

A sneak preview to:

Dare to Un-Lead

The Art of Relational Leadership
in a Fragmented World

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Preface

My late maternal grandmother, Lucienne, was born in Calais, France, in 1907.

She was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper who was a father to twenty-one children—eleven with his first wife and, after she died, ten more with my great-grandmother. The children were so numerous and so spread out my grandmother told me she often forgot the names of her half-siblings.

Lucienne was seven years old when she started school, but soon stopped because of the First World War;

By nine she was working to help the family make ends meet. Child labor in France was prohibited in 1874 but was still quite common in factories like the one that made lace where my grandmother worked. There she and the other children would do jobs that, because of their relatively small scale, were simpler for them. My grandmother's job was to crawl under the lace machinery to pick reels and thread that had fallen. I recall her telling me that the forewoman would lock her and the other child workers in the toilets on the days the labor inspector came to the factory.



Céline Schillinger - [weneedsocial.com](https://www.weneedsocial.com)

By her early twenties, Lucienne was already a veteran wheeler at the factory.



She kept on working hard and became a cleaner for well-off families after she and her husband moved to Bordeaux in the southwest of France.

Her experience of work and life couldn't be more dissimilar to mine. I was born and raised in a small town near Bordeaux, France, in a stable and loving family. My parents, both young art teachers, had met in art school a few years before. I'm the eldest of three daughters. My mother was the first of her extended family to attend graduate school. My father's family, with roots in Alsace near Germany, belonged to the lower middle class. Both my parents enjoyed a simple but joyful childhood in a country recovering bit by bit from the Second World War. From an early age, my father enjoyed freedoms that would shock today—hitchhiking across Europe, for example, at the age of fifteen.

My parents were always curious, creative humanists. Together, they traveled the world, visiting close to a hundred countries in the simplest way possible, meeting and interacting with the locals. Since they retired, they have spent several months each year in remote locations around the globe, helping educational charities. My mother is a talented portrait photographer. Her hands are always at work; she cannot stop creating and never seems to tire. My father is also a maker, passionate about manual crafts that demand effort and precision, full of admiration for master artisans. He seems able to do anything.

This is the environment that I was lucky to grow up in: creative, stimulating, free-spirited, open to the world, not rich but financially secure.

It was egalitarian, too. My parents shared the same profession, as well as the household chores. With no brother to compete with, we sisters grew up taking women's rights for granted. For quite some time, there was nothing in my personal experience to disprove this worldview.

Opportunities came my way and I grabbed them.

However, when thinking about leadership, societal change, and the contents of this book, my mind travels back to my grandmother's life. Being reminded of the hardships she endured as a natural course of the life she led at the time she led it compels me to not squander the opportunities life has given me, and it keeps me connected to the hardship of labor still experienced today by many people across the world.

While child labor persists in some underdeveloped nations, in the West it is largely considered a tool of a bygone era; a tool which no longer serves us well. Across industrialized nations it was recognized that by educating children, we would, collectively, get further ahead. What got us through the beginning of the Industrial Revolution would not work to get us where we envisioned ourselves in the future, and so, we adapted.

Similarly, and much more recently, I've recognized a global need to adapt from traditional models of leadership to something that will propel us forward with new collective work practices that respect people and drive economic growth. Unfortunately, many dominant leadership and management practices still in use around the world today are inherited from scientific management theory and its derivatives. These revolutionized manufacturing and enabled great business outcomes throughout the twentieth century and were gradually adopted by other fields, from education to sport.



But the context in which we now live, trade, and work in the twenty-first century has little in common with that of Frederick Taylor or Henry Ford.

The anachronism of their approach has fueled growing dissatisfaction about how decisions are made, how corporations are run, and how our societies function.

As globalization and technology accelerate, and as our values and social norms—especially those related to traditional hierarchies and authority—evolve, the business world needs to keep pace. Value creation has profoundly shifted in recent years, as have consumer expectations. All of this is pushing organizations to reinvent themselves. A new mode of leadership will need to be at the forefront of this change if it is to be sustainable and positively impactful on society.

And it is possible. A leadership model that is more respectful of people, while generating greater economic value is within reach. There is no need for complicated methods; three universal values provide the pathways to reinventing leadership. They are Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

Liberty

Far from being an obstacle to the smooth running of an enterprise, Liberty is an accelerant. It allows people to exercise judgment, escape the pitfalls of arbitrariness, and develop their agency. Collective freedom begins with the emancipation of the individual, a transformational experience that is undergone by anyone who aspires to change agency. To extend freedom at scale, a different kind of leadership is required, putting new and sometimes counterintuitive principles at the heart of managerial practices.

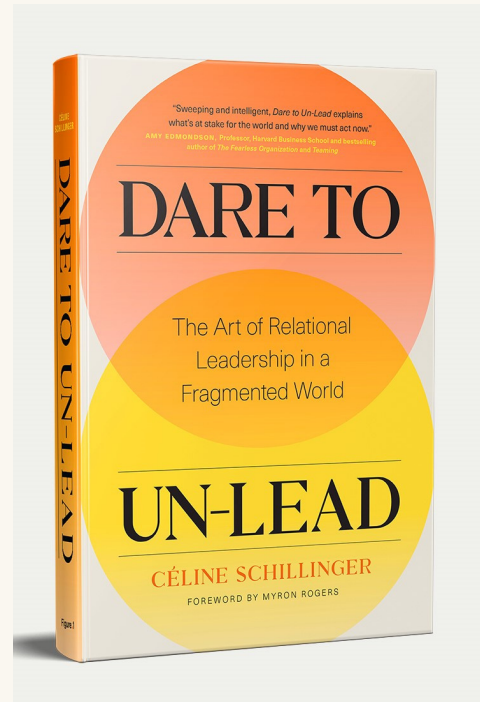
Equality

Inequalities in status and access to information, domination relationships, and obedience have become obstacles to the performance of organizations. A semblance of equality cannot mask the difficulties organizations face when dealing with the diversity of people. Yet there is a phenomenal opportunity before us in the shape of networks, as well as the technology and human relationships that enable them. Networks, as organizational design principles, allow for new, highly effective collective work practices, replacing domination with peer leadership that has the capacity to inspire agility and innovation.

