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Being before doing: leading disruption starts by turning inward

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The crisis of the Covid-19 virus spread, unprecedented in modern times, is having a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods. At the time of writing, a quarter of the world's population is in "lockdown" – an emergency protocol of forced self-isolation and social distancing to avoid the high rate of transmission. This while doctors and scientists scramble to provide life-saving treatment that can get our communities and economies back on track. In this extraordinary collectively restricted, and highly anxious context, many questions are being asked of our society. How come we are in this situation? What is Covid-19 shining a light on in our underlying mindsets and behaviour? Is how we run our political institutions, economies and communities today really something to be proud of? Will we come out of this a changed world, and, a world for the better?

In this series of articles, our aim is to ask questions about how we and our leaders are handling change within this disruptive challenge, and to offer some frameworks of thinking and practice that might enable us to handle this crisis effectively – as, who knows in this unprecedented situation, what "right" looks like.

This, the second article in the series, examines how *the quality of a leader's inner state fundamentally drives the quality of their outer action*, and we set out the four Still Moving "Inner Capacities", which our research has found account for over half the reason why big change either succeeds, or fails. Ignore this "to be list" at your peril!

In times like this, when it becomes obvious that we don't know what the future holds and certainty breaks away, we turn inside ourselves to find certainty. As social distancing requires most of us to clear our diaries from face-to-face meetings, conferences and the daily commute to work, so space opens – while, simultaneously, our lives seem to contract into our homes, with only very few if any people (and animals) around us. What can feel difficult and/or easy to avoid in other times, is

a natural for right now – looking inside oneself to find some degree of calm in the **eye of the storm**.

So, amidst all hardship the crisis does offer us *the opportunity to investigate whether we leap to do, or do we look to be?* Why is this important in leading disruptive change? Well, we have found that a leader's ability to first tune into and regulate their inner mental and emotional response to experience can make or break their ability to tune into and move the system around them. If they cannot use the pivotal muscle of their inner world, they might lead a lot of busy stuck-in-the-groove **"doing" action**, but not change the system more deeply from its "being" source.

Just look around at others and notice how they are operating for clues into appropriate inner strategies of **leadership in a crisis**. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed her people in an unprecedented **TV appearance**, it was as much her calmness and ability to tune into the system and its needs, as the content of her speech, that moved the audience. Amongst the experts in the German public gaze, those seen as the most credible are two virologists who can paint a nuanced picture of what they know and what they don't know, what they feel prepared to have a view on and where they feel out of their depths. They resist the repeated temptation to give in to questions and provide simple answers, not reacting to the pressure but instead responding truthfully and from a fresh perspective. It seems they have a clear sense of who they are and what they can contribute that helps them step into their leadership in a way that appeals to people and engenders trust and followership.

This fully echoes the research findings of Still Moving: with a correlation of 52%, the quality of our actions is **critically contingent** on the quality of our inner state . This is due in part to our own physical well-being and our ability to perform (the Dutch Health Minister fainted during a

parliament debate after too many days of high pace and little sleep). But, it goes beyond that – as spiritual traditions across the globe have **long-since known**. In Christianity, we find the metaphor of the vine and the grapes: only the good vine bears good fruit, the corrupt vine needing to be pruned so as not to spoil all (John 15). True strength comes from knowing yourself and the **inner source** that leads or pulls you.

How, therefore, to cultivate the vine? Below is our “to be list”, the set of inner capacities correlated with leading highly successful change. They are written up extensively **elsewhere**. Here, we thought we’d illustrate the capacities by inviting you to imagine practicing them during what might now be an all-too-familiar scenario – the quality of your inner state during an online, from-your-home, video conference call with your team, or clients...

Staying present: *notices what is here, now.* Only when we notice what is really going on in the present moment – for us and others – can we do something about it. To be fully present on a video conference, you may need to shut down other devices and notifications to avoid distraction. Make sure you have what you need to keep focussed attention – a drink to hand, a comfortable chair, breaks when you or others are getting tired. It also means being accepting of what is here, now – not yearning for the immediacy of a face-to-face meeting, and acknowledging that it requires more effort to stay present when your kids might be **playing in the background**. This non-judgemental attitude clears our minds so that we can open up and work with the possibilities right in front of us. A hallmark of a great change leader.

