

positive & mindful
leader

The importance of culture in challenging times

BY FINTAN MCGOVERN

**POSITIVE
LEADERSHIP**

UNICEF's answer to
current and future
crises

**THE LONGING
BEHIND THE
COMPLAINT**

Outside the norms
of conventional
professional
interactions

The Longing behind the complaint

By Nicole Brauckmann

In a time of major turbulence and uncertainty, emotional outbursts – displays of misbehaviour considered outside the norms of conventional social and professional interactions – seem to have become more frequent. How can leaders tune into what is really going on and respond in a way that is constructive and helpful?



What does it say about a country when the two people rallying to be the next “leader of the free world”, as the US presidency has been known for decades, engage in a presidential debate described as a “dark horrifying unwatchable fever dream ... the first line of America’s obituary”?

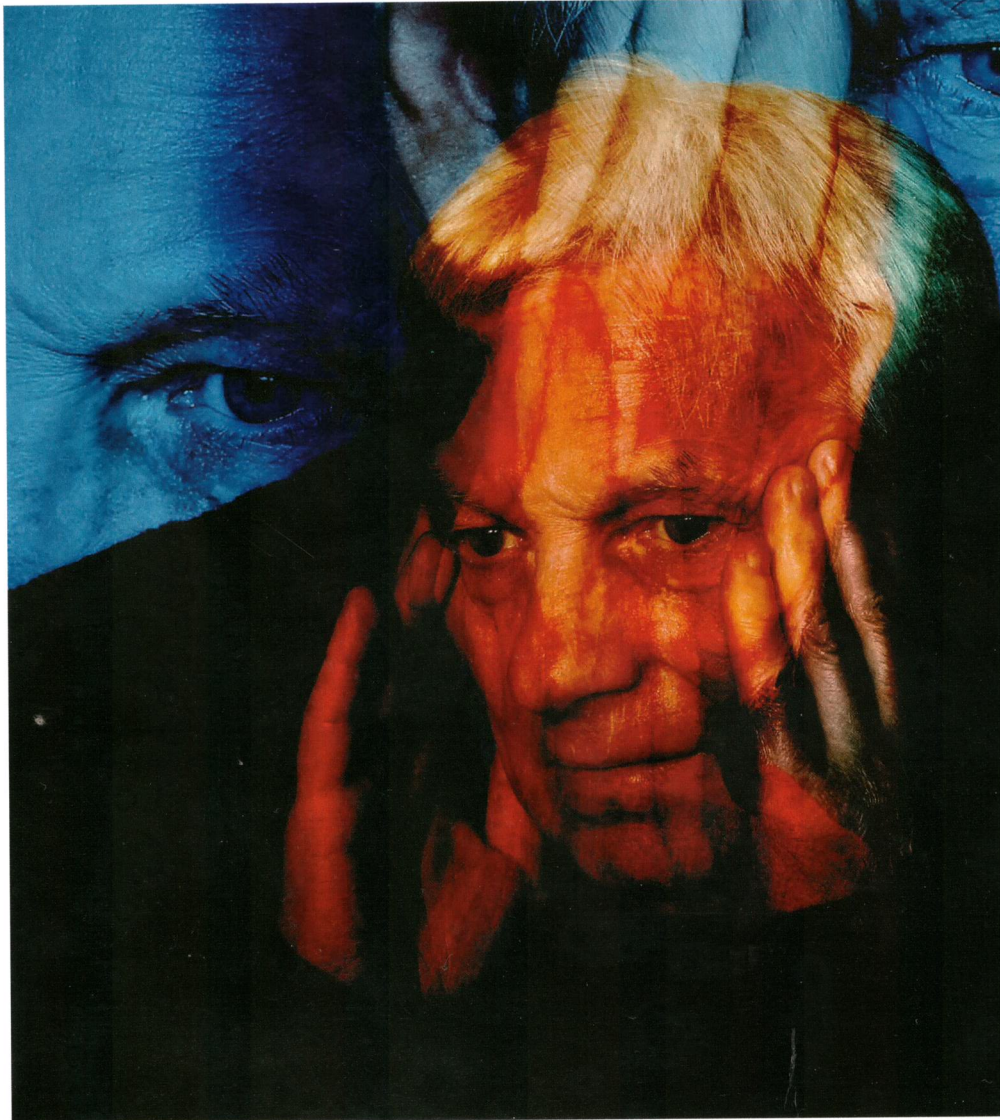
What does it say about a country whose COVID-19 death toll ranks 21st globally (Johns Hopkins University, Corona Resource Center) when a sizeable number of its citizens do not agree with governmental measures to keep a second wave at bay and instead take to the streets to protest, drowning out the majority who think the government is right (even if they sometimes forget to adhere to the rules themselves)?