Fraternity

Fraternity is a challenge in a contemporary society marked by individualism, distrust, and competition. This is about so much more than teambuilding and efficiency. To focus on that alone will deliver no more than superficial results. True fraternity stems from a shared commitment to a common cause in an activist movement. Activism—its psychological drivers, its engagement mechanisms, its tools—offers organizations and leadership an immense opportunity to progress. Corporate activism enables the formation of communities based on intent and impact. These are two key drivers of human and economic performance that can activate the radical reinvention of leadership.

Dare to Un-Lead explores the opportunities we have to collectively transform leadership through the personal experiences I have had in working with others to plot and test people-focused, digitally enabled, collective work practices. All of them have been internationally recognized for their ability to engage people and transform business outcomes for broader social good. I wanted to understand why they worked and how they could be expanded to more organizations. This book is the result of a deep analysis of leadership, studied through multiple lenses, timely sources of knowledge, and a set of universal principles. The result is an offering of original insights and evidence-based pathways for reinventing collective performance in a post-pandemic world. This book will assist those looking to perform better individually and collectively and who desire to be agents of permanent change in leadership and governance.



[Buy Dare to Un-Lead](#)



From large corporations to small businesses, the lessons learned here, implemented individually and collectively over time, will make our workplaces more equal, our jobs more gratifying, and our economies more profitable.

And that will make the world a better place.



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Leadership Matters

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the global population to navigate waters rarely traveled. Unlike previous worldwide catastrophes in modern history, World Wars I and II and the 1918 influenza pandemic, our new interconnected world—from global supply chains to expanded travel opportunities to our reliance on social media—has made this pandemic an unprecedented, shared experience. Across continents, borders closed and cities went silent. Citizens struggled with anxiety and grief. Many worked from home when it was possible. Many applauded the heroic healthcare workers. And across the globe as the virus spread, hordes of data were collected, analyzed, and shared.

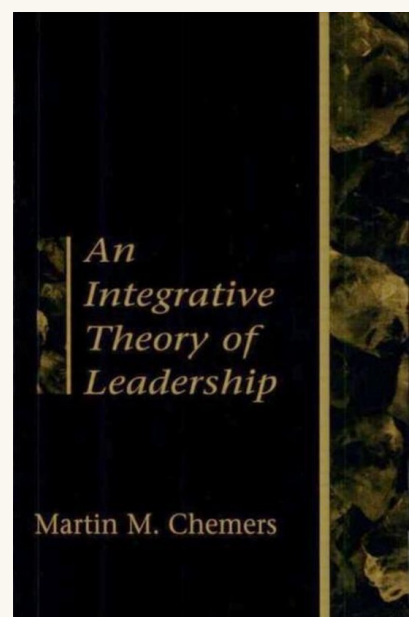
Yet the reaction to the pandemic was vastly different from country to country, from organization to organization.

Some were seen as prompt, orderly, and quite successful in limiting the loss of life and the impact on human activity. Others were slow to respond and caused confusion with their messaging and actions, resulting in both chaos and rage.

Why? I believe the answer lies in leadership.

In *An Integrative Theory of Leadership*, Martin Chemers offers the following definition:

“Leadership is a process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.”



Leadership, then, has very real consequences. People's lives are shaped—in the worst cases, shortened—by the effects of leadership. Those endowed with leadership responsibilities, and their actions while occupying leadership positions, affect each and every one of us, for better and worse, in our everyday lives.

From the time I became interested in the outside world till now, I have observed patterns and trends that in the most part did not evolve as I had hoped. In my corporate life, for nearly thirty years, I have often struggled with traditional leadership. I call it “traditional” because I am convinced it reflects a bygone era and does not serve us well anymore. What got us here won't get us there: context and aspirations have changed vastly. Methods from the past no longer accommodate the evolution of our societies, of businesses, and of organizations. What is still revered as leadership is often a noxious set of obsolete behaviors that harm individuals and societies, and that must be reinvented.

What Got Us Here Won't Get Us There

As we transition from an industrial society to a knowledge-based one, Canadian futurist Michel Cartier has identified five crises, one each relating to the economy, geopolitics, ecology, human generations, and energy, and all are occurring simultaneously. Since early 2020, the global pandemic has added a sixth. If there is a common denominator to all crises, I believe it is leadership. We have reached this multi-crisis state because we are stuck with a certain type of leadership that is profoundly detrimental to our world.

We need leaders who can gain a better understanding of the world around them, who can facilitate connections between different domains and areas of expertise, and who can enable us to change what doesn't work.

If this can be achieved, then we might be able to take a systemic and multidisciplinary approach to resolving some of crises of the twenty-first

century, making progress at greater speed and with more impact.

But how do we get there?

Societal Transformation

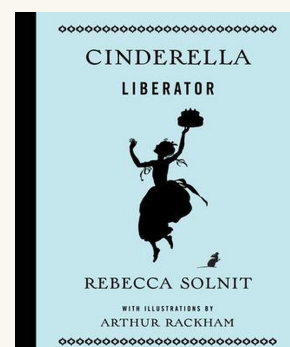
“Can we read together tonight?” In response to my daughter’s increasingly rare request for a bedtime story, I selected a copy of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales from the shelf, lay down next to her, and started to read. It had been a long time since I had ventured into this world of wolves, witches, and princes, and was the first time we had read these particular tales together.

The first story gave me mixed feelings. The second story left me uneasy. I stopped in the middle of the third.

“Do you realize what the king is doing?” I asked. She did—far better than I had done at her age. The king had claimed the poor peasant’s daughter as a bride, because she was pretty. The father had no choice but to give her to him. However, the king imagined three challenges for the young girl to complete, to make sure she was worth it. Should she fail at one, he would kill her. Only through magic was she able to complete the three challenges and become the king’s wife. That’s it. The story celebrated her ingenuity—and it chilled me to the bone.

