Leading in Wicked Times:
A Radical Shift to Inquiry, Humility, and Fairness

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We argue that humanity is facing an increasing number of wicked problems, including the current COVID pandemics. Wicked problems are novel, complex, without a single "right" answer, and provide an ultimate test of true leadership, as distinct from management. We suggest that effective leadership in the face of wicked problems calls for a very different set of virtues than those traditionally associated with leadership. These virtues include both confidence and humility, decisiveness and fairness, empathy and courage. We discuss the specific leadership behaviors through which leaders can enact these virtues. Importantly, we suggest that in the face of wicked problems, different behaviors are required at each of the five stages of making decisions: framing the problem, exploring alternatives, "taking" decision, execution, and learning. We illustrate using examples of Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, Gretchen Whitmer, Charlie Baker, and Andrew Cuomo, amongst others.

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Running head: LEADING IN WICKED TIMES

Many remarkable things happened during the COVID pandemic. The Black Lives Matter demand for ending racial bias and injustice is undoubtedly one. Another is the tale of leadership: terrible fatality rates expose so-called strong leadership as unfair and ineffective. Brazil and the US come to mind.

New figures have entered the Hall of Fame of leadership for us to aspire to. Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, has gained gold medals in sequential crisis "Olympics" (Christchurch shooting, early eradication of COVID in spring 2020), with childbirth in between. German Chancellor Angela Merkel came back from political sunset in her typical low-key, factual style. Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, and Charlie Baker, governor of Massachusetts, had the courage and foresight to take a series of preventive decisions early to manage the COVID outbreak in their states. Andrew Cuomo's leadership provided a stark contrast with that of POTUS. His political status has never been higher, notwithstanding a sanitary catastrophe that could have ended his political career. Each has a story to tell, and it is refreshing. It might well describe the "new normal" in 21st-century leadership. And it has the theory to back it up.

Leaders facing wicked problems

COVID is vicious and deadly and now stands for a chain of crises: health, medical, economic, social, and political. The current pandemic has all the characteristics of a *wicked* problem (as opposed to a *tame* one): it is novel in its emergence, complex, without a single "right" answer or specific protocol to be followed. Potential solutions can only be described as "better" or "worse" in particular aspects. (1, 2, 3) Together with climate change and

racism, COVID probably establishes an unfortunate gold standard amongst wicked problems.

Wicked problems test a leader's ability to cope and deal with issues that have no obvious solution and that keep changing. As such, wicked problems provide an ultimate test of true *leadership*, as distinct from *management*. Leadership involves taking the initiative in resolving *novel* problems, changing the status quo. Management requires dealing with *known* issues and maintaining the status quo. Restocking home pantry, fixing the roof, and ensuring people are healthy attests to the importance of management. Leadership comes to the fore in times like now, when uncertainty, collective anxiety, and human tragedies abound, all begging for innovative answers to a level of wickedness not seen before.

Begin with framing the problem right and beware of being wrong

To address wicked problems, proper framing of the problem is critical. Nothing may be worse than purposefully executing an excellent answer to the wrong question. Taxation of carbon fueled cars might be one such instance. POTUS framing his main issue as reelection in November is another. What specific emerging problems should we address now? Where are we headed, in the medium run? In the long term? What will happen if we do not act now? Who needs to be involved? Who can be affected or help? And when the problem is wicked, regular revision is the game as more information and knowledge will reveal that the apparent problems are symptoms of other possibly deeper problems.

The leader's first task is to zero in on framing the root of the problem. The COVID pandemic is a problem, but what is the specific underlying issue that needs addressing first?

Effective leadership starts not with barking out a bunch of orders, but rather with framing – with plenty of help by qualified experts and advisers – what is truly at stake and what might happen if we do not dare to address the issue thoroughly and early enough. Jacinda Ardern, Gretchen Whitmer, and Angela Merkel did precisely that in the outbreak when none or only a handful of cases became identified. (4, 5, 6) That's what Bolsonaro and Trump got so wrong.

Engage broadly and prioritize ASK over TELL

Good leaders in wicked times realize that they cannot solve the problem alone and that all have and can contribute. Thus, these leaders practice plenty of asking and listening to experts who know more about the problem than them, each with their own bias. They also engage those who will be key to successful execution – and who possess the operational knowledge to navigate the terrain best. These leaders understand that wicked problems require a great deal of discipline and alignment, including those who could stand in the way of unsuccessful execution (e.g., some people behaving recklessly in COVID times).

The continuous engagement of many individuals amounts to the partial outsourcing of one's leadership and requires building an entire community engaged in resolving the problem. As a business leader told us recently, it is about "YOU and I" committing to be one chain of leadership fighting the predicament.

At its core, leadership to solve wicked problems requires prioritizing ASK over TELL. The magic – and the paradox – is that with the use of questions, one both outsources *and* exercises leadership, effectively dealing with the problems while building collective

commitment, individual trust, and learning, all at the same time. (7, 8) "What would you do in this situation?" or, more simply, "What do you see or know that could help us? How do you frame the problem?" are examples of the guiding questions here.

