



## **Prominent thinkers throughout Europe work together to formulate a direction for leadership.**

*By Petra Baars*

'Leadership' is not that easy to define. This was shown once again during the three-day brainstorming marathon organised by de Baak, a training and knowledge centre, and attended by a think tank made up of 23 internationally known organisation consultants and trainers, including professors, who had gathered to exchange ideas about this subject. Many European countries were represented; based on these different backgrounds, leadership appeared to possess many nuances. What makes such a group exciting is how everyone relates to one another and whether they display leadership in their own learning process. Whether they are willing to let go, even temporarily, of their own assumptions and be open time after time to the insights and views of others. With the resolution to, with this mix of people, rise above the usual analyses, the three days became an exhilarating brainstorming experience, the flow of which could be felt in the corridors.

### **Leadership ideal is a creation of the mind**

Leadership in Europe is still fairly bureaucratic and based on authority. In these kinds of systems, the tendency toward control prevails. Someone has to be in charge. A crisis – this time, a collapse of the financial institutions, but there have been others over the last 20 years – has thrown a spanner into the works. Suddenly, we are confronted with the fact that things are by no means entirely controllable. Will we simply dust off our suits again after this crisis and continue on our former path? Or will we finally admit once and for all that the ideal of 'sound management' is a fabrication of the mind and simply unrealistic? Even though we feel ourselves to be progressive in today's society, 'we are still narrow-minded,' remarked one participant. We could also look at the point of departure differently. Crisis is actually normal; it is a critical moment concealing a range of possibilities. Critical moments come and go in waves. In fact, no growth is possible without crisis; crisis is a positive thing when humanity actually makes headway as a result of it. Crises have brought us to where we are today.

### **The paradox of strong leadership**

It is often said that what we need is strong leadership. Words that accompany this call for leadership are 'genuine', 'visionary', 'personal', 'free-rein management', etc. But there is another side to strong leadership: followers can sometimes also be strong leaders – better and faster than the leader. Something else that would certainly be appropriate now would be to direct ourselves more toward the community in which everyone participates according to his/her own capacity and creativity. Not by going back to Communism but by looking at all the things going on in Internet communities where leaders are irrelevant. There, leaders are only in the way. Are there more advantages to a team-based approach? Will you let everyone be his/her own leader? Is everyone capable of taking responsibility for this and not

passing on decisions to 'desired' leaders? Is the leader prepared to relinquish power and teach people to think for themselves – and then really step aside? And what will society be like once it is structured according to teams pursuing a common goal? Will this really be an improvement?

### **In sports: who is the leader of a winning team?**

Leadership is often defined in terms of development from a lower level to a higher level. Heavy responsibility and high risks are linked, of course, to large salaries and big egos; after all, these people know what has to be done. This leads to a split into two camps: the leader (lonely at the top) and the team beneath, a situation in which both camps have expectations of the other. This actually weakens the team, since who is the leader in a winning football team? Is this the coach or the best player? Organisations could be made up in the same way. The leader would then help the individual employee to focus, learn and be creative. Yet even in this relationship, the coach still holds the official power. A new concept would be that you could not teach others anything but that you could teach them to depend on themselves to find the answers. Leaders would then build a team of leaders, and this would be an almost unstoppable team. And the most exciting thing about this would be that the game would be about fun instead of results – a situation both very fulfilling and not excluding profit.

### **Holding on to a position of power**

Our economic model is now based on greed with the underlying assumption that the market will correct for excesses. We also assume that the economy and the political structures surrounding it result in our current peace and prosperity. But we have forgotten one thing: we are dealing in living things. We have made them into objects and stripped them of human qualities. We would rather ignore the inconvenient consequences of this approach such as sick, poor or intractable people, animals and crops. We don't know what we should do with them: it's a difficult business. Now that we have tried out all the possibilities of the individual, it's time for something different: worldwide collectivism and human values and the feeling of belonging to this world within your community. You don't engage in cutthroat negotiations in your family or with your partner, so why can't these values apply within society? We don't have to abandon the individual, but we are ignoring the other side and doing everything to maintain positions of power.

### **What motivates the soul of a leader?**

It used to be that priests cared for the salvation of people. Apart from whether they were successful or not, their role is now played by psychotherapists and other counsellors and advisors. Also most leaders have an underlying driving force. This might appear to be a masculine dynamic energy ('we're marching forward') but it could just as easily be associated with feminine aspects. Symbols are important when it comes to directing energy; they express something for which there are no words. For the Pope, the cross is a living symbol, a constant source of inspiration from which he draws the energy for what he does. Leaders believe in 'freedom' or 'justice for all'. And it is more than just a belief because they are in touch with that source; it is a part of them. If you lose your faith in a symbol, you also lose access to that source of strength. Putting in overtime and inspiring others are no longer effortless. Many people undergoing a personal crisis need a new symbol. Leaders also need such a source; without it, you would be powerless. A quality of leaders is that they are in touch with the symbolic and communicate this to others or the masses.

### **Leaders: not rulers but a social quality?**

A commonly heard remark concerning leadership is 'Are they also getting things done? Or do you still need managers for that?' 'Leaders ask the big questions,' they say. 'How can I save India' instead of 'How can I be a better taxi driver?' Strong charismatic leaders, however, can also be destructive for humanity. Who dares to question strong leaders? Who will ask, for example, 'how smart growth really is'. One way of going about this is to raise the awareness

of followers in order to educate the leaders. You can see this happening already: the general public is becoming increasingly more informed and more critical. Leaders will always seek to find something to lead, so by focusing on followers, they will probably collectively build the important platforms for leaders to migrate to and to amplify with their leading ability. Leadership is then a social quality and not an individual quality.

### **How do you become a better leader?**

Are you sometimes capable of stopping yourself before going ahead and doing something you will later regret? This could be humiliating someone, wanting quick results against your better judgement, displaying unnecessary and exaggerated self-assurance, etc. – all motivated by the fear of uncertainty and failure. After all, your role as leader means that you should be able to solve everything. As a rule, that's how you earn such a healthy salary, and this is what you are expected to do. This makes it even harder to listen to your 'leadership heart' and be honest – to be the kind of leader who helps others develop. How can you muster your strength instead of mustering power within the existing economic structures? How do you ask for help? How do you help others? In spiritual traditions, in the relationship between the guide and the guided, it is an effort for both to be very open with the other. Both learn equally from each other. Were you to do this in the business community, conversations would be on levels other than just business. 'Living' and 'working' would thus be drawn closer together, and both would take on greater meaning. This would also open space for uncertainty and chaos in the working environment. Disruptions such as a crisis could then be dealt with realistically and without being seized by panic. You would simply work with others to do what would have to get done at the time.

### **A progressive, entirely different approach**

Or you could do it entirely differently by taking your cue from the Internet and its facilitators. These are people who enable others to solve their own problems. You could then forget about who the leader is and who the follower is and, for example, formulate six planetary values and ask people how they would deal with these values and how their leader would deal with them. This would initiate change from an entirely different angle. An example of such a value would be dealing with generational differences.

**Conclusion: we have to rehumanise our approach. Our planet can hardly support us anymore, and there is a tremendous need for unity and meaning in our lives. In short, life on Earth could be so much better and more fun, with everybody having the space to develop themselves. So why don't we make that happen?**

The next meeting, to be held on 18 June, will be organised by Karin Jironet, senior program director at de Baak. This article provides merely a preview of a publication about the findings of these professionals. For more information, you can contact Cheri Blommers at [c.blommers@debaak.nl](mailto:c.blommers@debaak.nl)

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