

New Era Leadership for Liminal Times and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a comprehensive, systemic approach to create the organizational leadership capabilities needed for the demands of the post-pandemic era. We call this New Era Leadership. While every age is marked by critical events and crises that drive change, we believe that the current combination of events and generational workforce shifts creates a powerful momentum for people to participate in shaping their environments, and an associated demand for co-creative and self-aware leaders. We asked ourselves if the known leadership models, supported by their methods, educational approaches and practices, are capable of meeting this challenge, and examined their features and capabilities. We take a historical view of the characteristics of legacy leadership models from ancient times to the present to understand the important factors and dynamics relating to leadership, the gaps that exist between existing leadership approaches and today's needs and explore how a New Era Leadership model addresses those gaps. We detail the characteristics of the New Era Leader and the systemic, systematic actions needed to materialize this model, and conclude with a summary and ideas for future research directions.

Keywords: New era leader, Post-pandemic era, Organizational leadership, Workplace environments

INTRODUCTION

As human beings and human societies, we are always in motion, driving and reacting to change in our world. We embrace emerging changes, both evolutionary and revolutionary, and initiate and drive others. The recent decade has been an unsettled time globally, and dissatisfaction with the status quo and injustice of all kinds has mobilized people to expect more from themselves, their societies, and their work environments. Leaders are key figures in every dimension of our ecosystem: in our government, private enterprise, academic institutions, and other societal organizations, from large to small. It is not surprising that these increased expectations also drive the need for transformations in our leaders. For this discussion, we use a general definition of leadership crafted by Kevin Kruse: “*Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal*” (Kruse, 2013, p. 3). We start with a review of legacy leadership models and move into how the New Era Leadership model addresses current challenges and gaps, with a focus on individual leaders in their individual

business settings. We also discuss the important factors and characteristics of leadership, and what is needed from leaders in this liminal time.

Liminal is a concept used in multiple disciplines and refers to a threshold experience, on an actual or abstract journey, where a transition is experienced, and when one has left the old but has not reached the new. We use it here to capture the idea of a radical change which is underway globally, in our societies, in our governments, and in our workplaces. We focus on new opportunities that are unfolding now for leaders, leadership practices, followers and employees to address the demands of these societal changes.

The key questions addressed are:

- What are the characteristics of legacy leadership models from our history?
- What new leadership attributes are needed to address today's challenges and the current global forces of change?
- What actions are specifically needed to realize New Era Leadership for this liminal moment and position organizations for ongoing success?

The New Era Leadership Model

New Era Leadership is a new leadership model which embodies a co-occurring set of key characteristics: self-aware leaders; transparency; co-creative practices within an organization; and the alignment of personal values, business values, and work for both leaders and organizational members. These practices are systemically linked and supported by technology and made more effective through the ongoing adoption of emerging technologies.

The Historical Evolution of Leadership Models

The wealth of academic research on leadership provides a foundational and historical view about what has been important in leadership in the past, what we can learn from our history, and what new approaches need to be developed to meet today's challenges. It is important, however, to make two important observations. First, the evolution of leadership has been layered, not de novo. Each leadership approach is built on top of previous models and the model implemented in real-life situations is often dependent upon the specific situation and context and is influenced by macro forces and the dominant trends of the time. Second, there is no single model of leadership that is best for all circumstances. A wide variety of leadership models and practices has evolved to address a broad set of contexts and settings. In an emergency, for example, an autocratic, command-and-control hierarchical approach is required for a team to respond effectively. Table 1 summarizes leadership models from the early times of civilization to the present day and are grouped by their primary focus. First is a focus on the traits and capabilities of the leader, likely the earliest leadership model, stretching back to early civilization when leaders were selected by divine right. The second group details a variety of leadership models featuring learnable behaviors and practices, also referred to as leadership styles. The third grouping is a combination of personal traits and learned behaviors.

Table 1. Leadership models in the literature.

Emphasis	Differentiating feature	Literature
“Leaders are born, not made”	Natural personal characteristics / inner traits of the individual	Great Man theory (Carlyle, 1846; Borghetta et al., 1954) Warrior model of leadership (Nice, 1998) Early 20th century leadership model (Lewin, 1935 thru 1950s) Focus on the individual (Fleishman, 1973)
“I can learn to be a leader”	Learned behaviors and practices (“styles”) Context-based	Situational leadership (Situational leadership theory (Hersey, Blanchard & Natemeyer, 1979; Blanchard, Zigarmi & Nelson, 1993)). ‘Full Range’ Leadership Theory (FRLT), including Transformational leadership, Charismatic leadership, Instrumental leadership (James MacGregor Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Hunt, 1999; Antonakis & House, 2014) Implicit Leadership Theories (Wilson, North, Morris & McClellan, 2020) e-Leadership & virtual teams (Avolio, Kahai, Dodge, 2000) Entrepreneurial leadership (Fernald, Solomon & Tarabishy, 2005)
“Nature plus Nurture”	Natural personal characteristics coupled with learned behaviors and practices	Training (Gagliardi & Mariani, 2022; Laible, Anger & Baumann, 2020); Conscious Leadership (Dethmer, Chapman & Klemp, 2015); Mackey, 2020; Leadership Potential (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2016), Leadership (Kohles, Baker & Donaho, 1995)

