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Simon MCKENZIE

Jane SASSIENIE

Sunil SAVARA

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Nurturing Societal Leadership: Activities as Building Blocks

1 MAY, 2020

By **Simon McKenzie (Mac), Jane Sassienie and Sunil Savara**

We previously discussed the importance of societal leadership in building a better world for future generations—and how societal leaders are driven by a purpose far greater than themselves. In the first article, we introduced the Bridge Societal Leadership Model and outlined the common beliefs observed in many societal leaders. In the second article, we examined their common capacities, such as their remarkable abilities and capabilities.

This final essay will focus on some **activities** aspiring societal leaders can undertake to expand their personal purpose, beliefs and capacities.

#1 Disrupt Yourself

Societal leaders possess a sharp eye for injustice, and are outraged by unfairness. Some may have had personal experiences that significantly disrupted how they view the world and their place in it. The following are some examples from societal leaders we know and have worked with.

One such societal leader was a man who, when younger, had tried to intervene in a well-known kidnapping case involving tourists. He had bravely pleaded with the armed militants to free the hostages, but without success. Tragically, the hostages did not survive, and this incident left him with a deep sense of responsibility to change things. Another societal leader had walked unarmed and unsupported into a jungle to successfully negotiate for a peace deal with the leaders of a historically violent armed group. Having witnessed much violence in his lifetime, and hoping to ensure peace for future generations, this individual has dedicated himself to building schools in communities affected by violence. We also note the example of the founder of an Asia-based retail brand. This lady was so greatly impacted after meeting with a group of commercial sex workers, that she offered them—and other sex workers in the area—jobs in her company.

Stepping into the boxing ring

To be disrupted, for one's sense of injustice and unfairness to become burning and all-consuming, one needs to step into the **boxing ring of life**.

All societal leaders have, at some point in their lives, found themselves in the boxing ring of life. As American author Thomas Hauser once wrote,

“Each time he [a boxer] enters the ring, he's risking everything. ... He doesn't know what the outcome will be. If his opponent is a good fighter, he'll be hit hard and often. Most people never find out how much courage they have or don't have. But courage is the beginning point for boxers and their sport. It takes courage just to get in a boxing ring. Courage is inseparable from fear.”

To enter the "boxing ring" of societal leadership, the first step is to **disrupt yourself**. For instance, if you're concerned about climate change, connect with people who have lost family members due to natural disasters, such as Australia's 2019 fires or the flooding in Kerala, India, in 2018. If you're outraged by the trafficking of women, connect with women who have been rescued or volunteer for a not-for-profit that supports survivors of trafficking. If you're passionate about creating a healthier society, talk to people who live with Type 2 diabetes or other chronic health conditions. The possibilities are endless.

We live in a world where injustice is not very far away. With technology, we can easily connect with people and organisations in the social space. Start by contacting an organisation that inspires you; that way, you can contribute to its impact meaningfully in a short period of time. You can turn to platforms like the Asian Venture Philanthropy Network, the African Venture Philanthropy Alliance and the European Venture Philanthropy Association, which bring together some of the most purposeful not-for-profits, foundations, philanthropists and companies that are committed to building a fairer and sustainable world—and they are constantly looking for support.

#2 Inspire Yourself

As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.” The personal vision of societal leaders is what inspires and guides them every day.

To discover your *why*, we recommend writing The Letter from the Future. This note—from your future self to your present self—is a way to envision and reflect on what has taken place over the last, say, seven years from today.

The Letter should address these questions:

What type of person have you been? How did people experience you? What is the world you want to create for future generations? What were your

greatest achievements towards this? What have been your biggest contributions to the world? How did you experience the last seven years? What brought you the most joy? What impact did you make on those close to you?

Not only will writing a Letter from the Future take your mind off the grind of day-to-day life; it will also help you tap into your higher purpose. When penning this note, dream big and "swing for the fences". "Swinging for the fences", a phrase used in baseball, means putting all you can into hitting the ball as far as possible. You know that your bat might miss the ball entirely, but if you succeeded in making contact, the rewards would be significant.

So settle yourself down in a relaxing place, get your pen and notepad ready, and swing for the fences.

