Caretaker vs. Inspirational Leaders

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President John F. Kennedy, in a time beset by civil strife and international crises, turned a nation's eyes to the sky. He gave a nation hope with a simple mission: Put a man on the Moon. His quotation:

> *"We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too."[1]*

Are we beset today by caretakers rather than inspired, inspiring leaders? Is it wiser to maintain the status quo and keep most of the population somewhat content, enabling caretakers to retain their appointed or elected positions? Is there discontent with today's lack of inspired leadership? They say the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy.

This is the first article in a three-part series where we explore a different type of leadership malaise. A malaise of the times. A case where status quo is acceptable due to a multitude of issues. This article introduces the notion that leadership has become a caretaker function. We explore what that means and how this role affects meaningful progress, not perceived progress. We will provide a more meaningful definition of progress considering the challenges facing our nation, the world and our planet.

In the second article, we will introduce the idea that perhaps we have already moved beyond conventional leadership. We will explore specific challenges that leaders face and how some of the 'caretaker' roles, lack of inspiration or just plain mediocrity have changed the overall leadership paradigm. We certainly don't have all the answers, just ideas and thoughts which we will share those with you and solicit your insights.

We will incorporate your thoughts and input in our third installment and explore paths forward: How leaders and the leadership paradigm can change; is there a path beyond conventional leadership? For years we drilled down into issues of leadership quality and effectiveness. We see a future of emerging challenges and barriers that if not mitigated and led through with inspiration and skill, portend alarming consequences, not just for America, but for the world and this ball of mud we all live on.

How Did We Get Here?

Throughout history we have read about or experienced great leaders, good leaders and some poor leaders. We will never see great leaders across the board at all levels of business and government. But having primarily good, competent leaders should be expected. Given the nature of life and business and political cycles, we will always see some poor leaders. In 1969, Laurence Peters introduced the Peter Principle, which posited that people rise to their level of incompetence. Competent people get promoted to a level at which that are over their heads and become incompetent. Fortunately, in the last 70 or so years, we have seen industry leaders who have not reached that

level of incompetence and have been good leaders. Similarly in government the competent have outweighed the incompetent. Of course there are a myriad of other considerations, but let's keep things at 30,000 feet for now.

It appears to us that over the last 10 or 15 years we have seen a significant shift in the majority of leaders being good toward many more who are poor or weak. We have been repeatedly made aware of companies that make significant bad decisions on products, services and investments. We have seen a dramatic change in government leaders who instead of taking responsibility for bad decisions are quick to point the finger elsewhere and try to blame someone else. It is almost as if no one wants to take any responsibility any more. "He made me do it!" "It's their fault!" Why won't any put on their big boy or big girl pants and accept responsibility? Is this leadership?.

We seem to be in a state of no one wanting to accept responsibility and no one wanting to make difficult decisions. Why is this? In our introduction we call this a caretaker mentality. The status quo has become the accepted norm, and no one wants to rock the boat by introducing new and challenging ideas, regardless of whether our customers or our citizens want or need those new ideas. It has become too much about protecting one's turf and ensuring that one will stay the caretaker for the long haul. Disruptive, challenging ideas will force the caretaker to change or leave the leadership position.

Let's look at some recent perspectives. *"Americans are less confident in major U.S. institutions than they were a year ago, with significant declines for 11 of the 16 institutions tested and no improvements for any... This year's poll marks new lows in confidence for all three branches of the federal government - the Supreme Court (25%), the presidency (23%) and Congress. Five other institutions are at their lowest points in at least three decades of measurement, including the church or organized religion (31%), newspapers (16%), the criminal justice system (14%), big business (14%) and the police."[2]*

Another researcher states: *"The year 2020 has become synonymous with grand problems impacting individuals' economic, health, emotional, and social well-being. A broad public opinion attributes these challenges to a leadership crisis. ….Over the past decade, many*

scholars have argued that there is a need to build confidence in our leaders and institutions (Baron & Parent, 2015; Kellerman, 2012; Muff, 2013; Walumbwa et al., 2008). These concerns have led to calls for rethinking the leadership paradigm."[2]

Factors Driving Caretakers

The easiest way to secure one's leadership position, whether in business or government, is to maintain the status quo if it is seemingly acceptable to one's employees, taxpayers, or members. We use the word 'seemingly' for a reason. On a day-to-day basis, most people are concerned about their immediate needs and demands: work, family, budgets, health, etc. As a result, other issues that may not be so personal or pressing become obscure. But in the larger picture, many of these obscure issues can have lasting effects or impacts on quality of life across a broad range of categories. Caretaker leaders thrive on the phenomenon of "If it isn't broken, don't mess with it." In truth, while it may not be broken, it's dysfunctional and will eventually break or break something related.

Distractions are another key element. Most of our readers are familiar with the difference between Urgent and Important. Eisenhower's Urgent vs. Important Principle is:

Important activities have an outcome that leads to us achieving our goals, whether these are professional or personal. Urgent activities demand immediate attention, and are usually associated with achieving someone else's goals.