Thankfully, there was also a copy of Rebecca Solnit’s *Cinderella Liberator* on the shelf, to which we quickly turned after setting aside the misogynist tales.

Our perceptions change. Our collective values and expectations evolve. Whether we like it or not, society transforms itself in many ways. It is a fact of life. But what precisely is it about these changes that is relevant to leadership today? What has caused the disconnect that exists between citizens, employees, and their leaders? What is it that makes traditional leadership feel obsolete?



Perhaps leadership hasn't kept pace with the dramatic changes we have experienced over the course of the past century. Those changes, from many perspectives, have been more rapid and more profound than anything our species has previously witnessed. They have transformed how we behave, as well as what we value.

Human Change

It is not just the world around us that changes ever more rapidly; we do too.

Collectively, we experience more friction and fragmentation than previous generations. Our lives have been transformed by the effects of technology and the anxieties created by contemporary uncertainties. These have all served to modify the context in which decision-making and leadership take place.

It has never been easy for humans to agree on anything. That's why rules, norms, and institutions have been created: by channeling dissent, by enabling consensus, they organize our coexistence. But it is a process that is becoming more and more arduous.

There are a number of reasons why, but one clearly relates to demographics. In 1907, when my grandmother was born, there were 1.75 billion people on the planet. Around a century later, when my daughter was born, there were 6.92 billion. By the time she turns fifty, it is predicted that there will be 10 billion. Thanks to sanitation, vaccines, and improved socioeconomic conditions, we now coexist for longer. In 1950, the average global life expectancy was 45.7 years, whereas by 2015 it had risen to 72.5 years. What once were large cities are now mega-cities—huge metropolitan areas that are home to tens of thousands of people in each square kilometer.

Another reason we have a difficulty coexisting relates to our increased mobility, with a large number of us moving away from our local communities because of work, study, poverty, war, or ecological and climatic disasters.

Two hundred seventy-two million people, or 3.5 percent of the world's population, do not live in the country in which they were born. In France, close to 10 percent of the population was born in another country,

and now find themselves blending beliefs and customs from different cultural traditions. The decline of religion in Europe and the Americas, moreover, means that there is a large proportion of young people who have drifted away from the normative practices that shaped their parents' and grandparents' lives

With the development of transportation and technology, global trade has boomed, expanding further with offshoring, outsourcing, and the development of complex supply chains. From the blue-collar worker in Pennsylvania to the farmer in Kenya, no one in the world is immune from the effects of globalization, experiencing the jolts of distant political upheavals, trade wars, and tensions regarding national borders and immigration. The rapid spread of COVID-19 from one part of the world to another illustrates this perfectly. Our interdependencies are very real and can create antagonism. When borders are suddenly closed, supply chains break down, food and key products like medicine and protective clothing become scarce, fingers are pointed, and scapegoats are sought out.



With even more people on the planet living increasingly fragmented lives that are shaped by cultural and economic frictions, it is next to impossible to achieve consensus on anything.

This is a situation rendered even more complex by technological revolution.



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Transformative Technology

In March 2020, Pascal Coppens reported on China's deployment of an impressive array of technologies as part of its response to the coronavirus outbreak and management of a lockdown situation:

Drones are being deployed everywhere in the cities to see if people are wearing their masks, to disinfect areas, and to [check people's] temperature... Everywhere on the streets you could see self-driving delivery cars hovering around to deliver groceries to people in lockdown... Meanwhile, advanced AI has been used to help diagnose the corona virus and to find a vaccine.

With the advent of the internet and of greater computing capabilities, tech revolutions keep coming at an ever-accelerating pace. In Future Politics, Jamie Susskind calls our future a "digital lifeworld": a system that links human beings, machines, and data. "Increasingly capable systems, increasingly integrated technology, increasingly quantified society" are its defining features. It is a world that produces and processes ever more information.

We know that the way information is processed, tweaked, and presented affects how we behave, what we purchase, who we vote for. But Michel Cartier goes even further: each tech disruption actually changes the way our brains work. Their curves are exponential and interrelated.

Cartier writes:

In each new era (Prehistory, Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Industrial Era and post-industrial era) there is a significant increase in population accompanied by an equally significant increase in the amount of information being put into circulation

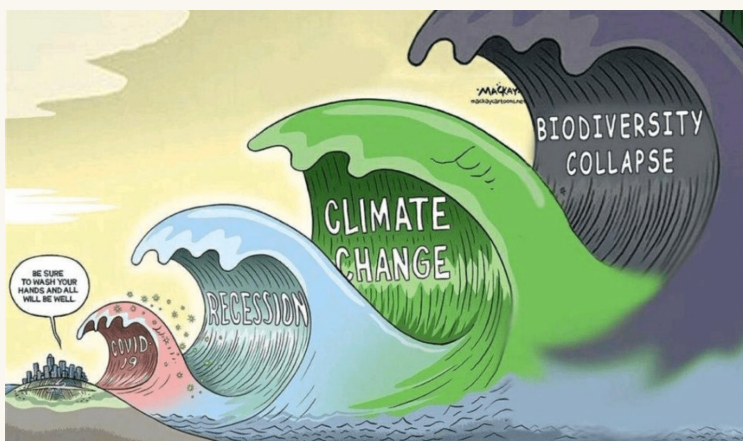
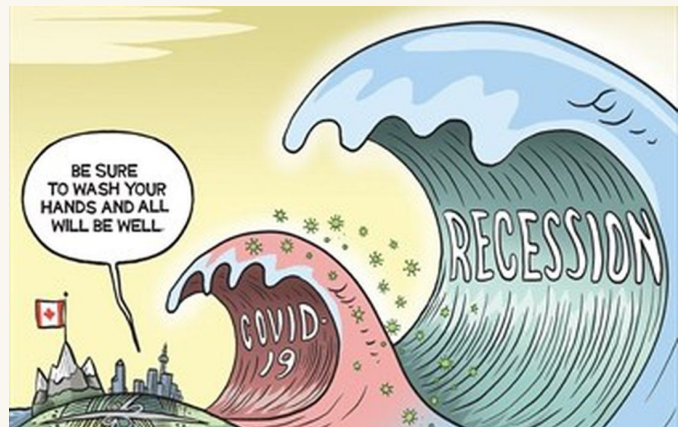
And:

- With each major leap in population and information, society creates a new communication technology: printing, cinema, television and the Internet are all milestones in our history.
- With each of these leaps, the human brain becomes more complex in order to adapt to the mutations of the new space-time.
- Our children will be different from us because their brains (in fact, their synaptic connections) will be configured differently.