Curious and intentional responding: *chooses the nature of experience.* We are primed to work efficiently on autopilot to cope with complexity and high stress levels. This can limit our ability to choose a **fresh response** to what we experience, for example when a participant in the video call “always seems to not get what is really the issue here”. We

can get so caught up in our own emotions, that we unconsciously only operate from that point – anger, frustration, fear, boredom. As neuroscience proves that our emotions can be **contagious**, whole situations can get stuck in an unhelpful state. So, if you feel like this on that video call, can you “hit the pause button” on your response and not react with unconscious routines, in order to gain deeper insight and find more creative solutions than the dance around same old, same old? By switching *your* inner response to what is being experienced, so will you switch *other* people’s responses, too. Try it out next time!

Tuning into the system: *perceives reality accurately.* Though true for all situations, the technology of a video conference really brings home that our perception of reality on the screen isn’t completely synchronised with others. If we use Zoom as the online platform, the arrangement of speaker pictures on the screen varies between participants. You can only effectively communicate with them if you share what you see and inquire into their reality. So, pay attention to and inquire about what you are noticing in the call – are people switching off, how are people participating – these visible signs are important data not just about this group, but also echoes of the wider system and context that your team are operating in right now. Experiment seeing this group on the call as a **“fractal” of the wider whole.**

Change leaders tune into what is really going on in front of them to discern what they need to do to create genuine movement in the system at large.

Acknowledging the whole: *integrates all of experience.* Many of us prefer the direct human contact in a face-to-face meeting. So, we can spend a lot of energy on dealing with the sense of loss and betrayal as we are asked to embrace new forms of collaborating. Can you work with any of the new discomfort you feel and see how these restrictions could in fact become helpful resources? Leaders who can lean into

difficulty without being scared, irritated or defensive, productively strengthen their organisations to see the value in a situation, engendering new insights or a deeper understanding of what really matters. Even considering all the pain and sorrow the Covid-19 crisis brings – can we also look at it as a wake-up call that invites us to re-assess the choices we have made in the past and will have to make in the future? A change leader would ask, how can our move to working online and at a physical distance, be helpful (beyond beating the virus)?

The current invitation to self-reflect and turn inward also extends to us at Still Moving – as change consultants and supervisors, what is the value we can bring to this situation and beyond? How can we find new ways to share our findings and support clients when support is restricted to remote settings? How can we envision a new relationship with our clients at a time when many plans are postponed or cancelled? What might we need to learn about what we don't know? We have certainly needed to hit the pause button and notice and handle our own inner responses to the radical change in context.

The last few weeks have seen many quality actions coming from quality being, for example people who need to keep their distance **joining each other in song** to build connections, creative ways of **expressing gratitude** to health care professionals at a certain time, and countless little acts of solidarity and caring that in the face of this global threat created a monument to humanity – so, what does the above “to be” list enable you to *do*?

Read on for next week's issue on what it is leaders need to do to be effective in times of complex change.



Notes:

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Deborah Rowland has led change in major global corporations including BBC Worldwide, Gucci Group, PepsiCo and Shell, where she had vice-president of organisational development and group HR director roles.

She is the author of *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* (Wiley 2017) and co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley 2008). Deborah founded the change consultancy Still Moving, where she advises institutional leaders around the world on how to implement change in more effortless ways. She also speaks, writes, and teaches on the subject. In the 2017 Thinkers50 Radar she was named one of the new generation of management thinkers changing the world of business. She tends to her own inner game via regular yoga, meditation and art gazing, painting, and walks in nature, in particular along the spectacular coastal paths of Southern Cornwall.



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 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 the family life of four and finds her inner stillness in reading, gardening and long walks through nature with her dog.

About the author



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Deborah Rowland is a speaker, writer, and coach in the field of leading big complex change. She is the co-author of three books, including *Still Moving Field Guide: Change Vitality at Your Fingertips* (Wiley 2020). She has personally led change at Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo, and pioneered original research in the field, accepted as a paper at the 2016 Academy of Management, and the 2019 European Academy of Management. 2017 Thinkers50 Radar named Deborah as part of the generation of management thinkers changing the world of business, and 2021 HR Most Influential Thinker list.



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