

ESAA symposium – Maakt geld gelukkig?

Business Leadership in a world in transition – Tex Gunning

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A world in transition

At this particular time, many are wondering what has brought us to this state of uncertainty and fear, of extremism and divisiveness, and more important, where it will lead us. Will it take us back to the dark ages? Or can we turn this turmoil into an opportunity to transcend to a world of prosperity, peace and happiness? It is clear that we have reached the limits of our system. The system that brought this country and the western world an extreme amount of growth and progress in the 20th century is in decline. It is no longer sustainable. An economic system of unlimited growth on a planet with limited resources is by definition not sustainable. A financial system that has lost its connection with the real economy and focuses primarily on financial speculation is an asset to the rich and a liability to the poor. It's not sustainable. A political system that fails to address society's biggest needs and fears, will evoke protest and eventually revolution. It's not sustainable. A society where large groups of people feel unheard, neglected and degraded to second best, is not sustainable. And on a bigger scale: a planet where maybe one third is living the good life and the rest of its population is struggling for survival is not sustainable

And although not everyone may be fully aware of this imminent system melt down, deep inside we all know. We can sense it. We feel the uncertainty, the unease whilst trying to hold on to a lifeline that is slowly, but inevitably, slipping through our hands.

How did we get there?

Tempting as it may be to scientists, I believe we must not linger any longer in trying to analyze what went wrong or who's to blame. First of all: we are simply out of time. If we don't act, we are sailing right into the perfect storm with our eyes wide open. Secondly, it does not take a genius to analyze this multiple system failure. It is simple: we are out of balance and most of all: out of touch. Out of touch with each other and out of touch with our true nature.

We have been so obsessed with the outer, material world that we forgot who we are. And somewhere along the way we seem to have lost the understanding of what brings us inner peace and contentment. Over many years thought leaders and philosophers have studied the emergence of a new world order on one hand looking *out* at the worlds of politics, science, economics, technology, business and the arts, and on the other hand looking *in* at the world of thoughts, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes. The problem is that we have been studying this outer and inner world as two distinct entities, while in fact they are one. Like two sides of the same coin. The inner world of thoughts, feelings and attitudes manifests itself in the outer world, which means, we are living in the world we created in our mind first of all.

The mind

The good news in that, is that it also implies that we can re-create or renew the world by transforming the thoughts we create. Like the Buddha said:

"We are what we think.

All that we are, arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts, we make the world.

Speak or act with an impure mind.

And trouble will follow you.

As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart,

*We are what we think.
All that we are, arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with a pure mind
And happiness will follow you
As your shadow, unshakable. “*

Universal values

There is hope in that, right? But what does that mean? To speak and act with a pure mind? Do we have any idea what keeps us in balance, in touch with our true nature? Do we have any idea what we need, to make us feel happy? Well, yes and no. Deep inside we do know. All of us know what really matters. I have asked this same question to thousands of employees in my career: for what kind of organization do you want to work? It doesn't matter whether you ask this question in Europe, Asia, Latin America or anywhere else in the world. Irrespective of culture, age or gender the answers are more or less the same. It all comes down to these universal values:

- people want to work for an organization where there is a high sense of connectedness, a sense of community,
- where relationships and work are meaningful, where they are known as a human being and not just as an economic resource,
- where there is a safe and positive spirit and
- where they can grow to be the best that they can be.

Remarkably; it is never really about the money what makes employees happy. There is a lot of debate on the bonus culture in business, but research shows that income is at best a minor driver for increased commitment and productivity. Of course people want to be rewarded for their effort, but everybody knows this is just a basic requirement.

What really drives people at work is not any different from what really matters to them at home. Purpose; knowing that your presence makes a difference, that you can contribute to something bigger than yourself. To be known, respected and loved. Trust; giving you the courage to be vulnerable so you can develop meaningful and respectful relationships in some form of community. And growth; on a personal level mastering the challenges of life like becoming a better parent, partner and person, but also professionally to become better and better at what you do at work.

Simple but not easy

I've done thousands of surveys like this in my career and really, it all boils down to the same universal values. It is these universal needs that make us human. Every human being wants to be happy and wants to avoid suffering. It's the foundation of our being, our script, the way we are programmed. And deep inside every human being, consciously or unconsciously, knows what it takes to be happy. So the big mystery is: why aren't we?? Why aren't we happy? Why are one million people in the Netherlands antidepressants? Why did people vote for a man like Geert Wilders or Donald Trump? Why are so many people frustrated, disoriented and scared? If we know what it takes to be happy, why don't we act accordingly?? While knowing what it takes to attain some level of inner peace and contentment, somehow we always seem to end up making the wrong decisions and choices.