We are already very different from our parents, just as our children are different from us.

World-pain

In March 2020, the Hamilton Spectator, in Ontario, Canada, published a cartoon by Graeme Mackay that was frequently shared online as the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic became evident. It depicts a city in which the citizens are advised to wash their hands. On the horizon is the



COVID-19 tsunami sweeping toward the city, behind which rises an even larger recession tsunami. Later variants added two more gigantic waves, one relating to climate change and the other to biodiversity collapse.

From the start of the global lockdown, there was a historic rise in mental health problems, with the coronavirus pandemic adding to the anxiety induced by other major stressors, not least among them the climate catastrophe and its implications for life on the planet. As I review these lines near Córdoba in Spain, the temperature has reached 49°C (120°F). This is unsustainable in the long term. Climate migrants are in the millions already around the globe. Economic turmoil, inequality, corruption, the decline of democracy in some countries, trade wars, and military conflicts are broadcast to billions of screens every minute of the day. The situation feels beyond anyone's control, creating a sense of helplessness. German Romantic author Jean Paul has coined a term that succinctly sums up the feelings that are elicited by the MacKay cartoon, and that are felt by people across the globe daily—*Weltschmerz*, “a deep sadness about the inadequacy or imperfection of the world.”

Or, in English, world-pain.

Fear is a political agenda in itself, fueled by those who reap its economical or electoral benefits. It is the source of conspiracy theories and of the rejection of science. Twenty-one percent of the French population believe in at least five conspiracy theories; the same proportion of Americans who believe that the Illuminati control the world. Vaccine deniers dismiss scientific evidence that vaccines are safe and effective. Consequently, there has been a resurgence of diseases like measles and other avoidable illness, including for young children.

Uncertainty and fear also generate hate, found in abundance on social networks. The 2020 “Hate Panorama” conducted by online content moderation company Netino, found that one Facebook comment out of eight was aggressive or hateful.

Some describe this distressed world in terms of VUCA, a U.S. Army War College acronym that means “Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.” Others, such as Jamais Cascio, find the term obsolete, referring instead to “an age of chaos,” in which the world is BANI, or “Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible.”

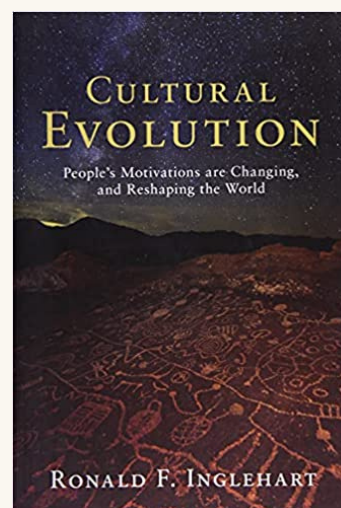
One thing is for sure: it is a world in which there are no “right” answers to problems. At best, we “manage polarities,” making decisions that are not fully informed, and that impact people whose very values have changed dramatically over just a few decades.

Evolving Social Values

According to sociologists Michael Haralambos and Michael Holborn, social values represent our “belief that something is good and desirable.” Although deeply embedded in our collective behaviors, traditions, and institutions, they do evolve under the effect of changes in human interactions and relationships. Detailed data and fascinating culture maps have been produced by the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org), a global network of social scientists, over the last thirty years.

As Ronald F. Inglehart says in the subtitle of Cultural Evolution (2018), “People’s motivations are changing, and reshaping the world.”

To illustrate my point, I will refer to the changes in Western societies that have come to challenge some of the beliefs on which traditional leadership used to flourish: social hierarchies, standardization, and authority.



The Challenge to Traditional Hierarchies

At a conference for Innotribe at Sibos Boston in 2014, Jon Husband began his exploration of new modes of work with commentary on “the expanded understanding of family: blended, same-sex, interracial marriages and rights, singlehood.” His point was that the very basic social structures and preferences on which we have relied for so long are now being called into question, deconstructed, and reconstructed differently.

What used to be a powerful norm (such as the married, heterosexual, same-origin, nuclear family) is now one of many options people can chose from, at least in Western countries. The Church’s influence over people’s lives has receded sharply. In France, about 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, and 61 percent of children are born out of wedlock. More than one marriage in seven is mixed, involving a foreigner and a French national.

In the United States, 67 percent of people supported same-sex marriage in 2020 as opposed to 11 percent in 1988.

Seventeen percent of U.S. marriages now involve couples from different “races,” which was illegal in some states until 1967. Twenty-three percent of U.S. children live with one parent only. The list of countries recognizing marriage equality continues to grow. Ireland, historically deeply rooted in the Catholic faith, voted in a monumental referendum held in 2018 to legalize women’s control over their bodies and reproductive choices.

Slowly but surely, economic hierarchies between genders are being challenged.

On average, women still earn 15 percent less than men, shoulder the responsibility and the mental load for most of the unpaid household chores—a situation, remarkably, made worse during the period of COVID-19 lockdown. However, an increasing proportion of women are now their families’ main breadwinners: in 2019, about half of American women said they out earned or made the same amount as their spouse or partner, whereas among married women with children in 1960, only 3.8 percent earned more than their husband.

Another example of social flipping has been evidenced by the number of pedophilia cases over the past decade involving celebrities and people in positions of authority, such as Larry Nasser in the U.S., Jimmy Saville in the UK, and Gabriel Matzneff in France, as well as other public figures, such as politicians and religious leaders. What was in the past quietly brushed under the carpet, despite broad awareness of criminal activity—or, in Matzneff’s case, confessional literature—has now come fully into the public eye. Victims, such as Vanessa Springora, have found a voice and been given a platform.



