from different perspectives should allow you to hold your own with more reason and less emotion.

The multipolar leader

In a multipolar world, embracing diversity means being open to opposing or different views, genuinely accepting and learning from them, and facilitating efforts to arrive at mutually acceptable outcomes. The **multipolar leader** values the organic character of life as it facilitates the evolution of multiplicity in a space where views are voiced, heard, respected and addressed, without power, righteousness, wishful thinking or naivety. We need to let go of unipolar thinking or risk the world passing us by, or worse, risk believing that we are entitled to use power or violence to bend others to our will.

Multipolar leadership requires a form of dynamic harmony beyond the coherence of objectives and beyond a common objective. Companies must take this reality into account by fostering multipolar discussions. Leaders need to analyse the environment their organisations operate in from different viewpoints. **Go deeper than the first layer**: What we see is not necessarily what *is*.

Our perspectives are skewed towards our values and it can be painful to see, think or feel another way. We are afraid of losing ourselves, losing our support, losing to the competition, becoming indecisive, changing our minds, losing our identity and our sense of belonging. We are fearful of being seen as weak, a sellout or a traitor; we are afraid of not getting what we want. Fear is the biggest emotional obstacle to a multipolar leader. To be a leader is to have the courage to go first and show the way, in spite of our fears.

There is enough space inside ourselves to choose our perspective freely. Exploration forces us to mature our emotional reactions and develop the courage to be ourselves while aiding others to contain their own fears. It allows us to be even sharper in our decisions because we take them in full conscience.

We can learn to be grateful and humble about our imperfections, selfishness, fears, preferences and incomplete views of the world. We can learn to express our point of view without expecting others to change theirs. We can also learn to apologise. We can still believe in what we hold to be good, and be aware that there are other ways that can be better for others even if not for ourselves.

In so doing, we become better at identifying right and wrong in more nuanced and accurate ways. We become more adept at coming up with multipolar solutions that offer greater value to as many parties as possible.

The more risks we face, the more we ought to engage in collective multipolar processes that embrace our inevitable shortcomings.

The dominant Western narrative owes its success to its emphasis on individual freedom, fair process and tolerance of beliefs. It is founded on secular representative government that protects citizens from religious or political persecution, ensures equal opportunities (not results) and upholds rules to protect those who think or act differently than the majority. This narrative is based on an evolutionary and self-correcting process that constantly scans for weaknesses or different ideas and then attempts to improve on them.

The problem is not the Western narrative but its current unipolar leadership, and the subsequent narrowing of perspectives, solutions, intentions and results. Every narrative, organisation or person can fall into this unipolar trap.

It is a good time to enrich our efficient rationality with an emotional and spiritual intelligence that leaves room for intellectual humility. Inside the plurality of ourselves, it can also be much easier to be whole. We can reduce the distance between polarities by facilitating dialogue and giving everyone a voice. We can look for peace – real, achievable, hardworking peace. In a multipolar world, multipolar leadership may help to bring about peace and prosperity, for one and for all.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/what-it-means-lead-multipolar-world>

About the author(s)

Horacio Falcao is a Professor of Management Practice of Decision Sciences at INSEAD. He is also the programme director of INSEAD's **Negotiation Dynamics** executive programme and INSEAD's **Certificates in Negotiation** (advanced and online) programmes.

Marc Le Menestrel is an Affiliate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD. He teaches and coaches senior executives and board directors on high-level performance and leadership as well as the exercise of wise power in governance, sustainability, anti-corruption and risk management.