Preoccupied with the issues of everyday life we tend to forget what really matters. As a result we strive for things that lead us (and others) in opposite direction becoming unhappy, angry, frustrated and depressed. If you take a moment to reflect on this, you'll see how bizarre this really is. The main goal in life of any human being is to be happy and to avoid suffering. That's the destination in his navigation system. But somehow along the way he

tends to ignore all the instructions that this navigation system provides, taking wrong turns bound for dead end streets. And when we end up in the wrong place, we get frustrated and angry. It's truly amazing if you think of it. And of course this is not a recent development; unfortunately, it's been the human condition for ages. Some 1200 years ago, Shantideva wrote his Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life with this beautiful and striking verse:

*Though longing to be rid of suffering,
They rush headlong towards suffering itself.
Although longing to be happy, in their ignorance
They destroy their own well-being, as if it were their worst enemy.*

In most cases this is a willful ignorance. We act against our better judgement because we tend to forget. We tend to forget what really matters. If we want to be happy, we need to remember.

Recap a little

So let's recap for a minute here. We are in the midst of the breakdown of a system that is no longer sustainable. If we want this world in transition to change, we need to change our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. If we want to change the world for the better, we need to act with a pure mind, in compliance with the universal values and needs that we all share. That's simple, but not easy because in everyday life we tend to forget. We need to remember. We need to be aware of our thoughts and make sure that we act with a pure mind in compliance with our universal needs.

How does this apply to business?

So you may ask what does business has to do with all of this?? For years we've heard the argument that the role of business is business. Meaning making money. One of the stubborn arguments of not integrating the economic, social and environmental agendas is the short-term view held by politicians and business leaders, that this will harm the economy or shareholders' value. To me, this looks like a convenient cop-out for not doing the right thing and it's not in line with reality. Any investment in the contentment of employees will pay off in terms of shareholders value. Short-term *and* long-term. In the short run it's quite simple: happy cows give more milk. It's true: happy cows give more milk! Efficiency, creativity and productivity will rise with the level of contentment right away.

In the long run our society needs to transcend to a new system that is sustainable and in line with our universal needs and values. Since business is part of society, an unsustainable society logically leads to an unsustainable business. So as a long term investment, business leaders need to think of what they can contribute to this world in transition. Not out of corporate responsibility but simply because it will pay off. Companies and economies that invest in the sustainability challenges can deliver superior economic and social value.

What can business leaders do?

So business leaders *can* and *should* make an effort to fill this vacuum between the old bankrupt system of the 20th century and the sustainable society of the 21st century; fill it with the proper building blocks. Fortunately, as the currents of fear and anger are gaining force, more and more leaders in business and society feel an urgency to act --- to do something to heal and support the most vulnerable. And it is about time! For years, my generation of leaders has deservedly been accused of short-termism, opportunism and a lack of responsibility and accountability to the world that we pass on to the next generation. We are being accused of taking out a mortgage on the future wealth of our children. More importantly, the general view is that we are taking out a mortgage on their future happiness.

So the challenge seems to be a leadership challenge first and foremost. Leaders like you and me are being challenged on our intentions, attitudes, beliefs and our wisdom.

New leadership

Most of all our challenge is a call for a new leadership. Not the kind that puts the leader at the top of things, managing, directing and telling people what to do and what to think. We need leaders that lead the way. Who know how to *be* the change they want to see in this world. Leaders that are aware of the idea that real leadership is all about serving others. The more we serve our people, our customers and our shareholders, the more we will grow as individuals as well as business people and consequently our business will grow.

And....we will all be happy. Genuinely serving other people, serving society, serving a cause, serving sick patients, serving customers creates in my experience a sense of pleasure, gratification, a feeling of self-worth, a good feeling that makes humans happy. And it is also my experience that it will lead to exceptional results. It results in reciprocity of service to the giver and it leads to a larger circle of influence that could never be predicted nor achieved through strategy or management. Living a life of service can be lived in all professions and in all contexts. It's a character trait, it's a way of living that requires development and education. It's an intention of character, if executed with the right attitudes and wisdom will have enormous leverage and in my experience is the best way to success.

Again, simple but not that easy. To be able to serve and support anyone else, we must first become masters of our own healing. Only then can we turn our attention to helping others with their healing and to making meaning of the current state of the world from a higher vantage point. This requires that we pay careful attention to the quality of our thoughts. It calls for the clarity and strength of mind to resist the energies and influences of the world and the ability to cultivate an inner condition of pure intention, unconditional regard, and peaceful contentment. It's the path of the bodhisattva and what the Dalai Lama calls 'intelligent selfishness': trying to become enlightened in order to be able to help others on their path.

Meditation

The quality of our thoughts determines the quality of our actions. So if we want quality actions we need to remember at the beginning of everyday to center ourselves in quality thoughts. Thoughts of service, care, purpose and love & compassion. By centering ourselves in these high quality thoughts we develop a strong inner voice that will guide us positively through the day. A meditation practice at the beginning of every day allows us to "remember" the relationship between our thoughts and our actions. Strengthen your inner voice through practice and bring wisdom to your actions and happiness to your life.