Vanessa Springora

[linkedin.com/in/vanessa-springora-4519a955](https://www.linkedin.com/in/vanessa-springora-4519a955)

Their own publications and media coverage have resulted in criminal prosecution and widespread public discourse. This has posed a challenge to at least three symbolic hierarchies: those of adult over child, man over woman, and perpetrator over victim.

Formerly oppressed or silenced groups now speak up, on the street and on social media, as exemplified by the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. Their words and actions have triggered ongoing discussions about victimhood culture, political correctness, and reversing the imbalance of power. Patriarchy and bigotry continue to resist as vigorously as they can. Nevertheless, today, their traditional power and hierarchy rest on very unstable foundations.

The Fragmentation of Expectations

What once was normalized has been disrupted profoundly: religious institutions, social class awareness, powerful work communities, the sedentary lifestyle, and other conditions that homogenize behaviors and expectations. Today, people are more disparate in the paths they follow, more diverse than their ancestors were. Capitalism exacerbates the need for individual recognition.

As Francis Fukuyama observes in *Identity*:

“Economic modernization and rapid social change undermine older forms of community and replace them with a confusing pluralism of alternative forms of association.” Problems arise when seven billion individuals “demand public recognition of their worth.”

Long-term work and strong affiliation to a single employer have given way to the gig economy and hourly contracts.



Class or political affiliation reconfigure themselves constantly, as proven by the Brexit vote in 2016 and the election of Emmanuel Macron in France in 2017, both of which brought together people who would not have voted alike in the past.

The “common world” has fragmented. In *Une démocratie sans autorité?* (Authority-less Democracy?), Alain Eraly attributes this fragmentation to three main factors:

- The segmentation of social groups—a vast movement of social differentiation that tends to multiply cultural and cognitive separation.
- Information bubbles—the diversification of information sources and the emergence of echo chambers.
- The market of opinions—the extreme difficulty of narrating society, of making sense of a continuous flow of disparate information.

Fukuyama argues that another factor—“the triumph of the therapeutic”—is in play, too. In the past, a shared moral horizon was defined by religion. Then psychotherapy emerged as a new religion, establishing that an individual’s happiness depended on their self-esteem, requiring them to liberate their inner selves, to become “authentic.” Modern liberal societies gradually took on the responsibility for raising the self-esteem of each and every one of their citizens, contributing, through “identity politics,” to the fragmentation.

This fragmentation is paralleled by a polarization of society around competing identities. The ferocious culture war raging in the United States today between conservatives and progressives has even spilled beyond politics into public health. Whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, you perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as more or less threatening. Even scientific messages are perceived through the filter of identity.

At a time when disagreements are so fierce and the cancel culture is on the rise, does the common good mean anything anymore?

Eraly argues that: “increasing inequalities, social exclusion, the cynicism of economic elites, the multiplicity of affiliations, geographical mobility and the omnipresent spectacle of identity conflicts all contribute to undermining the perception of a common fate.”

The end of Authority?

We now have a very different relationship to authority—political, scientific, intellectual, parental—from that experienced by previous generations. For my grandmother, the doctor was a godlike figure, whereas today many challenge the doctor’s advice, conducting searches for alternative points of view on the internet and placing trust in the opinions of celebrities instead. My parenting is probably quite different from my grandmother’s too—more permissive, more consensual. Disrespect for political or business figures doesn’t surprise anyone anymore.

In 2005, the Edelman’s Trust Barometer highlighted a shift in trust from “authorities” to peers. This “inversion of influence” was presented as a flipped pyramid.

[People] no longer rely on a few well-informed opinion shapers for news and information... Peer voices today are more powerful than the opinion of traditional authority figures. Respondents say that they find “a person like yourself” as credible as an academic expert (64 percent), and far more credible than CEOs (49 percent), NGO representatives (48 percent), a Board of Directors (44 percent), let alone government officials (35 percent).

As a result, we have a new pyramid of influence, where the broader population has more influence than those with authority, creating a real challenge for those in positions of power and authority who need to find new ways of engaging and influencing opinions.

Trust levels are significantly lower in the general, broader population than in the “informed public—those with higher income levels, higher education, and higher usage of traditional media,” creating a gap that has reached its highest point in recent years. Coronavirus, the great revealer of social failings, illustrates this gap.

In the United States, for example, 25 percent of adults believe in a conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic was planned. This figure rises to 48 percent among those with a low level of educational attainment.



Eraly defines authority as:

“the personal legitimacy that a person derives from occupying an exceptional position, playing a specific role, exercising power and assuming responsibility on behalf of an institution.”

In theory, the holder of authority represents the community and exercises power in its name. However, those who have an aversion to centralized power, who fear oppression, and who resist demands for obedience often resist this model whenever they feel excluded by it. For them, authority confers a position of questionable superiority and unacceptable hierarchical distance, carrying with it the alarming possibility that decisions can be made without the consent of the very people who are being represented. Focus shifts, then, from the collective to the individual: the holder of authority. It highlights a crisis of legitimacy.

Legitimacy can be restored only through equality and inclusion, through a horizontal democratic process. Legitimacy can no longer be derived from divine rights, social status, or economic privilege. Without the consent of the collective, authority has no foundation.

In this sense, empowered and connected citizens, consumers, and employees exercise new forms of power that counterbalance or even delegitimize the traditional ones. In *The End of Power*, Moisés Naím recounts how, having been appointed Minister of Development following his party's landslide victory in the 1989 elections in Venezuela, he became aware of “the enormous gap between the perception and the reality of my power.”

