



Leadership Gap

Moderator



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Here's some background to our discussion of filling the Leadership Gap:

Successful leaders establish a course that others want to follow, and then ensure they actually do so. Leadership can materialise at all levels of society – and leaders are not just those with the titles of CEO, president or director.

Sustainable leadership requires people to become agents of change, and the gaps in leadership appear when these agents are unable to define an economic, social or ecological purpose, or are ineffective.

Ineffectiveness could mean being unable to influence the surpassing of a tipping point (an intermediary goal of the SDGs), or overcome an intention-realisation gap in the transition to greater sustainability (an ultimate goal).

Sustainable leadership for the SDGs requires ample mobilisation skills within an organisation, and increasingly requires mobilising external stakeholders for a common good too. Mobilising external stakeholders is important for leadership that involves taking the stance of the frontrunner – a risky but rewarding position.

The 'incumbent's curse' illustrates the Leadership Gap all too well. This is the situation when a business is stuck for too long in a financially successful but unsustainable business model.

Leadership Gaps appear when change does not address the root causes, doesn't happen fast enough, or when the mobilisation of stakeholders applies to a limited number of people.

Should we be satisfied with adaptation strategies when we're faced with systems failure? What positive interventions should we prioritise within the SDG framework? Should it be a living wage, biodiversity, gender equality, or combinations of interconnected targets?

How can internal and external support for change be leveraged at the right pace, and with sufficient funds?

In this increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, the Leadership Gap increases when leaders are not able or willing to share their dilemmas, or when they present false contradictions, or they don't show sufficient tolerance for ambiguity while dealing with paradoxes in a constructive way. So, are leadership styles like 'paradoxical' or 'servant' leadership effective?

There's a particular Leadership Gap associated with the prevalence of doom and gloom scenarios: the gap is a result of a belief that an awareness of forthcoming disasters is enough, and there's no need to act further. Obviously this is problematic.

The more complex a problem, the bigger the number of bystanders; this is when people tend to become undecided and reactive. In global systemic crises like climate change, famine, or rising income inequality, it becomes an intricate challenge to address this inhibiting effect on people's motivation to act.

Presenting these phenomena as a disaster or doom scenario in order to mobilise action usually has a limited effect. It tends to feed the paralysis, the distancing and the denial, even when there's overwhelming evidence for real and imminent disaster.

The Norwegian psychologist and economist [Per Espen Stoknes](#) concluded that there's psychological paralysis about the issue of global warming. He called it 'apocalypse fatigue'. It triggers evasive reactions to the discourse of flooded coastlines, destructive storms and species extinctions. Even well-intentioned people do it – because apparently 'hell doesn't sell'.

Unfortunately it's widespread: 80 per cent of news about sustainability issues is framed negatively, so overcoming the Leadership Gap means developing and appointing leaders who can go beyond doom and gloom to reframe and formulate a response that's positive, meaningful and doable – and includes actions that even deniers can support. Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate *Change* (*IPCC*) recognised that the trend of taking a doomed view is actually as dangerous as being a climate denier. It's clear that activating people to get involved needs a smarter approach; working *with* the peculiarities of human behaviour rather than against them.