Combining humility with justified self-confidence

Leading by ASKING is as basic as it is subtle. However, it is quite uncommon among so-called "strong" leaders who love to TELL what they believe the problem and the solution to be. And this is also why more dictatorial leaders are bound to cause lots of damage when fighting wicked problems, even if they genuinely mean in their delusional ways to lead their flock to the promised land. While basic and subtle, leading in ASK or inquiry mode is not simple, as it requires a combination of self-confidence and humility. It stands 180 degrees from the classic "Right, Pence?" leaving the latter with the single option of acknowledging yet another statement of unverifiable or untrue "facts," or lies.

The global world is complex and interdependent. The insistence on simplistic answers, if not slogans, creates it's own wicked dynamic, forcing execution too far in the wrong direction, and leading followers into a tragic inferno fueled by the leader. This tragedy is unraveling in front of our eyes in the US when states reopen too early. Napoleon's leading his Grand Army into Russia follows the same logic.

Maintain and build credibility based on process, hard truths, and admitting mistakes

Successful leaders facing wicked problems know that a wrong framing of the problem – or a failure to recognize the real problem early enough – can be deadly. The best answers to the wrong question are not only harmful but extremely dangerous, amplifying

the wickedness itself. These leaders know that they will need to revisit their initial framing and that it is essential for them to retain their credibility throughout this revision, as it is the core of a leader's license to operate. They speak not of decisions but a *journey* towards a solution. This journey can be called *a leadership process*, involving many choices, some right, others wrong ones, requiring honesty and humility when one has failed.

In the face of wicked problems, leaders who cannot see or admit that they have been wrong (in good faith) will soon lack credibility, and the world will eventually pass them by. In contrast, effective leaders are not afraid to share hard truths and admit to not knowing. They do not need to invent hoaxes or fake enemies to motivate their troops; the wicked reality is plenty to focus upon and direct all energies. As we stated earlier, wicked problems change over time, so challenges shift with them. And sometimes, new challenges require engaging new leaders, as is the case when incumbent leaders burn out themselves, or their troops, by doggedly pursuing the wrong course of action. It takes humility and self-awareness to stay or to leave.

Engage the world also in creatively searching for "good" or "better" options

Having framed the problem's real roots, leaders can start looking for solutions, lines of defense, and options. In the face of wicked problems with a lot of uncertainty, one cannot afford to jump to the first solution they think of or hear, for other solutions might be more productive. Adopting the wrong answer in a wicked problem makes things even more vicious. This second phase of the leadership process is thus devoted to exploration, to the generation of several alternate options. It also provides a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem and possible solutions. Technology here allows a much richer contribution

"from the world" through, for example, "solution tournaments" where leaders engage others for answers. (9) An excellent example of this is the current global race for a COVID vaccine.

The courage to "take" a decision when not all is known

Then comes the third phase, where a decision does not so much need to be "made", since many options have already been created, but rather "taken" – as in the French "*Prendre la décision*." This "decision-taking" is entirely at odds with the picture of "heroic" leaders "making" their own decisions without the knowledge and buy-in of their team. On the contrary, effective leaders will encourage their teams to challenge them to gain awareness of the challenges in front of them.

The "decision-taking" phase is the time for the decision to become apparent in the leader's mind. A high number of intense debates equip the leader with a profound rationale for the decision and against those alternatives not chosen. It also is the time to close the discussion and show that the leader is inclusive, for sure, yet decisive, as we expect leaders to be. It is the moment to announce the transition to the next phase of the battle, devoted to enacting the decision.

The decision stage of the leadership process is the time of big pronouncements, with a convincing and robust TELL, built on plenty of previous ASK and discussion. Churchill, in his remarkable "we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender", is a noteworthy example of this clarity and courage in the decision. (10) It is also the time to set the expectations for success that "we, the people" can legitimately hold in the contract that binds us with our leader. It is the time for brutal

honesty, Merkel, or Cuomo-style. (11) Tempered with plenty of empathy and compassion to not terrorize, but to engage and motivate, to generate hope and commitment grounded in a thoughtful framing of the problem and thorough testing of many alternatives. It is grounded hope that many of Jacinda Ardern's and Cuomo's public addresses over the last months so gently and at the same time powerfully conveyed. There is no place here for delusional or reckless hope or one based on ideology or charisma, two sure paths to value destruction in the face of wicked problems.

Give the decision a fair chance to succeed by committing to full and purposeful execution

Good leaders know that in the face of considerable uncertainty, one should give the chosen decision the best chance. They will continue to communicate the decision to all concerned, with a missionary zeal, but reminding that time for discussion has passed. That is now the time to put all energies into winning the battle "and do what we have decided."

Full and unhesitant commitment to execution is needed at this phase, fueled by a recognition that if we fail, it will not be because of a lack of responsibility, but instead because the decision was not the right one or circumstances changed. Cuomo excels in this phase and is not shy of showing numbers to back up progress while admitting it is still a gamble ("*but then there are other solutions we may have to turn to ...*"). COVID has shown this with the masks: countries that adopted them with discipline did well, the others met fates proportional to their indecision … or to their inability to recognize they were wrong.

The need to evaluate, learn the lessons, and adapt as needed

We come to the final step in the leadership journey: the need to review the progress, or the lack thereof. Wicked problems precisely allow for plenty of mistakes. They require nearly instant learning as more information becomes available, and the context changes. Merkel excels here, her scientific background proving a real asset, driving a disciplined evaluation of results and progress achieved, with a predominance of data over opinion or ideology. So-called "pit-stops" or "progress reviews" will allow at this phase a comparison of performance against the expectations announced at decision time. If the promised land is not there, it may be the time to admit that the decision taken was wrong, perhaps due to changed circumstances or in the light of new information. It is the time to evaluate what went well – and should be maintained – and what went wrong – and should be changed.

This ability to hold oneself responsible, particularly for defeat, defines great leaders, who see or sense failure before others. It is something dictators, and narcissists hate to do and thus fail to do. Those psychological tendencies precisely prevent them from recognizing failure, leading their learning muscles and reflexes to deteriorate and ultimately vanish altogether. It is the time for the lonely night, for personal reflection as to whether "one still has it" and questions such as "what is the world telling me? what do I need to change?" Answered positively, a new cycle of engaging and framing, exploring, deciding, and execution is initiated, which will also be closed with another "pit stop."

Fairness as the ultimate leadership virtue

The leadership cycle we have presented here is called "*Fair Process Leadership*." It is a leadership based on a 5-step iterative process of framing the problem, exploring alternatives, disciplined decision making, followed by execution, and finally, evaluation

review, learning, and adaptation. (12) Wicked problems are terrifying because the outcomes can be so unfair, winners and losers being generated more by luck and wickedness as by enlightened leadership. Often, like the COVID pandemic, or racism and poverty, outcomes depend on the hand one was dealt with, not only by any action of one's own. "Life is unfair," children do not choose their parents or the district they are born.

This unfairness is why the leader facing wicked problems has to rest his leadership on a fair leadership process, as wicked problems indeed do not offer much of a guarantee of fair or merit-based outcomes. Wicked problems produce more martyrs than heroes, and the latter often go unnoticed and unrewarded. Many new leaders have a deep sense of public service and sacrifice. They are very aware that outcomes risk having brutal consequences, and that these outcomes will only be seen as fair if – as in an excellent court proceeding – they are the result of a fair hearing, and more broadly of a fair leadership process. It is such a process that generates both trust and individual and collective commitment. Abraham Lincoln knew this so well having to deal with one of the wickiest problems in US history, a savage civil war, the end of slavery, and the purposeful introduction of equal justice for all US citizens, winners or losers, black or white.

Conversely, and as science has proven repeatedly, an unfair process creates divisions, distrust, and a lack of commitment. This quasi-linear relation between the quality of the fairness in the leadership process and the quality of outcomes reached is one of the insufficiently known facts of social science. (13) Because great leaders know they cannot guarantee a good result for all, they rely on the fairness of the leadership process to draw and sustain the commitment of people they lead. The repeated and prolonged violation of

justice by dictators ultimately leads to their fall, unfortunately not without having sown heaps of destruction.

Humility and fairness define genuinely "strong" leadership

Our final point is to comment on the persuasive examples of women leaders such as Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, or Gretchen Whitmer. They are striking because if one looks at justice, one must admit that all statues of justice are women. Blind women, to eliminate bias in the application of justice. This practice dates back to the Roman Emperor Augustus, who introduced Iustitia as the goddess of justice, holding both a balance and a sword. Some have argued that men will instinctively go for the sword and start "executing" hoping afterward to have done the right things and serve the just cause.

Our point here is more metaphorical. While there could still be some association between the male image with that of "strong" leadership, there is nothing "soft" or "unmanly" about leading fairly, with humility and authenticity. On the contrary, doing so requires large doses of courage and self-confidence. Going forward, these will become the characteristics of strong and effective leadership. The sooner leaders at all levels have the courage to lead with humility and fairness, the sooner humanity will, in our view, make a huge step forward.

Summing up

We have tried to argue that effective leadership in the face of wicked problems calls for a very different set of virtues than those traditionally associated with leadership. These virtues include both confidence and humility, decisiveness and fairness, empathy and

courage. These virtues are neither male nor female. They are ultimately universal human virtues, celebrated in the Roman and Greek Pantheons and followed by our western societies in their emblems of justice.

The point of this article is that these leadership virtues are to be recognized and understood, as they define the leadership that is essential if we are to resolve the wicked problems facing humanity today. The global world will continue to generate wicked problems. Different leadership is required. It is the leadership evidenced by Ardern, Merkel, and Whitmer, amongst many others, for all to emulate, men and women.

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understood that the notion of fairness in process and discourse was the key to

happiness prevailing in their cities and empires. Rousseau later referred to it as *Le*

Contrat Social. The Founders cemented this in the American Constitution, which

does not guarantee equal outcomes or equal wealth, but equal rights, an aspiration

that fueled the Black Lives Matter movement today.