Faced with riots as citizens protested against the new government's program, he discovered that despite having significant nominal power as an economic minister, in practice he had "only a limited ability to deploy resources, to mobilize individuals and organizations, and, more generally, to make things happen." This realization is shared by many people in positions of authority. When I worked for the pharmaceutical company Sanofi, I wrote an email directly to the CEO about the lack of diversity inclusion in the company. Slowly, my note, which I shared with three trusted colleagues, began a process of internal activism which grew to 2,500 women and men, in person and on digital channels, and even extended outside the company.

When the CEO finally responded to my co-activists and me about workplace diversity, unlocking access to the company's Executive Committee, we thought we had reached the place where power resides. It was an incredible disappointment, therefore, to see so little change after the door had been opened.

If the Committee couldn't transform the organization, then who could?

Business and Organization Transformation

There are other changes in addition to those relating to social values that influence how we lead, make decisions, and work together. Some of these relate to how, where, and with whom we work, how we organize ourselves, and how we have become outcomes oriented. These all have had an impact on the business landscape, with leadership particularly affected by the shift in our understanding of value creation and by the evolution of customer expectations.

Value Creation

One of the most visible changes concerning value creation and its consequences for leadership has been the switch to a knowledge economy, although there are some, such as public policy specialist Nick O'Donovan, who question whether this itself is now moribund. The knowledge economy is a system of consumption and production that is based on intellectual capital, taking root in the postindustrial period of the 1960s and accelerating through the 1990s with the exponential growth of information technology. Use of the hands, manual labor, was displaced by use of the head and digital literacy.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global knowledge economy employed approximately one billion people, according to consulting firm Gartner.



In Thinking for a Living, Thomas Davenport argues that knowledge workers are:

“vastly different from other types of workers in their motivations, attitudes, and need for autonomy –and, so, they require different management techniques to improve their performance and productivity.”

In one sense, all work is, of course, a form of knowledge work. However, those individuals identified as knowledge workers do present certain characteristics, often a high level of educational attainment, experience, and expertise, which they apply to jobs involving creativity and the application of specialist knowledge. Managers in the knowledge economy, then, are often placed in a position where they know less about the field than those they manage.

The expansion of the knowledge economy has also been accompanied by the disruption and adaptation of traditional business models. In recent years, we have witnessed a distributed approach to product development (with Wikipedia serving as an exemplar), the deployment of infrastructure as a service and software as a service offerings, and the emergence of digital platforms and ecosystems (with Android and iOS initially leading the way). Today, Jennifer Schenker reports in *The Innovator*, seven of the ten most valuable companies in the world are based on a platform business model. This has a profound effect on our understanding of what constitutes a business, on the atomization of the workforce and the supply chain, on how people are contracted, on the role of the customer who may also be a partner or supplier, and on where power and authority lie.

As Simon Torrance of the World Economic Forum observes:

“this model is not something that today’s corporate leaders were taught at business school. Very few leaders at non-digital companies understand, to a profound degree, business models like [Apple’s] and even when do they do it takes time to percolate through the strategy process.”



The fluidity of relationships and interactions in the ecosystem overturn the traditional customer–supplier model, while there is a constant demand for adaptability and speed, seemingly making business more complicated than it once was. There is less clarity and certainty, little room for fixed mindsets and best practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to accelerate and broaden the reach of many of the emergent changes from these new working methods. Millions of people have now transitioned to distributed, digital work. Agility has become a condition for survival, which requires the capacity to reinvent oneself quickly and often.

Changing how we innovate is paramount too. Ever since Clayton Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation became popular in 1997, the profile of disruptive

innovation became popular in 1997, the profile of disrupters has changed dramatically. “They now enter the market with products and services that are every bit as good as those offered by legacy companies,” Rita McGrath explains. Instead of investing time and money on the automation of old business models, established organizations need to work on their internal capabilities for discovery. Significant energy needs to be directed toward culture, attitudes, the circulation of information, and the development of a discovery mindset across the organization, not just in the R&D function. The aim, as McGrath suggests, is to “learn quickly, experiment, and then pivot to reflect the insights gleaned.”

In my time at Sanofi, the old world pushed back fiercely against new innovative initiatives. With the strength of my 2,500 co-activists, eventually I was able to create a new function at the company—Stakeholder Engagement—to help bring the power of free will, purpose, co-creation, social media, and community engagement to product marketing and to have it support the launch of a new vaccine. I focused on the cause, fighting the disease, rather than on the product. I joined forces with different partners who shared the same purpose. From listening to activists, I created the conditions for global connections and action, so that more solutions against the disease could emerge, benefiting both the company and society. Viewed from the outside, the concept proved to be a triumph. Within a year, we had 250,000 worldwide members, and would go on to win multiple awards and secure the interest of the media and key stakeholders. However, internally, it seriously disrupted those with a vested interest in the traditional system of pushing communication toward passive audiences, of controlled messaging, and of siloed interactions.

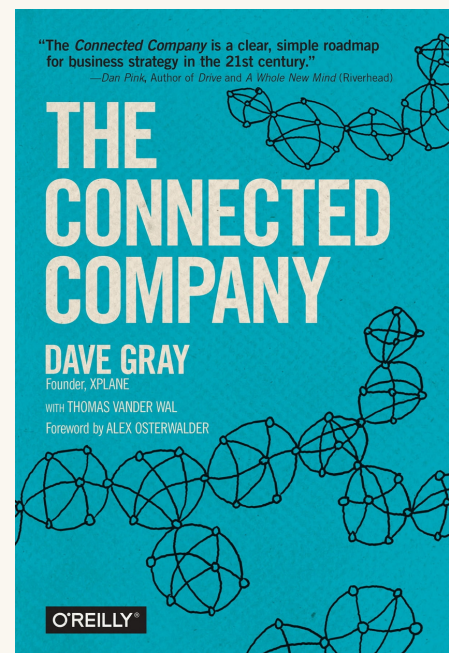
Customer Expectations

The COVID crisis put a brutal stop to our economic systems. Only time will tell how temporary or long-lasting its effects will be. But the abrupt and dramatic disruption it has caused to our way of life has forced at least some level of reckoning. The pause enforced upon us by the pandemic threw into stark relief—as the roads and flightpaths emptied, supply chains broke down, and the smog lifted—the planetary cost of human activity and of globalization.

The extractive capitalism of the twentieth century helped lift hundreds of millions of people out of hunger and poverty, yet it was also an ecological and environmental disaster. Reliant on continuous growth, it has shaped human behaviors and expectations. Consumerism involves the consumption of objects, experiences, and natural resources. Consumers are maintained in a state of perpetual craving so that they purchase more. Status, identity, and pleasure are just some of the triggers that brands play on to encourage us to spend and accumulate.

For a long time, consumerism invited a general state of passivity and fake agency, with people considered the targets of, and skillfully maneuvered by, marketing and brand messaging.

More recently, though, we have become demanding consumers. As Dave Gray and Thomas Vander Wal note in *The Connected Company*, the shift from the mass manufacture of homogenized goods to the development of services intended for diverse consumers has boosted the demand for flexibility and personalization. One-size-fits-all doesn't work as much anymore. Organizations now have to be in tune with their customers, listening closely, responding, and co-creating with them where possible.



Market competition and the effect of decades of total quality management have created new expectations. Quality is a must-have, not a nice-to-have. We demand excellence of product, service, delivery, and customer support. While this is still to be achieved across many industries, some progress has been made. In 2005, Bain uncovered the "delivery gap," or customer experience perception gap: 80 percent of executives believed that they were delivering a superior customer experience, while only 8 percent of customers agreed. Twelve years later, 75 percent of companies believed that they were customer-centric, while 30 percent of consumers agreed. It's a small step, but a start, nonetheless. We want excellence in a fast and reactive manner: our busy lives have rendered us impatient.

If unhappy about customer service or about companies' behaviors, we tell our friends and the whole world, because we can. Online shopping, price comparison apps, consumer forums, and social media offer new ways to challenge businesses, to the point that consumer activism has become a growing threat to corporate reputation. This is not a new phenomenon, but it has acquired unprecedented power with the development of new channels and technologies. Empowered consumers expect freedom of choice, respect of who they are, and attention to their needs. Increasingly, they also expect the organizations to which they give their dollars to demonstrate social and environmental responsibility.

If consumers are making these kinds of demands of the brands they purchase from, it is reasonable to think they will make similar demands of employers and elected representatives in the near future, if they aren't already. The notion of what a consumer is, of how powerful they are, has been transformed.



Work structures are not spared from the effects of these changes, which should surprise no one. Workers are individuals whose life experiences are impacted by demographic evolutions and shifting values; they are those newly empowered consumers. As such, they feel the limits of traditional organizations.

We Are Not the Employees We Used to Be

Society's evolving values permeate the workplace. For example, the growing aversion to blatant manifestations of inequality has forced the removal of status markers in some workplaces. The reserved parking space has become the symbol of a leader's resistance to change.

From a simple demographic perspective, the workplace today is much different from that of thirty years ago. With looming retirements and an aging demographic, multiple generations now coexist in the same workforce. The Baby Boomers are still a visible presence, particularly at the top of hierarchies, in decision-making positions. Younger generations, though, bring different viewpoints and expectations to their work. They have different styles, different ways of learning and sharing knowledge. Intergenerational tension is a growing concern that can be detrimental to both engagement and productivity.

Women now account for 40 percent or more of the total labor force in many countries. Thirty-seven percent of the support and operations staff in the United States is non-white (however, only 15 percent of executives are non-white).³⁸ Technology and greater awareness of accessibility have made it possible for more people with disabilities to enter the workforce.

The globalization of the workforce has brought people from different parts of the world to work together. In many countries, there are moves to embrace equality and diversity in the workplace, buttressed by legislative frameworks and social pressure.

What keeps the workforce busy has also greatly changed over the last few decades. Organizations require different skills as business and technology evolve. Artificial intelligence and automation will make redundant certain functions that were previously fulfilled by people.

Of course, there is nothing new about this. All technological revolutions have generated changes in working practices, from the plow to the printing press, steam engine, and microprocessor. The COVID-19 pandemic, though, could accelerate the transition from human to machine labor in some fields

But it could also broaden the scope of what jobs will be affected as its economic effects bring into question the viability of some sectors. Company life cycles were already shrinking, with the average expected to be twelve years by 2027. COVID could shorten that even further.

People are going to have to become multidisciplinary and adaptive to retain relevance in the job market. Pre-COVID, it was expected that 17 percent of the occupations monitored by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics would lose more workers than they added between 2016 and 2026, with some occupations losing more than a fifth of their workforce.³⁹ Mass layoffs accompanied the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, and we are seeing large-scale redundancies again today.

Many workers have experienced an emotional rollercoaster, protected for a time by government-funded furlough schemes then discarded like any other commodity from organizations they once thought of as family. Some sectors were already preparing for an uncertain future before the pandemic. Pharma sales representatives, for example, were being reskilled en masse. At the same time, though, there are professions such as cybersecurity and healthcare that are booming and experiencing a shortage of talent.

Lack of job security, redundancies, automation, the erosion of loyalty to an employer, and uncertainty about the future are pushing a higher proportion of people into the gig economy.

