

## Response-Able Leadership Post-COVID

LEADERS NEED TO LEARN TO MAXIMIZE THE EFFORTS OF OTHERS TO ILLUMINATE THE PATH TOWARD A BRIGHTER TOMORROW. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**

**T**hroughout history, particularly during times of continuous change, leadership has unfailingly stepped forward to bridge the gap between an increasingly untenable present and a frighteningly uncertain future. In the past, leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Ruth Bader Ginsberg emerged to light the way toward a better future.

Today, more than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, the world is waiting for such leadership to emerge once more. Why is it taking so long?

We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation where our need for leadership to light the path is becoming increasingly acute, while the needed nature of that leadership challenges our deepest held beliefs on what it means to lead.

### AN ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

In 1924, Mary Parker Follett observed, *“Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power, but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led.”* More recently, Harvard’s Barbara Kellerman asserted that leadership is a system consisting of three interacting components: The Leader, The Follower, and The Context.

These illuminating perspectives reimagine leader-

ship as a complex and dynamic set of leader-follower interactions that is a property of a system—not of the individual—and that is exercised as a process of social influence to maximize the efforts of others toward the achievement of a shared goal.

Simply put, leadership emerges from the connections people make and the decisions they collectively take. The adoption of either a leader or follower role emerges organically based on the context within which leadership needs to be exercised.

Catalyzing such an adaptive leadership system requires a paradigm shift in what we believe about what it means to lead. We must recognize that leadership:

- Is not a person, but a system.
- Is not about exerting power over others, but generating energy among others.
- Is not about exercising control, but catalyzing creativity.
- Is not about enforcing rules, but nurturing relationships.
- Is not about mandating responsibility, but cultivating response-ability.

Most importantly, leadership is about recognizing that everyone has the response-ability to maximize the efforts of others to illuminate the path toward a brighter tomorrow. What will *you* start doing more, better, and differently today to light the way? **■**



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