Sparse in the literature are effective and practical methods, metrics, and processes to measure leadership effectiveness in a timely manner in real-life settings, a gap addressed in our New Era Leadership model.

In studying the shifts in leadership approaches across the decades, we make two observations that inform our perspective on leadership today. Trust is a key leadership factor and a persistent thread that weaves through virtually all the leadership models – either by its presence or its absence. Autocratic leaders tend to have a high degree of trust in themselves and are successful if their subordinates also place their trust in them. The relationship aspect of trust (trust from the autocratic leader to the followers) is de-emphasized and tends to be a low-trust phenomena. Trust is important in leadership models emphasizing a relationship dynamic within an organization or setting (e.g., conscious leadership). These relationship-centric models are also characterized by collaborative and interactive leadership behaviors. Leadership is inherently a relational process. As we evaluate the dynamic of leadership for today’s challenges, we are struck by the importance of a robust, trusted relational environment between all parties and at all levels, and one which is intrinsic to the New Era Leadership model.

Keeping in mind the importance of both trust and the relational aspect of leadership, we now move to an examination of the larger context in our societal and business settings today and the associated leadership challenges.

Forces Driving a New Leadership Paradigm

A confluence of macro forces is driving a new paradigm in organizational leadership. These forces, both interconnected and independent, trigger downstream changes in the workplace ecosystem, creating new needs, opportunities, and challenges for businesses, leaders, and employees in three dimensions: social, organizational, and technological.

Social: Fundamental Changes in Our Relationship to Work

One visible symptom of the changes in our relationship to work has been covered widely in the press this past year: focus on the post-pandemic workplace (Kane et al., 2021), “the great resignation” in Harvard Business Review (Cook, 2021), and “anti-ambition” (Malone, 2022) and “turnover contagion” (Goldberg, 2022).

Large-scale departure of people from their jobs is just one very visible sign of changed workplace expectations. A 2021 Gallup study shows that, across generations, there are significant differences in what is valued from work across generations. Employee wellbeing and ethical leadership are important factors in each of the four generations (baby boomers, gen X, older millennials, and younger millennials and generation Z), although employee wellbeing is more important for both millennial generations and generation Z than prior generations. Organizational financial stability was a priority for baby boomers and generation X, but not for the later generations (Bass et al., 2017). What’s new for the older millennials is a priority for leadership openness and transparency, with diversity and inclusiveness most important to the younger millennials. For example, Malone (2022) notes that “*many young people with professional options want to be in solidarity with their colleagues instead of climbing the ladder above them.*” This aspiration contrasts with an earlier work ethic where employees pledged loyalty to a company and served their purposes (Whyte, 1956; De Meuse et al., 2001). Employees place a high value on trust and transparency in their leaders and expect a participative work environment where their ideas and perspectives are welcomed.

Organizational: Remote and Blended Work Requires Adjustments in Leadership

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a sudden shift to remote work, where many people discovered that it is feasible to effectively accomplish some percentage of their jobs virtually. Now in 2023, with better virus control and vaccines, we are seeing a “blended” or hybrid working configuration (Van Yperen & Wörtler, 2017), with people mixing on-site and remote work, enabled by technology and supported in varying degrees by their organizational managers and leaders. The desire of employees for increased flexibility and the ability to shape the ways that they perform their jobs pre-dates the pandemic and has been studied extensively in earlier times (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Lautsch, Kossek, and Eaton, 2009; Madlock, 2012). But the pervasiveness of this blended configuration is greatly increased, as is a greater desire for agility and flexibility. This, in turn, drives a set of evolving leadership changes. Prior research tells us that an empowering leadership style must be

an enabling factor for employee effectiveness, but additional work is needed to test this assumption (Wörtler, et al., 2022).

Technology: Enabling New Ways to Influence Leadership Behaviors¹

Beyond enabling remote work, technology impacts leadership in three ways.