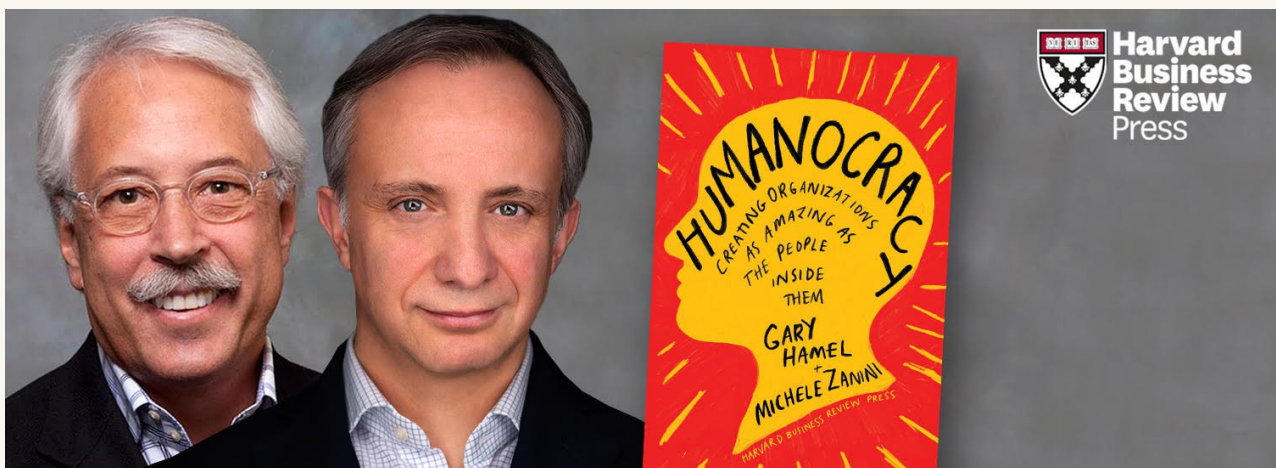
This accounted for 43 percent of the U.S. workforce prior to the COVID crisis, a figure likely to grow. Work has become increasingly transactional in nature. Relationships between worker, colleagues, and organization are often ones of convenience rather than lifelong and deep-rooted. As one friend, who had witnessed multiple layoffs, told me, “I have learned not to love too hard.”

The Limits of the Traditional Organization

To a much-changed workforce, the traditional organization can feel like a straitjacket. Its operating model was built on the principles of scientific management and has been only marginally adapted since then. The vast majority of large organizations, and many smaller ones too, still promote hierarchy, order, shareholder value, segmentation, individual merit, and bureaucracy.

In 2014, the Washington Post ran a story—“Sinkhole of Bureaucracy”—about an underground government facility located in a former mine in Pennsylvania where thousands of retirement papers are laboriously processed by hand in a totally inefficient process established forty years ago. It is an extreme example but a good reflection of what happens in many places. Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini describe the issue according to a “bureaucratic mass index” (BMI). This refers to the layers of rules, processes, managers, and administrators that many organizations add, creating a “bureaucratic drag” and costing OECD countries around \$9 trillion a year.

Hamel and Zanini received seven thousand responses to their BMI survey, which illustrated how bureaucracy “produces parochialism, undermines empowerment, frustrates innovation, breeds inertia.”



Naturally, there have been many attempts to reinvent organizations and improve how work gets done. These efforts are not lost, and they made some progress possible.

But there is nearly always a disjuncture between original ambition and achieved outcome. Consider the example of W. Edwards Deming, the “father of modern quality.” In Japan and in the United States, Deming oversaw new systems of organization that created much more space for people across the hierarchy to get involved. He developed a new philosophy focused on knowledge, ownership, and collaboration. His books are still taught, read, and commented on. Yet only about 20 percent of his teaching is properly implemented in organizations—the easiest part, related to statistical methods. The other 80 percent, the more challenging ideas about leadership behaviors, has been left aside. By focusing on processes, control, and exhortations, manufacturers have missed the essence of Deming’s message.

Other attempts to modernize organizations have focused on reducing waste (of time, of resources) and simplifying work. This was and still is the promise of Lean manufacturing, which, unfortunately, has morphed in many organizations into an additional source of bureaucracy. Improving collaboration at work has been another avenue for reinvention. The “matrixed” organization, where people report to two lines of command (e.g., “Asia Pacific Business Unit” and “Marketing”) was designed with this in mind. It is not a bad idea in theory but is crippled in practice by being a cause of confusion and a source of conflict. Project teams, Agile methodologies, enterprise social networks, holacracy, design thinking, process redesign, and self-management all have their advocates too and are still being trialed in some organizations. Each can have a positive effect where the whole company is mobilized and communication is effective. However, when good intent becomes a formula—a set of rules that people can apply—that’s when its positive effect stops.

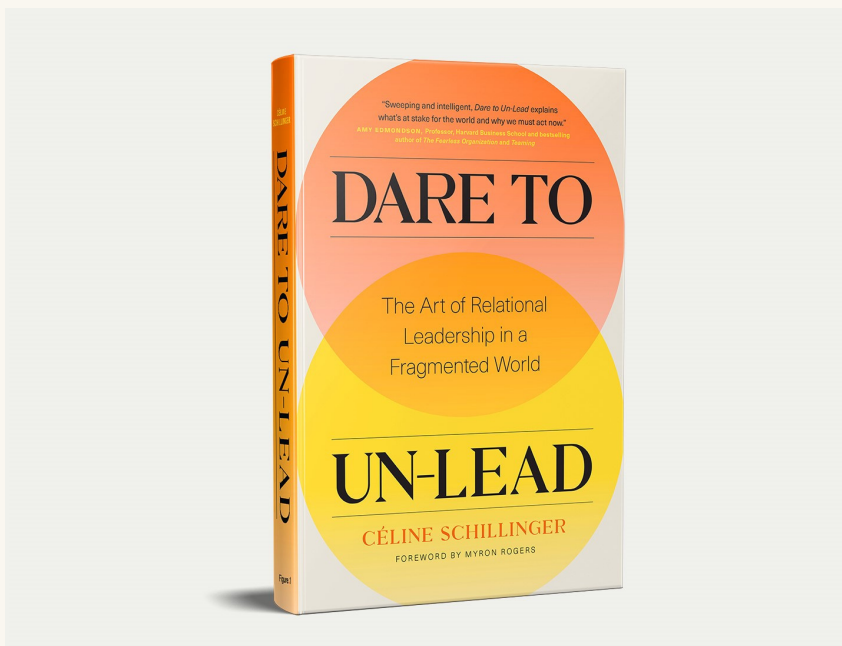
Behind the suffocating effects of bureaucracy and the failure of many change initiatives is a lack of effective leadership. We have fallen into the trap of mythologizing our leaders rather than challenging and questioning them. It is to the question of the fallacy of leadership that we now turn.

About Céline Schillinger

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