Sorting out the Urgent from the Important and then making the appropriate decision is a key leadership skill. In a caretaker mode, the urgent and 'unimportant' in the context of Eisenhower's principle can take a leader's energy and resources while affording a leader good press – "see what I have done to prevent this from happening!" This principle also falls into reactive vs. proactive leadership. Then, there is the caretaker mode of ignoring those things that fester but are not highly visible or urgent. Therefore, in the reactive mode distractions become urgent, responding to those distractions becomes a normal caretaker way of doing business.
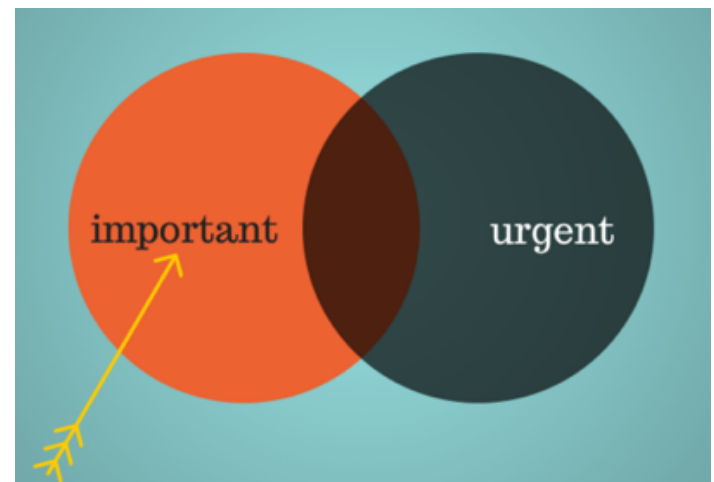
Preservation is another factor. If a person does nothing, then nothing can be assessed, or criticized. Just keep one's nose clean,

be lovable and preserve one's position. This is a sort of ostrich head-in-the-sand modus operandi. Local politicians seem to fit this model quite well. They are good at stroking their constituency with feel-good things like town hall meetings or attendance at community events, but in reality they are there to preserve their job, get reelected and the maintain the status quo. In reality, how much influence or effect can they have? To answer that, the term 'local' needs to defined. I recall meeting with a state senator about an issue with a local state department, a department with an uneven reputation. I explained our situation, the consequences which included good high paying jobs for college students in the summer, and the demonstrable positive impact we were having on their educational experience. While the senator listened over a cup of coffee, absolutely nothing came from that meeting other than a staffer's response acknowledging that it was good to meet me. This is the same senator that holds town meetings to make people feel good. At the town level, preservation and status quo are alive and well. Just keep it going. Unless there is outrage, continue with those services, justify the existence of town departments, create a degree of fear if police and school budgets are reduced, and keep the wheels turning. We are confident our readers can relate to these scenarios and even as one goes up the leadership chains of government and business.

Yet another factor is leaders who want caretakers below them. This makes their job easier. This phenomenon perpetuates the caretaker culture. If no one makes waves then no one has to deal with storms. Just keep the wheels turning. In business this can be a very realistic leadership strategy since the senior people have much control over their subordinates. In politics it's a different dynamic since voters have the final say. With that said, communication becomes a keenly important component of a politician's ability to populate those who supposedly report to them. Not to get into politics but we feel this is how political parties perpetuate themselves. In contrast, to illustrate how this can work in reverse, recall the famous Ronald Reagan quote: 'Are you better off today than you were four years ago?'

Yet another factor is not-for-profit or 501-C3 organizations. Leadership dynamics have other variables. There are organizations whose CEO or designated leader reports to a Board of Directors, and the Board has control over the leadership. In this case a caretaker CEO may be very appropriate if the donations continue and the entity continues to exist. There are other non-profits where 'the community of members' dictate the leadership. Volunteerism is more important and it's easier to attract volunteers if there is a perceived level of stability, even though there may be a festering carbuncle beneath it all.

Inspirational Leadership

Volumes exist on inspirational leadership and how to become an inspirational leader. There are the 'x-number' of characteristics or traits required, or common, to inspirational leaders. As most of our readers already know, we are not believers in checklists to achieve success. Interestingly, recognizing inspirational leadership is evident almost immediately, but certainly not a cookbook endeavor. Those uninspired leaders are equally or even more readily recognizable.

We bring to your attention our writings on Contextual Leadership. See our website: www.themacrisgroup.com/newsletters and select Volume IV, Issue 0-06 Contextual Leadership and Volume II, Issue 03-04, The Elixir of leadership. A Harvard Business Review from April 25, 2017, "How to Be an Inspiring Leader" acknowledges; *Effective leadership isn't generic. To achieve great performance, companies need a leadership profile that reflects their unique context, strategy, business model, and culture—the company's unique behavioral signature.*

Inspiration is tough and takes thought and honest introspection. Those who are able to attend to the unique aspects of their organization or business and compare those aspects with their self-assessments are most likely to achieve inspiration. As a global community, we are in a place where conventional thinking on leadership needs re-examination. We are thinking this reexamination needs to look beyond conventional leadership practices, concepts, training, etc. Do we have answers? Not yet. Do we believe there to be leadership fundamentals even when rethinking conventional leadership? Of course. One of our fundamental premises is many of the answers reside with the various levels within an organization and that thinking needs to be revealed.

Conclusion

We introduced this article indicating we see a three issue set. This one, Caretaker vs Inspirational Leader, which queues up the next one, Beyond Leadership where we introduce why we think there is another leadership paradigm, and solicit your thoughts. Finally, rather than leave the topic open-ended, the last issue will explore paths forward. How leaders can change and is there a path beyond conventional leadership?

1. Houston Space Center, John F. Kennedy Podium
1. Jennifer Ruben, Washington Post, New London Day 8/7/2022
2 "Humanizing to Address the Grand Challenge of Rising Inequalities: Leadership in a Post-COVID World" Shaista E. Khilji Christian E. List