What does it say about a federal state when a minister of police and domestic security comes under immense scrutiny for appointing antidemocratic, extreme-right figures to key positions in the police force and other civil servant groups, and resorts to extreme and foul language to describe his state of mind in a parliamentary session?

This article does not wish to determine which of these complaints are justified and which are wrong. This is not about debating facts and fake news. And it does not claim to have the answers to these issues.

Rather this article invites a systemic perception of these eruptions and suggests viewing them as a fractal of the whole – a yearning for something to be seen and acknowledged. This article describes how leaders can tune into the turmoil and the noise that occurs in any human system, particularly when under some form of transformational pressure.

In many cases, a habitual response to seeing something that doesn’t fit with our understanding of how things should be is often to discard it as irrelevant, irrational, wrong or unacceptable. However, any such response is unlikely



to yield understanding or agreement between parties.

So, what would be a more constructive way of looking at these eruptions?

A FRACTAL OF THE WHOLE

Any event, however small, that seems to threaten the status quo results in one of three basic responses in the amygdala section of our brain – fight, flight, freeze. This is often the immediate response when we witness an unanticipated (degree of) eruption in the system we are a part of, whether that’s family, colleagues or co-citizens.

I can pretend not to notice what has happened, talk it down or deny it. I can retaliate against an outburst with equal

or greater force. And I can actively look away (flight...), occupy myself with something else and actively avoid further exposure. None of these are very helpful – but they often contribute to a swift escalation and hardening of opposing positions.

If we understand extraordinary and unexpected eruptions as events that are fundamentally connected to their surrounding system and an actual fractal of it, i.e. representing the system as a whole in some way, this perspective helps us to see the disturbance as something that has its own place – even if it feels uncomfortable, alienating or difficult. Something is going on that requires our attention – not our (pre-empted)



judgement.

This is more easily said than done, but more on that later.

THE ENERGY IN E.MOTION

In the workplace, and to an extent among the general public, emotions are perceived as ambiguous concepts. Emotional intelligence is widely seen as a desirable capacity, and many team-building efforts have focused on creating shared positive emotions. Yet largely unfiltered, spontaneous displays of emotions, and particularly negative emotions, are often labelled as unprofessional, irrational, or unwelcome. Reality TV shows capitalizing on artificially created emotionally turbocharged interactions

between cast members don't help here.

But let's return to the genuine purpose of emotions. Based on the research of Ekman and Plutchik in the 20th century, emotions can be described as having developed to stimulate movement (just put a dot in e.motion...). Basic emotions evolved in response to the challenges that our early ancestors faced – mainly aiding their survival. Basic emotions are therefore hardwired into our very being.

Obviously, sabre-tooth tigers pose little threat to our livelihoods these days; yet, we see emotions erupt with quite some force. So what triggers these responses?

THE LONGING BEHIND ANGER

As John Gottmann put it, "Behind every complaint is a deep personal longing." This also translates into anger, often expressed as complaints. Anger is the emotion we feel when boundaries are crossed, when we experience or observe injustice, and when our values seem to be threatened. The primary force behind anger is the need to restore or protect something dear to us. Thus anger can be a very helpful force that helps us navigate our individuality, alerting us to when something that is a core part of our being is threatened. Equally, anger on behalf of others is a beautiful expression of our respect for their individuality and our intention to keep that intact.

However, two aspects easily cloud the purity of the source behind such anger. Firstly, we can easily get caught up in our anger, not paying attention to what it is really about and focus on the anger itself without inquiring into the important message that it conveys. Then it is often expressed in a way that is destabilizing, even fear-inducing to others; this makes it hard for us and others to connect it to a need for restoration or protection. Secondly, as one's source of anger is very

individual, based on my experience, my observation, my values, it implicitly explains too why a purely rational, distanced response often fails to settle the matter. As long as the heart of the matter isn't clearly understood – what needs protection, restoration? – any rationale will easily be beside the point and not helpful in channelling energy towards an achievable and helpful outcome.

So, what is a more productive way to connect with anger, be it our own or that of others?

MY PLACE IN IT

The Still Moving Leadership Framework offers four inner capacities that can be applied to this situation.

Let's start with "Staying present" – the ability to simply be with the situation as it is, without being thrown by the experience or getting distracted. If we can hold focus on the present, we can fully notice what is going on, both around us but equally important within us. We don't quickly make up our narrative of the situation, often including judgement ("there is no reason to be so angry, surely it doesn't affect them as much"). Resorting quickly to familiar narratives leads us to form our view of a situation without first allowing ourselves to fully take in reality; this makes us liable to miss important clues to the situation and how the situation affects us, clouding our perception of reality.

It is then easy for the autopilot to take over, which minimizes our ability to freely choose the most appropriate response and not resort to the one we use most often. If, however, we manage to "hit the pause button" and look at the situation with intentional curiosity, we can bring deep personal awareness and personal intention to the table. Particularly when faced with difficult emotions, like anger or fear, we can get caught up in our anxious response to this experience. And as neuroscience has demonstrated, we cannot be anxious and curious at the

same time. An anxious brain is far less likely to produce creative solutions to a problem than a curious one. When we are able to consciously choose how to be (e.g. curious, not equally angry), it liberates us to choose our response whatever happens – and shift the habitual response and routines of those around us. This capacity is called “curious and intentional responding”.

“Staying Present” and “Curious and Intentional Responding” are two inner capacities used to monitor and navigate one’s inner processing and responding to the world outside. A third capacity “Tuning into the system” shifts my attention to what is around me. As stated before, I can treat anger as a disruption of proper public order, as a barrier to changes that need to be made, or as a meaningless outburst of a few ignorant opponents that “just don’t get it”. But what if I can see, as described above, the anger as data and as something that might give me some insight into an undercurrent that is meaningful because we are all parts of a richly interconnected relational system where there are underlying

dependencies and causal effects? As anger – however unskillfully it may be expressed – has great telling power about something that needs protecting or restoring, we should not lightly dismiss the message we are being told, even if at first it seems to relate to only a few of us.

Lastly, this gives us a duty to “acknowledge the whole”. History is full of examples where completely ignoring an (initially) small group of protesters leads to an ever-increasing opposition and further societal division, which in turn either leads to revolution or brutally ends with violent force. So, in short – what gets excluded only gets bigger! Skilful leadership finds a way to integrate all that happens and gives it a place so that its value can be seen. Concerning anger, truly understanding its (pure) source – not the manipulated, sometimes instrumentalized claims that are stated – can offer great insight into what seems to be at stake and how that might need to be reconciled for things to realign and move forward.

