Leadership in Interesting Times

Klaus Leisinger

Crisis bring forth leadership. Leadership steps up to crisis. What kind of leaders do we need right now to get us through the COVID-19 global crisis?

A Chinese curse, so I heard, imprecates: “May you live in interesting times!” And so we are with the Corona pandemic. Of course, also in such times, the old wisdom applies “What should shine in the world must begin at home.” If everyone cleans in front of his or her home, the whole community improves.

But then most of the really interesting problems we have before us are too big and too complex to be solved at home by ordinary citizens.

Sustainable solutions under such conditions are the result of enlightened multi-stakeholder efforts and wise leadership. Such leaders create a motivating environment for sharing and garnering vital information and for the best minds to evaluate options, co-create solutions. Such leaders encourage broad support for doing what is seen to be the right thing to do.

Women and men who accomplish this are strong leaders. *Strength*, however, not defined as in Rambo movies but in a way, social psychologist and humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm advises.

Leaders according to Fromm have four orientations: care, sense of responsibility, respect and knowledge.

*Care* recognizes people’s needs, strengthens their character, values and self-awareness, motivates them through emotions and shared values. helps others grow and fills them with enthusiasm for a shared vision. Care is being sensitive, respectful and full of recognition!

In business and politics, the inner motivation and contentment of people are essential preconditions for ensuring their personal commitment to the enterprise and so generates sustainable improvement of common wealth and corporate wealth.

*Sense of responsibility* creates in the leader a constructive response to the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of others. In a business context “others” the stakeholders. Meeting the expectations of the financial sector but addressing the needs of corporate staff and the interests of all relevant stakeholders defines excellence in corporate leadership. For political leaders excellence in leadership responds to constituent needs after the election has been won

*Respect for Others* defined by Fromm as the ability to see a person as she or he is, to be aware of his or her unique individuality, and to accept and support it. Respect comprises not only respect for human rights; it also honors the inviolability of human dignity. Such an attitude results in a totally different dimension of thinking and acting than merely seeking compliance with rules and regulations. Respecting the dignity of fellow human beings demands enabling their freedom and participation.

*Knowledge*, to Fromm, penetrates to the core of a leader: it is only possible when one can transcend the concern for self and see the other person in his or her own terms, without the filters of self-interest, considerations of utility, prejudice or the given hierarchical structures.
This is only possible when a person has a sober awareness of his or her own strengths and weaknesses, talents and competences, prejudices and blind spots. All too often (powerful!) people tend to judge their own intellectual, social and other abilities much more favorably than is actually the case.

The Corona Crisis and its handling by different institutions reminds us that everything of importance with regard to care, sense of responsibility and respect for others depends on what people know. Knowledge is a prerequisite for acknowledgement; acknowledgement triggers counteractive measures.

Knowledge is most necessary when the truth is inconvenient for a specific political or corporate agenda.

"Knowledge" is the most important element of good leadership. Good decisions take into account the fact that what individual people regard as objective truth is merely the outcome of various subjective assumptions. Human beings tend to construct their subjective realities on the basis of their individual background and specific socialization, their personal convictions about values and their personal interests. As a consequence, different people perceive things differently, creating conflicting visions of reality where everyone regards his or her reality as the only true reality.

Under these conditions, decisions and actions follow one's personal knowledge and belief, without any awareness of the narrowness of one's own conceptions and without accepting that others may have a different perception of reality. This selfishness is not a proper starting point for ethically responsible decisions – particularly when unexpected events of large magnitude and consequences, black swans, land in our neighborhood. Good leaders act on stakeholder concerns, base their assessment of affairs on the judgment of experts, and communicate truthfully about what they know and what they do not know and, as a consequence, what they propose to do and why.

Those making decisions impacting other people’s lives must be able to convincingly answer the question of “why”. They must have humility to explain the purpose of what is expected from those who should follow their directives. Second, decision-makers must show how their decisions contribute to the public good. Legitimate decisions in business and politics do not only benefit a privileged few but rather contribute to a broader societal objective – the public good.

Leaders who care, shoulder personal responsibility, respect others, and act from knowledge can always help us get through interesting times.