

The shadow of war: a reflection on leadership and systems change

By Wayne Visser

Given the dangerous and deadly crisis that is unfolding with Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, I want to share some reflections on *leadership* and *systems change*. I will leave you to make your own connections - and draw your own conclusions - about how these ideas relate to the unfolding Russia-Ukraine tragedy, and whether they strike a chord of truth.

What is good leadership?

In my work, I have had the opportunity to study and reflect deeply on leadership, especially in the various roles I have held with the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. Most of my research, teaching and writing on the subject has centred on the question: What is good leadership? A key to answering this question is the realisation that effective leadership and good leadership are not the same. Hitler was an effective leader, but he should never be regarded as a good leader.

The same is true of many dictators, autocrats and megalomaniacs who hold positions of power, but whose brutal, self-serving actions are nothing but an abuse of power. Their leadership modus operandi is fear. By preying on and stoking up people's fears - using lies, exaggeration and manipulation - they foment popular support. And for those who do not fall into line, they instil the fear of harassment, incarceration, injury or death. We saw these same tactics for 40 years in South Africa under the racist apartheid regime.

There are three characteristics of bad leaders. They are extractive, exploitative and exclusive. They take more than they give back to society - tragically, often from the very people they claim to serve. They use people, resources and institutions (government, the legal system, media, business) for their own selfish ends. And they make sure that the benefits accrue mainly to themselves and their circle of corrupt cronies. They are apartheid leaders: leaders that increase division and separation; that sow discord and conflict.

In contrast, there are six characteristics of good leaders, which I elaborate in my new book, *Thriving*. Good leaders are systemic, inclusive, strategic, caring, innovative and courageous. They work to build connections and inclusion rather than the division and exclusion. They care about the impacts of their actions on humans and on nature, and they have moral courage, standing up for what is ethically right. They are thriving leaders: leaders that increase harmony and balance; that support life and regeneration.

How do systems change?

Leadership is one part - but not the only aspect - of how complex systems like companies or societies change. In my work on the subject, I have identified 12 different types of change agency, incorporating individual catalysts and collective processes, with some resulting in rapid revolutionary change and others in more gradual evolutionary change. I won't go into these 12 types here, except to say that change is most often non-linear. It doesn't happen in regular steps; it stumbles along and then, unexpected, takes giant leaps.

Systems change can be for better or for worse. It can lead to breakdowns or breakthroughs in society, the economy and nature. It can either enter a virtuous cycle of ever increasing integration and better functionality, or it can spin off into a death spiral where everything literally falls apart. War has all the hallmarks of a degenerative death trap. It destroys trust, decimates institutions and disintegrates societies. Any victory is hollow, since it leaves behind a scarred, empty shell where once there was a vital, living system.

So how do we turn breakdowns - whether they be a war on society or a war on nature - into breakthroughs? How do we take a process of degeneration and transform it into a process of regeneration? There are six elements, which I call the keys to thriving. None of them are quick or easy, but all of them necessary to bring about positive systems change. Here, I will distill them into three imperatives of systems change, namely: complex coherence, creative convergence and cyclical continuity. Clever words, but what do they mean?

In practice, they mean building social movements with more and tighter connections and a common positive purpose. They mean using the problem-solving energy of imagination and innovation. And they mean thinking, planning and acting for a long term better future that can continually renew and replenish itself. It's hard in a crisis to stay focused on these fundamental levers of systems change. But doing so is our best hope for creating the peaceful and prosperous world that we all long for - and that our children all deserve.

Source:

First published on 3BL Media, The Thriving Movement Series – Part 2, February 25, 2022. Available at: <https://www.3blmedia.com/news/shadow-war-reflection-leadership-and-systems-change>