



Leading (and managing) our way through the COVID-19 pandemic and towards sustainable development

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Although we are still far from fully understanding why COVID-19 spares some places while battering others, it has become clear that thoughtful, data-driven, accountable, and engaged leadership is an important determinant of the trajectory of this emergency – locally, nationally, and globally.

As we read the news every day, the difference between stories that inspire us, that help us to believe in a brighter future beyond the pandemic, and those that make us worry that life is bleak, is leadership. When we read about the courage of health care workers facing unimaginable challenges, or local officials who have put aside party politics to make complex -- and sometimes unpopular -- decisions to safeguard public health, or national leaders who have laid out thoughtful strategies informed by evidence, our belief in the transformative power of leadership is renewed. When we read about individuals who spread misinformation or provide false reassurances, we are reminded of how a leadership vacuum can have catastrophic consequences, particularly in times of crisis.

One thing that this pandemic has repeatedly underscored is the difference between being in a position of authority and being a leader. True leaders can be found everywhere, at every level, staying home to safeguard others, delivering essential community services, and repurposing production lines to manufacture essential medical equipment. They are the people shining in the face of adversity. They are the ones making good things happen. They are the ones finding common ground, uniting us in the face of a formidable and invisible enemy. We need to visibly celebrate these leaders, to hold them up as beacons of hope, as has been done in many places each night to give noisy thanks to front-line health care workers.

To be sure, it is not enough to have a visionary leader charting the way for a clinic, a company, a community, or a country. The current crisis has also called attention to the importance of teams, and of meticulous management in overcoming complex challenges. We need vast numbers of people with the doggedness and determination to execute plans, to ensure that test kits are available, food supplies are maintained, personal protective equipment distributed, and essential social services continued – to name just a few.

It is increasingly clear that COVID-19 is going to be a long emergency, and that the challenges that we will face as a global society are unprecedented in our lifetimes. It is equally clear that this terrible crisis offers us an unparalleled opportunity to re-imagine a better world on the other side of the pandemic, one with universal access to essential healthcare, diminished inequality, increased rights for workers everywhere, more sustainable food supplies, re-imagined educational systems, and a greater emphasis on the long-term health of the fragile and beautiful planet which we all share.

Already we see signs of hope. The world appears to be learning that facing off against a common enemy such as COVID-19 requires a collective and multi-sectoral approach to everything from vaccine development and production, manufacture and distribution of personal protective equipment, and the sharing of data. COVID-19 is also forcing us to rethink our priorities, leading to a renewed cherishing of our common open spaces and fundamental questioning about rampant consumerism.

We are a group of former heads of state, former ministers from diverse sectors, CEOs, and civic leaders who recognize the strong association between values- and virtue-based leadership and success in confronting significant threats, be they related to health, the economy, food security, education, or the environment. We recognize that these are times of uncertainty and insecurity. Yet this could be an era of unprecedented collective leadership to not only overcome what is the most widespread public health and economic crisis of the past 100 years, but also turn it into one of the greatest leaps forward for humankind.

We understand that cultivating leaders and managers does not happen through magic, but through consistent collective action, prioritization, and investment. There is an urgent need for meta-leadership, for leaders who understand the importance of leadership, and who are willing to advocate for the resources needed to develop leadership and management capabilities for public service, at all levels of the system, and across all sectors. We believe that massive investment in these skill sets is both the only way to defeat COVID-19, and also the best hope that we have to reach the sustainable development goals, and ensure a bright future for all of us, our children, and the generations to follow.

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