#3 Activate Your Personal Agency

Personal agency refers to one's ability to take action, be effective, influence their own life and assume responsibility for their actions. Societal leaders have enormous amounts of personal agency.

To map where you're at in terms of purpose, beliefs and capacities, we have put together a short diagnostic—click [here](#) for the short survey. Upon completion, look at the areas you've scored lowly on and think about what's holding you back from scoring a 10 out of 10. Note these down and act upon them.

Activating your personal agency does not mean you have to give up your day job. Indeed, corporations can play a major role in building a more just and sustainable future. Like government bodies, non-profits and social enterprises, for-profit organisations, too, can make impactful contributions.

Every organisation has a sweet spot in terms of how it can use its assets and capabilities to be a force for good and make money from it. For instance, soap brand Lifebuoy determined its social mission—to prevent children from dying due to unclean hands and unsafe water—and successfully implemented their "Help a Child Reach 5" programme. In our previous article, we also discussed how clothing company Patagonia set a pioneering example in "building the best product, causing no unnecessary harm, using business to inspire, and implementing solutions to the environmental crisis."

Some recommendations

If you care about climate action, we recommend the book, *Drawdown*, which offers advice to businesses on how they can embrace the proven

technologies that will reduce carbon emissions. If you care about sustainable agriculture, explore how your company can support the growing of more sustainable crops and reformulate foods that are better for the planet and its people. SDG Compass is a good resource that provides guidance for companies to align their strategies—as well as measure and manage their contribution—to the meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Finally, pick up the book, *WEconomy*, for plenty of inspiring examples of how companies are being a force for good in the world.

Whatever cause you're passionate to support, now is as good a time as any to engage with stakeholders of your organisation on how your company can do good better.

#4 Find Mentors, and Be One

Societal leaders create a community of inquiry, where they can stop, reflect, make sense and move forward. They have mentors and become great mentors to others. In your own journey, attain mentors, or become one for others.

To find mentors, start by identifying three people you know and consider to be wise and gifted—individuals from different walks of life who you think are the best examples of societal leaders. Ask them to be your mentors: this can be in the form of a 30-minute conversation once a month, for instance. At the same time, find three other people you can be a mentor to; people who might benefit from your skills or experiences.

Next, find a project to get involved in. It might be a family project, a business project, a community project or a societal project. Whatever your undertaking, it has to resonate deeply with you—it might be something that you scored 10 out of 10 for in our diagnostic test, or something mentioned in your Letter from the Future.

Then, kick things off with a small pilot and dedicate five per cent of your time to it per day. Beyond your mentors, also try to meet people outside your usual circles to gain fresh perspectives. You can also contact Bridge if you'd like to invest in a coaching session.

The pathway towards societal leadership is open to everyone, including you. If you still find yourself doubting that you have the right or capability to change the world, consider the words of American author Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most

frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?"

Simon McKenzie (Mac) is a director of Bridge Partnership and one of the cofounders of the Bridge Institute. Based in Singapore, Mac's expertise is in leading societal programmes on behalf of governments and corporates. The programmes he leads bring the highest levels of government, business and civil society together to solve pressing societal challenges. These pioneering programmes are now called SDG17, after the Sustainable Development Goal 17 Partnerships. They apply leadership, strategy, systems thinking, design thinking and policy tools to support breakthroughs in thinking and action. Mac can be reached at **mac@bridge-partnership.com**

Jane Sassienie is a director of Bridge Partnership and a co-founder of the Bridge Institute. She has been working in the field of leadership and system evolution for more than 25 years, and in Bridge for over 20 years. Based in London, Jane's expertise is in understanding how to equip leaders, organisations and social systems with the capabilities they need to sustain transformation. She has designed the programmes for Bridge and the Bridge Institute that bring together government, business and civil society in partnership to tackle some of the most difficult societal challenges. Jane can be reached at **Jane.Sassienie@bridge-partnership.com**

Sunil Savara is co-founder of Mission Impossible Leaders, which develops leaders to be powerful and make a difference in the world. He is also co-founder and Trustee of Head Held High, intended to eradicate poverty. His purpose in life is to be a catalyst in the transformation of human beings. He can be reached at **ssavara@missionimpossibleleaders.com**