
SHOULD LEADERS BE PRESENT OR FUTURE- ORIENTED?

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Martin Seligman who brought us Positive Psychology, has always been ambitious. He wants to change the name of our species to Homo Prospectus. He argues that it is a mistake to call us Homo Sapiens. He thinks that wisdom is not the distinguishing feature of humans; that this title is clearly an aspirational description. Seligman wants us to be called Homo Prospectus, because it is our future-orientation which fundamentally distinguishes us as a species.

We will take a closer look at Martin and his theory on future-orientation soon. I have been thinking a lot recently about the role of time horizons. Many of us in Australia are enduring extensive lockdowns because of a small vaccine hiccup courtesy of our forward-looking Prime Minister. The start of a lockdown is all

about cancelling things – cancelling flights, cancelling workshops, cancelling holidays, cancelling social events, and just clearing the diary. Our time horizon shrinks because the future beyond breakfast can be hazy. I find that this miniaturization of the future definitely reduces my personal level of excitement and increases my lack of discipline. Tasks that I am conscientious about when time is tight, receive less of my attention now that time is plentiful. Of course, others are experiencing time pressure working from home, managing their teams and schooling the children. I am realizing that being able to plan, and pursue commitments into the future, are attractive to me and motivate me.

When I am feeling listless, I start thinking about concentration camps to cheer myself up. I don't mean that in the desperate and ghoulish sense of "things could be worse Richard". When I read the writings of survivors, I find that they have so much to say about how to endure things, find joy and achieve lots. The celebrated author, psychiatrist and survivor of Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl, gave three professional lectures within nine months of his liberation from the infamous concentration camps. The lectures were recently published as a book using his original title for his seminars, *Say Yes To Life In Spite of Everything*. In case that hopeful title suggests to you that Viktor must have had some cushy pathway through the camps, it is worth noting that both his parents, his brother and his pregnant wife were killed there. Viktor Frankl was interested in suicide, or more precisely, how to prevent it. That had been the focus of his medical and hospital work before the war. He already had a growing reputation for his successes. He even snuck a draft of his treatise on the topic into the camp sewn into the lining of a jacket. That didn't survive, but fortunately he did.

Victor became the Professor of neurology and psychology at the University of Vienna Medical School and his more famous book is titled *Man's Search for Meaning*. One aspect of his view seems to line up closely with Seligman's. He argues that those who survived death in the camps were extremely lucky. Those who avoided total despair in the camps were those who still had something left

undone in life and clung to this story, commitment or project. You might say that they held onto their future-orientation, even if ninety-nine percent of their daily energy was focused on their gnawing hunger. In one seminar, Frankl shares with his audience that he used to rehearse giving this very lecture on this very stage, during his daily back-breaking labor in the concentration camp.

Frankl believes that it is meaning which matters most to humans. He argues that it is not just *Consciousness* which is distinctive about humans – whether it is past, present or future-oriented. *Responsibility* is the other distinguishing feature, and it occurs in the present. He is unimpressed by the common question: “What is the meaning of life?”. Victor argues that the correct and more powerful question is: “What is life asking of me in this particular moment”? It is us who provide the meaning to our life by responding moment to moment, circumstance to circumstance, to life’s questioning. We respond through our choices and what we do, how we relate and what we say – responsibility is pragmatic and contemporary. Viktor also views religion as consistent with his thinking. Reflecting on his camp experience, Frankl surprisingly contends that we do not need to be masochists to find meaning even in unavoidable suffering.

In his lectures, Viktor shares how people regularly challenge his focus on the meaningfulness of living. “What about death?” they ask. “What is the point if you are going to die anyway”? Viktor suggests a thought experiment: Imagine that you are immortal. How would that influence how you live your life? He suggests it would result in less achievement and less satisfaction. What would be the point of busting your gut today, if you knew you had all the time in the world to do anything and everything. It is mortality he argues, this fairly definite but unknown time horizon, which spurs our energetic projects. A destination point, even one as negating as death, can encourage us to imbue the present with more meaning. It seems that Viktor’s views both align with Seligman’s future-orientation, and they also diverge.