Personal journey

As leaders we are obliged to undertake this journey into our inner world in order to recreate our outer world. But becoming more aligned with our universal needs and values by improving the quality of our thoughts is first and foremost a personal journey. As a CEO, I can help create the environment in which my employees can flourish and grow into the best version of themselves, but it is their personal responsibility to undertake this journey. If the organizational environment feels safe and respectful, there is no need to be professional all the time and to keep up appearances. People can interact in a vulnerable and authentic way and be human before being a professional. But if an employee is completely out of touch with his true self and out of connection with the people around him in his personal life, that is not something we can fix at the office. Of course I can address issues that manifest at work, create awareness and provide some training and coaching, but I cannot fix it for them.

Education

It would make a huge difference of course if we started educating our children in a different way. For years the focus of our educational system has been on knowledge; reproducing the insights that somebody else has realized. Recently we have added the so called 21st century skills to that, teaching our children practical skills like how to communicate, collaborate and so. But still our educational system is pretty much pre-occupied preparing students for an exam and a job rather than preparing them for real life. They hardly address these developmental and existential challenges.

Obviously many educators and policy makers would raise the argument that preparing kids for life is not the role of our schools and universities. But the reality is that to be successful in a job you have to be successful in life. The separation assumed between skill/competency development and character development is a fiction, an illusion. What makes people excellent and successful is first and foremost their character development. It's a pre-condition sine qua non. Character development has all to do with existential questions like:

- Do you know?
- Who you are?
- What you are?
- What makes you tick?
- Can you connect with other people on a profound level?
- Are you able to articulate your intentions?
- What is YOUR role in life?
- Are you able to develop the right constructive attitudes
- Do you invest time and effort in developing wisdom that can guide you in the most difficult decisions that you will face?
- Do you know what makes you successful?
- Do you have the character traits to invest in what makes you successful?
- Do you invest in personal mastery and permanent education?

These are all existential questions and development challenges that in my book are pre-conditions for excellence in whatever you are doing and are surely pre-conditions for a happy life. I can tell you that most people who join our company or for that matter are already at the top of our organization, have failed to understand, let alone have invested time and effort, to meet these character conditions for excellence. Most people after school or university are cruising on automatic pilot having been successful academically, having their first and second job at McKinsey or Unilever or as a doctor. They stop learning and stop developing in a meaningful way. Their initial successes have all the making of a boiled frog! They are truly warm and cozy!!

Sooner or later however they will find themselves at different moments in their lives and career having to go through traumatic experiences and being frustrated as they cannot comprehend why they fail in jobs. Or why they continue to feel unsatisfied with their jobs. Paradoxically when they fail in their jobs or fail to be happy in their jobs, they perceive this as a failure in life! But most of the time clueless to see the connection between their failure in life and their failure in their jobs. And this has all to do with our educational and management development systems and paradigms.

We fail to accept that "Man is One" and not a Lego toy of different parts put together by an invisible hand. Man can only be developed as One Being- physically, intellectually, socially and spiritually- and all in an integrated and synchronized way.

I would like to encourage policy makers and educators to re-assess the need for character development in our educational programs and start seeing the interrelatedness of character development with excellence, success and happiness.

Wrap up

The call of our time is for a shift in consciousness and a related transformation of vision so we are seeing beyond the breakdown and disintegration around us to the field of possibility that is waiting out in the future. We need a vision of hope if we are to help others to be hopeful. We need leadership to role model what is possible and to create evidence that a new value based order is possible starting in our own circle of influence. Change begins here with you and me and only then we can extend our circle of influence step by step to a wider world.

As a father and CEO, I wish for my children and our employees, and for all human beings for that matter,

- that they become leaders first and foremost of themselves.
- that they have a clear dream for themselves and the will power to make that a reality.
- that they accept that setting themselves ambitious goals in the private and public sphere will facilitate their growth and the growth of others.
- that they will live a life of service as it will make them happy and it will make them better human beings.
- that they can rely on themselves in times of despair and chaos and can see, whilst in the chaos, a new and happier path forward.
- that they have a serious work ethos as it will be a means to satisfy their needs to grow and serve.
- that they recognize the need for co-existence and that they are able to make the strength of others their strength.
- that they are willing to live life dangerously, deeply understanding that by walking to the edge of what is possible, it facilitates change and personal growth.
- That they will become aligned with their universal values and needs and ultimately are able to live a busy but peaceful and happy life.

And to my fellow business leaders around the world I would like to say this. Our biggest challenge is not to defeat our competitors. Our biggest challenge is to leave our safe harbor on a stormy day and set sail to a destination unknown. With nothing to guide us but our internal compass of our universal values and needs.

It will take courage and perseverance but as Thomas van Aquino once said: "If the highest aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever."