

## **Judging the Past, Present, Future, and Interesting Leadership**

Dear Friend,

Every time, I find the differences and similarities between us enriching. I would likely have also chosen the path of trust regarding the termination of your tenant that you mentioned in your last letter (i.e. that he would just give your keys back). After all, trust is hard to build and easy to lose. Especially as a leader, an act of distrust can cause significant damage quickly.

### **Judging the Past in the Present**

Ultimately, it turned out to be the 'right' choice. The realization that everything often seems logical and clear in hindsight, but rarely upfront, is usually reassuring to me in the moment. And later on, it helps me feel more at peace when I realize in hindsight that I made the 'wrong' choice. This is because the criteria used to judge leaders retrospectively are not necessarily the same ones they had to consider at the time of their decision. Thus, the governor of the province of Luxembourg in your last letter to me can now be perfectly 'unmasked' as a tyrant from the past, while through the eyes of that time, it might have been seen as very normal leadership according to prevailing standards. For me, it's often a matter of both/and, not either/or. This also means that I believe there's something to be said for the idea that human leadership was or is possible in all times.

In this vein, I also follow the reasoning that we will only know in hindsight if World War III has already begun, as Paul Goossens, a Belgian senior journalist suggests. This is an expression of a more systemic adaptive view. This perspective acknowledges that systems can adapt and change in response to their environment, often in an attempt to sustain themselves. However, the behavior of the system is not entirely predictable because it is adaptive. It can evolve and reconfigure itself depending on external and internal influences. Who knows what might still happen in the meantime. 'Events, dear boy, events,' to quote former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

### **Judging the Future in the Present**

This stands in stark contrast to the often more systemic deterministic and normative view I hear many opinion makers, tech gurus, and consultants espouse. This view is popular, especially in Belgium, as it caters to the uncertainty-avoiding nature of the Belgian people. By deterministic, I mean in the sense of being unavoidable. This approach assumes that systems are governed by fixed laws or rules and that their behavior is predictable and predetermined by these laws. Everything in the universe follows from cause and effect. Phrases like 'The AI revolution will change society completely' (fill in the blank), 'in 5 years (strike out what doesn't apply: we will live/work/shop all hours/days) in the metaverse', 'old structures and paradigms in organizations are collapsing and being replaced by (fill in the blank)'...

To be clear, I am sometimes susceptible to this as well. Living with uncertainty is exhausting. And it sometimes puts me in a seeming paradox as a leader. Because where do I get the belief to steer an organization in a certain direction? Especially if that direction initially meets with resistance. Resistance because the criteria of the past are being used to look at a future I am outlining. Because old sensemaking clashes with my new *sensegiving*.

I often find these clashes fascinating. They reveal so much about the system and the desires of the other. By then connecting and exploring this clash together, jointly listening into existence

the common future of the system/organization, we manage to bridge that gap in meaning-making.

In what I then listen to, I take a more holistic system view. This assumes that a system has a sort of built-in developmental direction (teleological) (so in that respect it has something normative). What this is, is often for me to explore together, to feel, given its history, market signals, where 'natural' energy lies in the system, etc. You never know the direction entirely upfront, but once we collectively have a good feeling about it, we can make a collective 'leap of faith' as an organization towards that supposed logical future. Leadership for me then also doesn't feel like being coercive or forcing others. It's not about my vision either, but about what the system already carries within it and that we can better bring out together. So more the sculptor whose statue is already in the rock, than the painter who still has to fill the blank canvas. And again, both/and, this form of leadership will certainly not find fertile ground everywhere.

### **Interesting Leadership, Isn't It?**

This holistic approach requires a form of 'interesting leadership'. Inter-esting means being in-between. 'Interest is therefore essential as a leader; otherwise, you quickly miss the mark,' said Guido Rijna, communications advisor for the Dutch Government Information Service, recently at a leadership and polarization conference where I also had the opportunity to speak. But interesting leadership, being open to the unknown, is not always fun; it's sometimes exhausting. Ultimately, it remains Sisyphean labor, that Man in Revolt (cf. Albert Camus). And then individual hatred lurks, as Václav Havel would say. More so, collective hatred is 'better' here, because it's even more energy-efficient and advantageous, he argues:

It makes life easier. You no longer have to think. There is a scapegoat.

- It relieves people of loneliness, abandonment, a sense of weakness, powerlessness, which helps them overcome feelings of undervaluation and failure. You can join in immediately. No exam needed. One statement is enough.
- People can mutually assure their self-worth: either in their expressions of hatred against the hated, or by emphasizing the value of the community through symbols and rituals (clothing, signs, flags, chants,...).
- The collective expression of hatred also gives a sense of backing for aggression. There is no individual responsibility anymore.

I may be making it bigger than it is, but leading up to the elections, political parties in Flanders are now presenting you with a series of scapegoats: the foreigner, the Walloon, the rich, or the non-working. You name it. We'll tackle that group, and then the problems will melt away in the sun. Nice and simple and soothing. We can stop thinking now.

I feel that scapegoat logic grates against me, and I oppose it: we'd better consider each other. Listen to the other side as well. On the other hand, here I go again with my both/and thinking, I often wonder lately if we haven't collectively become overly sensitive. Perhaps precisely because we have started to consider each other more and more. Think of all those leadership and organizational insights of the past 10 years: shared leadership, i-deals, self-management, deep democracy, sociocracy 3.0, etc. Are we not feeding the narcissistic beast in each of us with this? Are we not making ourselves too important as individuals? Are we not making it impossible

as a society, organizations, and for leaders by wanting to build policies and systems tailored to each individual...?

A happily searching greeting,

Jesse