

Lighting and Leading the Way

The primary paradox we face today is that we are desperately looking to leadership to light the path to a better tomorrow at precisely the moment they feel the most insecure in their ability to lead the way. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



Tony O'Driscoll is global head of DukeCE Labs, whose purpose is to discover what's next for leadership development by experimenting with new methodologies, approaches, and technologies to uncover where leverage lies in building the leadership system capabilities required to survive and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Almost a quarter-century ago, social philosopher Charles Handy's prophetic book, "The Age of Paradox," foreshadowed seismic shifts in the global economy triggered by new technologies that would disrupt entire industries and compel corporations to doggedly pursue productivity gains to propel their share price into the stratosphere.

Importantly, Handy warned us that this technologically accelerated causal chain of events would create a host of paradoxes for societies, economies, organizations, and individuals to grapple with.

Welcome to the Age of Paradox. Since the introduction of the Mosaic browser in 1993, the Internet and its social and mobile cousins have woven the Web into a digital nervous system that connects every person and every thing on this planet with light speed.

At the societal level, increased digital connectivity has led to increased cultural disharmony. Connectivity is polarizing citizenry into digital media filter bubbles and social media echo chambers that are tearing the very fabric of society.

At the economic level, increased digital connectivity has led to increased wealth asymmetry. Connectivity is creating disparity in wealth between those who benefit from financial market gains and those who work for an hourly wage.

At the institutional level, increased digital connectivity has led to structural volatility. The average age of a publicly traded company today is less than the average age of its employees, and the turmoil and tumult of political transitions is increasing rapidly.

At the individual level, people have always looked to leadership to light a path between an untenable present and an uncertain future. But the more connected we are digitally, the more vulnerable and insecure leadership feels to take individual action in times of increased and intense scrutiny.

A NEW FORM OF LEADERSHIP

Throughout history, in times of societal polarity, economic inequality, institutional instability, and individual insecurity, leadership has stepped into the breach of uncertainty to create new eras of growth and prosperity by developing and implementing social innovations to complement

technological ones.

In essence, the primary paradox we face today in addressing our current confluence of connected conundrums is that we are desperately looking to leadership to light the path to a better tomorrow at precisely the moment they feel the most insecure in their ability to lead the way.

Economic historian Carlota Perez argues there have been five technological revolutions over the last 240 years. These revolutions follow a predictable pattern. Each begins with the emergence of a breakthrough technology that rapidly diffuses throughout society. This eruption is followed by a period of frenzied bubble prosperity when financial capital is decoupled from production capital, and those who can play in the financial casino economy enjoy significant economic gains. The bubble then bursts, and we enter a period of recession when new forms of social innovation are institutionalized to ensure that the huge underlying technological potential is realized, leading to a time of synergistic growth and inclusive prosperity, until the technology matures and the cycle begins anew.

Today, Perez argues, we find ourselves at an inflection point similar to the one we faced in the 1930s, when the tumult and turmoil of World War II was followed by the Golden Age. To find our way forward at this critical inflection point in our history, we need a new form of collaborative leadership to build a new set of societal innovations and global institutions that can maintain synchrony and relevance in a connected age of swift, sweeping, and significant paradoxical change.

To close this year's Global Peter Drucker Forum, Charles Handy took to the stage to remind us that revolutions of the societal kind begin with a small group of people who share a big dream to build a better tomorrow. He challenged each of us to start small fires in the darkness until they spread and the whole world is alight with a better vision of what we can do with our businesses and shape their roles in society to create a new Golden Age of growth and inclusive prosperity for all.

He ended with a call to action that those of us in Learning and Development should consider deeply: "If not us, then who, and if not now, then when?" **T**