First, technology provides mechanisms for communicating with and influencing people at scale. The pervasiveness of social media is an example of technology changing what it means to be a leader (Garrigos-Simon, 2012). Through social media, anyone with a phone camera and the ability to capture people's attention can influence millions. In the world of social media, the most limited resource is attention. When anyone can grab someone's attention, a new role of a leader is to help their followers to attend to the appropriate information and use their attention in ways that will result in the team achieving their goals.

The second way in which technology impacts leadership is by providing more effective means for learning new leadership behaviors. Historically, leadership skills were acquired on-the-job through working with and emulating effective leaders. With technologies such as Virtual Reality, it is now possible to create life-like immersive simulations where aspiring leaders can be trained on a variety of critical scenarios (Pelser and Gaffley, 2020). Dynamic experiences interactively test their leadership skills and provide an opportunity to get feedback and grow. Finally, technology generally provides the levers to scale. This is a critical capability in both individual businesses and in our overall ecosystems; in our remote work configurations, and in specific aspects of our business processes and systems. Coaching, for example, is one area which is limited by one-to-one delivery configurations, and which would benefit from technology amplification.

The third element of leadership impacted by technology is diagnostics and impact measurement. From the powerful computers we carry in our phones or watches to advanced computer vision cameras that detect emotion, technology to understand our physiological and affective signals has advanced to a degree where accurate feedback on leadership behavior and its effect on people is technologically possible in real-time. This area needs additional research.

The New Era of Organizational Leadership

The New Era of Leadership builds on some foundations learned from the past but is fundamentally different in important ways and introduces some new ideas and practices to address today's challenges and needs. Recognizing that different situations require different forms of leadership; Table 2 summarizes five key differentiating characteristics between leadership models of the past and what is needed in the new era of leadership.

The first dimension, collaboration, contrasts the strengths of a single person contribution with the collective contributions of a group. The cornerstone of collective genius is the increased organizational aperture from

¹Ideas in this section are contributed by Neeraj Sonalkar PhD, May 2022 (Stanford University).

Table 2. Differentiating characteristics of the new era of leadership model.

	Leadership Practice	Legacy Leadership	New Era Leadership
1	Collaboration	Solitary Genius	Collective Genius
2	Role	Authoritarian	Co-Creator
3	Communication	Secrecy	Transparency
4	Decision Making	Cognitive Intelligence	Embodied Intelligence
5	Identity	Public-private Splits	Public-Private Alignment

focus on a single person – “the solitary genius leader” driving a top-down agenda – to include a broader set of people who are contributors in shaping the work through active collaboration (Chrislip, 2002). The second dimension, role, reveals the strength brought by a broader set of people who are co-creators and entrusted as decision-makers in the working process (Schieffer, 2006). Leaders tend to have an eye on the whole landscape facing the group, whereas followers see their own space and possibly more detail of the immediate landscape. Thus, co-creativity is an intrinsic element of an overall successful implementation process. Communication is the next important component to examine. In a distributed, decentralized way of working, transparency and information sharing is critical (Chandler, 2022; Mackey et al., 2020). Secrecy, a lack of authenticity, and selective sharing of information is incompatible with this new way of working. The inputs and elements of decision-making are also important.

In the New Era, leaders access multiple levels of intelligence to guide and support their teams. These include “multiple intelligences” of the head, heart and gut of a person: the intellectual capabilities coupled with emotional literacy and embodied awareness. The last dimension is about the identity of a leader. Leaders need to be fully self-aware, knowing their own emotions and with personal and interpersonal agility. Acting with integrity - matching what we do on the outside with what is on the inside – is a visible and important component.

Foundations Needed to Actualize the New Era Leadership

Now our discussion moves to the difficult question about how to enable the emergence of New Era Leadership. There are three major execution areas which include an integrative approach to leadership development, closing the “knowledge-practice” gap through embodied learning, and applying the discipline of science to understanding leadership.

An Integrative Approach to Leadership Development

First, there needs to be alignment and integrity between our internal values, strengths and work experiences. This requires companies to implement employee development experiences with a focus on employees to build greater self-awareness, understand their personal values and actively shape how they perform their work, as well as help to influence the company values

and objectives. This alignment has multiple levels and dimensions and includes harmonization of all human dimensions, such as cognitive, affective, and conative (Hilgard, 1980; Gerdes et al., 2008) with one's strengths and capabilities, as well as alignment between one's personal objectives and the company objectives. A second level of harmonization is between the personal values of the employee and the job they perform. This can be at a "micro" level in the individual employee as they define their own job objectives and outcomes to be consistent with their values. It can also be how the individual employee influences the actions of their organization or the overall enterprise. In this integrative approach, development activities align individual internal growth with organizational growth initiatives, and manifest those (often) intangible values, principles, and goals in external work.

