
HOW TO LEAD IN THE NEW NOT-NORMAL?

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Welcome to the new not-normal. What kind of leadership will be most helpful to us in this new era? Adaptive leadership, for sure, and I think the two qualities which will be most in demand are courage and compassion.

I first started using the term “Covid Not-Normal” during a seminar I gave in the middle of 2020 to the leadership team at a large government school. They had just returned from three months of pandemic induced on-line learning, and they were so relieved to have survived the challenges and adapted successfully throughout it, and now they were relieved to be back in Covid-normal. I advised them that it was better to think of it as Covid Not-Normal. Their challenge reminded me of Mallacoota earlier in the year. The town had survived the onslaught of the wildfires on the first night with residents stranded on the beach, but the bush was burning all around them and things were not back to any kind of normal. Indeed, Mallacoota endured the same punishment again within a week, and their one access road and the main highway would be closed for a long time to come. The re-building continues still.

And so it proved for the school. Another four-month lockdown soon ensued. Positive cases at the school itself meant that the physical site was off limits for a long period, with laptops and teacher notes beyond their grasp. A strange thing happened, though, when they finally returned to face-to-face teaching. The overwhelming emotion seemed to be one of pride and a sense of achievement. The school had not just survived it, they felt like they had nailed it! Students, families, teachers and leaders felt better connected than ever, because they had worked methodically to keep checking in. They had developed many of their own protocols, because the Department was weeks behind events. Student attendance during and after actually improved. I don't want to glamourize this. I coached several of the leaders during the lockdown and I know their stress levels sometimes were through the roof as they juggled educating their own young children while managing large groups of teachers and students. But they did adapt. This is a feature of the pandemic response which is not always recognized – all sorts of workers and leaders at the frontline led the charge and learnt how to adapt because there was no time to wait for those at the top.

You may have noticed that the world is not normal at the moment. Being human, we are all understandably yearning to get things back to normal. We are striving for Covid-normal. We hope for post-Fire Inferno normal. We are trying to get beyond Capitol Riot-normal. I used to like watching all those Nazi war movies in the past when I thought this was an historical aberration which we had defeated. How did we ever take plain old normal for granted? But we may need to say farewell to it. Covid Not-Normal may be an introduction to the future.

The media mogul Rupert Murdoch will accuse me of being “woke”, but I still watch Foxtel and read the back pages of the Herald-Sun for the sport. Business managers with whom I work a lot, are well placed to help us with the adaptive leadership we need in this new era, but many are also a little handicapped. Some business leaders really are leading the charge on issues such as climate change. Most are operating in a bubble, completely distracted by the exciting entrepreneurial opportunities or engaged in the life-and-death struggles, posed by the current technological bonanza which will dwarf the industrial revolution. They are dealing with lockdowns and their own commercial not-normal! Society, they ask? What society? Didn't Margaret Thatcher close that down? Meanwhile, the water we all swim in is developing its' own bubbles.

During my summer holidays I watched the excellent Netflix documentary and read the accompanying book by David Attenborough titled “A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement”. The 94 year old Attenborough is no radical – he has spent most of his public life avoiding controversy. David's courage to take a stand about the state of the planet is quite recent, and hardly self-serving given his age. Page after page is filled with sadness as he describes how he has personally witnessed and filmed the destruction and disharmony wreaked upon the natural world during his own lifetime. He laments the loss of so much wilderness and so much biodiversity. He laments all those products boasting to be “Safe for the Planet”, and those well-meaning campaigns to “Save the Planet”. In some form or other, the planet will persist and look after itself, he argues. It is humanity that needs to be

saved, because very soon the type of planet which does survive will not be safe for the human species and human civilization.

The natural dangers are multitude, but Climate Change caused by humans is the big one. This is an emergency more far reaching and more deadly than the Covid pandemic. It is already well underway and soon it will be irreversible. If you are feeling optimistic that human beings are too smart and well organized to let the situation become irreversible, consider this: despite all the excellent science that was available to us, almost half of all the problematic carbon dioxide pumped into the atmosphere has occurred in the past 30 years alone. We have become more irresponsible, not less! In America, some folks politicized and opposed wearing a face mask during a deadly pandemic. In Australia, some folks have done the same about any intelligent response to climate change. Courage is needed by those who engage in adaptive leadership, because it involves convincing others to take responsibility for making and acting on tough, even painful, choices. We have seen such leadership happen here in Australia during this Covid pandemic and we have seen people rise to the occasion.

It is not difficult to understand that leadership in society and business in a not-normal era, needs to be adaptive and courageous. But what is my point about compassionate?

I see compassion as understanding and caring about others, especially their pain, and trying to relieve their pain if possible. Some define it as being able to feel others pain. But compassion is not just a feeling or an attitude – it is really a commitment to others. Empathy is different, but

important too. I see empathy as being able to tune into and share others' emotions. Compassion is deeper and more powerful than empathy, although both involve connecting with others. And in adaptive situations, compassion is often the other side of the coin to courage for leaders.

Lori Gottlieb works as a clinical psychologist. Instead of grand collective adaptations, she helps individuals to change, to make better choices, and to act upon them. She has written a book about her client's efforts to change, as well as her own, entitled *Maybe you should talk to someone*. Her book has had rave reviews, and been described as funny, bold, smart, and vulnerable. These are all true descriptions, but no one mentioned grueling, which I also consider to be true. I found it grueling because it certainly touched some painful and sad parts in me as I read peoples' stories and struggles. Pain, whether emotional, physical, mental or existential, was a common thread in these stories – how people hide or avoid pain, and attribute meaning and make poor choices based on their pain. It reminded me of the Buddhists who contend that pain is inevitable, but the suffering over it is not.

Lori Gottlieb is also a great story teller, and in her stories people do change, alter their relationship to pain, and make positive progress in their lives. It is easy to become engrossed in the questions and dialogue that she has with clients, and in the dialogue she has with her own counsellor. As I read her book I came to realize, as does she, that it is not the dialogue alone, but her compassion which creates the space for change. She is not just smart and talented – she is a very compassionate professional. And the space her compassion helps to

create, offers an opportunity for others to reconcile with painful events and how they have responded to them, realize their own freedom and accept their own responsibility for what happens next.

It is best that public and business leaders don't engage in psychological counselling with those they lead. But the role that compassion can play in empowering people to change should not be overlooked by adaptive leaders. This transformative space is based on the quality of the relationship – whether people trust you, and trust that you understand them, care about them and want the best for them. Without this quality to the relationship, leadership becomes mechanistic and can rely only on carrots and sticks, and messaging or propaganda. With this quality to the relationship, people are willing to hear bad news and believe the good news from the leader, just as they are willing to hear confronting feedback and the new possibilities from the counsellor. Adaptive challenges nearly always involve delivering some bad news, and most folk tend to avoid pain and bad news. It is one thing to be courageous enough to deliver the bad news; it is another thing to be compassionate enough that people will bother to listen.

If you are still reading after all that bad news, let me give you some good news: it is possible for leaders to cultivate compassion and courage. You don't need to be Wonder Woman or Superman to do it. Large numbers of us who are confronting the new not-normal really hope you accept the invitation!