A CASE EXAMPLE

To illustrate the above, the following is a story from working with a client organisation a few years back. We had been working with one of Europe’s three biggest utility companies. The lignite division of the organisation was under immense scrutiny as a result of increasing awareness of climate change and the societal move to carbon-free sources of energy. This pressure came not only from outside but also from within as it had become clear that there was no viable, socially acceptable way forward for this part of the business. A group of leaders had recognized how the pressure had resulted in low morale on the shop floor and was growing into a significant threat to the mental and physical health of the workforce and thus threatened performance. They came up with the plan to establish staff engagement rooms to share the overall change story so that everyone would be able to see how the hard cuts in the division were a key contribution to secure survival and new business perspectives for the corporation as a whole. They hoped that the staff would embrace this perspective and then more fully

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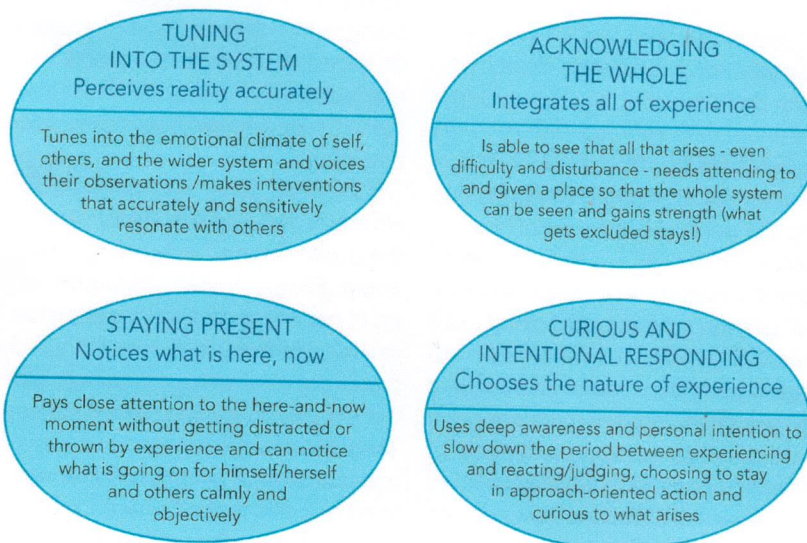
“Behind every complaint is a deep personal longing.”

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STILL MOVING

INNER CAPACITIES – HOW TO BE TO LEAD CHANGE



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support the ongoing changes.

Only a few tentative tests were needed to see that this plan would not unfold as envisioned as the resistance amongst employees to and active disinterest in any such engagement was clearly visible.

The team shifted their focus and experimented (with significant trepidation) with the idea of offering “anger rooms” – rooms dedicated to management spending time with and listening to the anger and complaints of employees in the sites most heavily affected by the drastic changes. What surprised them most was that despite their own concerns that the anger rooms would be seen as an opportunity for staff to forcefully make demands and present lengthy wish lists, simply being listened to, being heard and being allowed to be angry was what was needed. The facts were clear – without the cuts, the whole division, and possibly the whole corporation could go belly up. The longing behind the anger was the workers wanting it to be seen and acknowledged that the changes would affect some more than others and that some had to pay a higher price.

The sessions that were run at different locations helped staff to cross the threshold from being angry to facing reality clearly, feeling in charge of how they wanted to be whilst working towards the end of this business. They stepped into their professional pride of doing their best whilst facing the unavoidable instead of wasting energy on being upset, debating options and speculating about the future, which ultimately led to better performance.

So whilst most of us are not in a position to address all of the eruptions described at the start, maybe we can look at what happens around us with an understanding of the need to identify the longing behind people's anger and what it may take from us to work with anger in a way that opens rather than closes opportunities for change.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICOLE BRAUCKMANN

Nicole Brauckmann has spent over fifteen years in various leading roles in HR learning and development functions of large, multinational corporations. She is a member of the founding group of Still Moving Consultancy, a tribe of change practitioners passionate about bringing mindful leadership into the world. She mainly works as an executive coach and consultant to organisations facing significant change and looks for different ways for leaders to utilise the potential they have within themselves to create the conditions for successful emergent change to unfold. The underlying conviction in her approach is that connecting individuals, teams and organisations to their true self fundamentally enriches their ability to move through difficult transitions. Nicole balances her work with her family of four and finds her inner stillness in reading, gardening and taking long walks through nature with her dog.