I am very interested in this notion of future-orientation in the practice of leadership, and I regularly work with terrific Futurists such as my mate Rob Burke on my own leadership programs. I am also someone who practices meditation and tries to be mindful, and who regularly writes about and advocates for the leadership advantages which arise from paying attention and being present. Does that make me flexible or confused? Martin Seligman, the founder of the Positive Psychology movement, clearly thinks it is contradictory. Seligman wrote an Opinion Piece for the New York Times several years ago titled “We Aren’t Meant to Live in the Moment”. In his autobiography *The Hope Circuit*, Seligman describes a particular conference in Sydney where he was sharing the stage with the Dalai Lama. “Holiness”, he recalls asking him, “can I say what bothers me about Buddhism?... Buddhism urges us to live in the present and to be mindful of the present I don’t agree. We are not beings who dwell in the present. Our minds brim with futures. This is not to be fought. The future is our nature. We are creatures who are drawn into the future.” The Dalai Lama remained “unflappably positive” in the face of this news, Seligman assures his readers.

Seligman’s view on the future-orientation of human consciousness is not actually new in the field of philosophy. For instance, in my article “How Can Leaders Be Authentic?”, I explored the notion of “intentionality” in the work of the Existentialists. The fact that the prominent Heidegger became a flag-waver for the Nazis, has soiled that contribution a little. Seligman collaborates with a number of modern philosophers in his book *Homo Prospectus*, but what he brings to the topic are the new perspectives of psychology including the field of neuroscience. Seligman argues that Positive Psychology initially was developed to counter the field’s prevailing emphasis on pathology, and its’ exclusive focus on those folks who were suffering from mental illness or dysfunction. Psychology was ignoring the much larger group of people who were well and functioning okay, but were looking for guidance on how to be more effective and to flourish. I admire this aim. Most leaders with whom I work, apart from the occasional psychopathic CEO, seem to belong to the larger group. Seligman received some flak from critics

for his focus on positivity, and he has often said that he wished he had thought of a better term. I think quite a lot of that criticism has been pretty facile, and amounts to little more than strawman tactics such as “Why do I have to be positive?” More substantive issues have been raised by some researchers, who have questioned whether the outcomes always match the aspirations of the accessible “kitchen-table” methods promulgated by Positive Psychology.

It turns out that it is not just a focus on the **present** that Seligman finds unimpressive, he is gunning for the **past** as well. In *Homo Prospectus*, Seligman argues that traditional psychology has not only been too focused on pathology, it has been too focused on the past and how the past influences our mental well-being and performance. He acknowledges that past traumas and tragedies often have a lifelong impact on people, but he contends that for most of us it is the **future** and our future-orientation which have the greatest influence on issues like well-being, achievement and fulfilment. Seligman claims that the past is an influence, but the future is a drive. Seligman is a scientist, but he tends to communicate in broad strokes. My own experience from working for many years with high-achieving and effective senior leaders, suggests that it is not only those who have experienced traumas and tragedies who struggle to brush-off negative and limiting hangover-effects from their past. And the new honesty about the true extent of sexual assault and violence against children and women, also swells the ranks of those who have experienced actual trauma.

Seligman is very interested in what neuroscientists call the “Default Circuit” of the brain. Thousands of studies have examined what is happening in the brain when participants are focused on a particular external activity such as solving a mathematics’ problem. These studies also ask participants at the start and other times, to lie there and just rest so a contrast can be established in brain activity. This “at rest” status is known as the default circuit. Apparently, it is quite uniform and reliable. The truly surprising element is that the default circuit is the same circuit that lights up when you ask a person to imagine a personal future. For

Seligman, this is the starting point for his hypothesis that future-orientation is our default position. Similarly, studies where participants are pinged five hundred times a day and asked to record what their attention is on at that time, reveal that events in the future outrank the past ten to one. Seligman argues that we have been wrong in thinking that rumination is about the past – it is overwhelmingly about the future. Of course, this doesn't tell us anything about the usefulness of such rumination and fantasizing, but Seligman takes a sanguine view.

We also have been misunderstanding how perception, memory and emotion function, asserts Seligman. Memory is not some filing system or audit of everything that has happened to us. Memory is a selection process, and the reason why humans make such poor eye witnesses and constantly change their recollections over time, is because we are selecting for a particular purpose. We are not selecting for things which had the biggest impact on us back in the old days. We are selecting for memories and versions of the past, which may be useful to us right now, but more importantly, are useful to us in terms of what we are prospecting for the future. Similarly, perception is not producing an exact replica but is like a pixel page comprising the elements we accentuate. The pixels selected align with our expectations, and what we were not expecting, and relate to our particular future-orientation. Again, emotions are not so much about things that are agitating us at the moment, but they are part of our “valence” system which alerts us energetically to focus on those things which most serve the future towards which we are oriented. Subjective feeling becomes the brain's common currency for value, and it lets us compare possible futures.

It is worth remembering that Seligman's theory on Homo Prospectus is still largely a theory, with some tantalizing evidence to corroborate it. There are, however, some fascinating questions and possibilities which the theory provokes. For the field of psychology, the big implication is that the best way to assist people is to

focus on their picture of the future, and to help shape their future-oriented projects. This is clearly a long way from Sigmund Freud and his couch.

Given Martin Seligman's enthusiasm for the future, I asked my colleague Amanda Sinclair for her views on the parallel topic of goal-setting and achievement. Amanda is a long-time Professor and now Professorial Fellow at Melbourne Business School. She has had a very successful academic career, and written numerous books on leadership. Two of her most recent titles are *Women Leading* and *Leading Mindfully*. She has supervised a number of successful younger academics, and received various awards from Melbourne Business School. Amanda and I have collaborated on a range of leadership programs for the past two decades, and we are good friends. The most popular Podcast interview which I have ever recorded is with Amanda, and you can listen to it at www.searleburke.com/podcast/. One of the most lively discussions which Amanda and I have had over all these years has been around the topic of goals. Amanda is not a great fan of goals, and I tend to like them. Amanda is a high achiever, much more than I am, so maybe I should just follow her example.

Amanda accepts that goals may work for others, but she does not think they have played a significant role in her life and career. She also believes that they can be unhelpful. She could not nominate a single goal that she had set for herself during her career. Several days after our interview for this article, she sent me a message to say that she had finally remembered a goal she had pursued in the middle of her academic career. At a birthday party she had declared publicly that she was going to become a yoga teacher. Amanda does believe in "purposeful intent", but she is not attracted to the language of goals which she finds "cognitive, driving, and lacking heart".

She also thinks goal-setting as a process is often very individualistic, becoming a mantra or ideology that we should question, rather than simply adopt or advocate for others. Her remarks remind me of a joke I often tell on my own leadership programs, when I advise participants that if they want to succeed at

CEO interviews, they should double the outlandish promises made by their failed predecessor.

Amanda also associates goals with ego-driven quests, for example the colonial pursuit of conquering the world, and conquering nature. People get attached to their goals, the criteria and conditions for their happiness, and this attachment causes suffering for themselves and others. She is not much impressed with my example of President Kennedy setting the stretch goal to land a man on the moon, and then America successfully marshalling all its' research and resources to achieve it. Amanda reflects that her own approach to achievements has been more organic, and allowing things to unfold. Amanda likes the quote attributed to John Lennon: "life is what happens while you are busy making other plans".

I think there is validity and value in Amanda's approach. One of the great surprises for me in my work with senior managers, has been the level and extent of cynicism they openly express about the stretch goals wrapped in visionary language, which get handed down incessantly to them in their own corporations and organizations. Maybe we don't need a moonshot every year in order to keep the blood pulsating and the achievements flowing. However, I still set goals for myself, and I still assist leaders and organizations to be strategic and set goals for the future. I have written about my thinking, especially regarding the useful distinction between the "future as destination" and "future as emergent context", in the article "Commitment is Powerful: Attachment is Not". Also, see my Tricky Puzzle No 9 which questions whether Goals are Uplifting or a Deadweight.

Should leaders be present or future-oriented? I am going to take my cue from Viktor Frankl here, and say that my answer is Yes.