Closing the Knowledge-Practice Gap Through Embodied Learning

The second foundational area is closing the "knowledge-practice" gap by utilizing embodied learning. Embodied learning is *learning by doing* – extending the reach of learning beyond the mental processes to engage our full body intelligence. A now classic method in early education, it is also a powerful approach for adult learning. Embodied learning (Blake, 2018) engages the whole body and the mind to create durable change, rewiring our entire neuromuscular system. Through active learning experiences, new intentional patterns can be created and practiced in daily life - both individually and reinforced in social and community connections. Many artists and athletes spend upwards of 80% of their time in rehearsal or practice. Building leadership proficiency is no different.

A multidimensional combination of educational techniques and emerging technologies can effectively implement embodied learning. These include:

Structured learning experiences in a cohort-based format, an approach utilized extensively in schools and academia. The cohort-based approach groups together individuals with shared learning goals to connect, learn, collaborate, and actively engage in activities built around a specific subject. In doing so, this learning configuration increases student success rates due to interaction and accountability. Application of virtual technologies and use of the internet enable scaling and flexibility.

Adoption of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, digital twin, and augmented reality to enhance the effectiveness of the learning experience. As discussed earlier, technology can support and augment the practice of new leadership skills, particularly in providing mechanisms for communications and influence at scale, immersive simulations, and rapid cycles of data analytics for performance diagnostics and impact measurement. We envision building technology-enabled platforms and solutions with frameworks that support leaders in practicing their new skills and getting feedback on how they are doing. This transformational technology would enable leaders to easily pull abstract concepts into their repertoire of skills and capabilities, and then put them into practice in real-life much more easily than is possible today.

Applying the Discipline of Science to Leadership

Science is not just for laboratories and in the study of disciplines such as physics and astronomy. We believe that it is possible and beneficial to apply the discipline of science to leadership within a specific organization or team. A scientific approach with an experimental mindset provides a systematic framework for examining and validating assumptions, developing the “right questions”, developing and testing hypotheses, building knowledge through data gathering, and generating new ideas and innovative approaches. In addition, a scientific/experimental approach can help to establish a collaborative working environment which is transparent, inclusive and psychologically safe.

Existing practices in organizations today also provide elements for application of the scientific method:

Data driven approaches that utilize facts, metrics and data to guide decision making that is predictive of the future. It can also be difficult to develop data driven insights about innovative ideas such as new business models and new customer experience using historical data. The scientific method is not simply an inductive process where knowledge is built directly from data, which may better be considered a form of analytics (e.g., regression). Instead, the scientific method relies on a separate creative step of generating a hypothesis, followed by experimentation to test it. Therefore, the insights developed from data driven approaches can be a starting point for developing new questions or generating testable hypotheses.

Agile methodologies are practices that involve discovering requirements and developing solutions through the collaborative effort of self-organizing cross-functional teams and their customers and end users. Agile approaches therefore have the potential to play a significant role in automating and scaling up the scientific method. One natural place to begin might be in employee climate as leaders learn and practice new approaches. Rapid cycles of point feedback capture small changes in real-time or near real-time, providing systematic data capture and subsequent analysis to support or refute a hypothesis, and generate new questions and insights. Small changes can add up to trends enabling rapid course correction.

Taken together, these strategies provide a clear set of focus areas to implement the enabling components for all stakeholders to thrive and drive organizations with effectiveness and success.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper we introduced the New Era Leadership model: a comprehensive, systemic approach to creating the organizational leadership capabilities needed to address the transformed, post-pandemic business ecosystem. We reviewed legacy leadership models and their characteristics to understand the important factors, dynamics, and gaps relating to leadership. We have also shown the importance of evaluating any model in the light of a larger social context. We recommend a set of individual, and organizational actions to materialize the New Era Leadership model, and propose a systemic, integrative approach to leadership development. This proposal includes strategies to

close the knowledge-practice gap through embodied learning and using the discipline of science and an experimental approach for leadership.

As our human development continues to evolve, new theoretical and practical models are needed. The New Era Leadership model is an approach that meets the challenges of our evolving ecosystem. We believe this systemic and systematic approach enables leaders, employees and businesses to move forward with business success and personal fulfilment. We find that drawing a causal relationship between situational variables and outcomes can be difficult. We will explore new scientific approaches, meaningful metrics, and linkages anchored in real-life operational situations to address this gap and build knowledge in this area. Finally, we believe that cross-industry collaboration is needed to drive new leadership educational delivery experiences, standardized profession leadership certifications, and artificial intelligence frameworks to enable ecosystem-wide measurement of leadership actions. We envision partnerships with forward-thinking entrepreneurial organizations as well as established enterprises. Future work will also explore the industry-wide actions needed to extend the New Era Leadership model to the larger organizational ecosystem.

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