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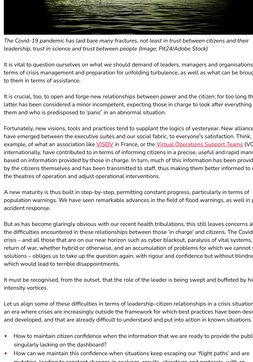
Rup[illegible]adership & citizens

In this in[illegible]ory Panel Member Patrick Lagadec examines the complex relationship between leadership and citizens in times of crisis, telling us that responsibility lies on both sides and giving us his thoughts on civil responsibility



The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare many fractures, not least in trust between citizens and their leadership, trust that Lagadec and first between people (Image: PIK24/Adobe Stock)

It is vital to question ourselves on what we should demand of leaders, managers and organisations in terms of crisis management and preparation for unfolding turbulence, as well as what can be brought to them in terms of assistance.

It is crucial, too, to open and forge new relationships between power and the citizen; for too long the latter has been considered a minor incompetent, expecting those in charge to look after everything for them and who is predisposed to 'panic' in an abnormal situation.

Fortunately, new visions, tools and practices tend to supplant the logics of yesteryear. New alliances have emerged between the executive suites and our social fabric, to everyone's satisfaction. Think, for example, of what an unknown like VSDN in France, or the Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOSTs) internationally, have contributed to in terms of informing citizens in a precise, useful and rapid manner, based on information provided by those in charge. In turn, much of this information has been provided by the citizens themselves and has been transmitted to staff, thus making them better informed to map the theatres of operation and adjust operational interventions.

A new maturity is thus built in step-by-step, permitting constant progress, particularly in terms of population warnings. We have seen remarkable advances in the field of flood warnings, as well in post-accident response.

But as has become glaringly obvious with our recent health tribulations, this still leaves concerns about the difficulties encountered in these relationships between those 'in charge' and citizens. The Covid crisis – and all those that are on our horizon such as cyber blackout, paralysis of vital systems, the return of war, whether hybrid or otherwise, and an accumulation of problems for which we cannot see solutions – obliges us to take up the question again, with rigour and confidence but without blindness, which would lead to terrible disappointments.

It must be recognised, from the outset, that the role of the leader is being swept and buffeted by high intensity vortices.

Let us align some of these difficulties in terms of leadership-citizen relationships in a crisis situation in an era where crises are increasingly outside the framework for which best practices have been designed and developed, and that are already difficult to understand and put into action in known situations.

- How to maintain citizen confidence when the information that we are ready to provide the public is singularly lacking on the dashboard?
- How can we maintain this confidence when situations keep escaping our 'flight paths' and are mutating, leading to constant changes in analyses, results, objectives and protocols, with an abysmal loss of familiar landmarks?
- How to operate when one finds oneself at odds with phenomena that no longer develop in a linear way, but rather exponentially, requiring measures to be taken when the imperatives of action are not in phase with the 'obvious facts' directly perceptible by common sense?
- How to maintain this confidence when the best experts fight resolutely in the unknown, but encounter oceans of ignorance that are difficult to tame in time?
- How to keep this bond of trust when certain experts make full use of the media's insatiable appetite, and the madness of so-called 'social' networks? When they engage in vociferous 'anti-system' declarations, knowing that the widely-proclaimed provocative nature of the subject will be instantly rewarded with the triumph of the ego, with guaranteed television glory, and jubilant veneration in these savage, untamed networks?
- How to maintain legitimacy when a long series of emblematic routs have permanently undermined the credibility of the authorities – the Chernobyl cloud being undoubtedly the 'original' fault that we risk having to expiate over generations? These primordial flaws have been reactivated since the Covid crisis began by Pavlovian postures that are as inadequate as they are suicidal in the case of face masks.
- But we need to go deeper into the current dynamics within populations and their relationship to authority:
- It is quite possible that many people are now carried away by an overwhelming anxiety in the face of the loss of landmarks in a world that is being jostled increasingly. How can we keep up with so many fronts of existential fragility, which are constantly being revealed, wave after wave? How can you trust expertise when you feel that expertise is itself overwhelmed and faced with questions that go beyond and destabilise it? How to trust governance, when you have the perception that those in charge are just as taken aback? How to deal with heart-breaking events, not for a short time as in the case of the accidental?
- It is also possible that these fronts are not, in the end, the most destabilising. Rather, they bring about the loss of the anchors and the fabrics that somehow made 'living together' possible, where we could find our place or at least navigate with a minimum of balance and benchmarks. What we managed to hold onto before, albeit with difficulty, now seems out of reach to many.

From then on, one finds oneself immersed not only in the painful accident, but also in the chaotic – "the deepest terror of humans", as Maurice Bellet puts it. Being thrown onto these tumultuous shores elicits unheard-of violent survival reactions, with the heart-wrenching cry supplanting subdued speech. Suddenly one must jettison all ballast. Thanatos, as if Valéry's words came back with a brutality we had forgotten: "We civilisations now know that we are mortal."

The defences are mobilised in haste, with frenzy:

- **Building bunkers as a generic criticism:** "You shall not pass."
- **The end of 'knowing everything'** with a withdrawal into an unlimited cult that is dedicated to the most provocative figures in terms of expertise.
- **Reflexive denunciation of any authority, including from within.** This has been illustrated in the Gilets Jaunes movement, where some have led organisations to convulse, unable to lead, or to protests that have managed to those attempting to set organised conduct.
- **The irrepressible need to oppose leading to blocking slogans.**

Under these dynamics, emerge two principles that have become sacred:

- **'Me, Myself and I'** – a slogan that has become the new personal anchor, the new collective horizon. In this universe, it is difficult to speak of 'responsibility' or of collective gain. Kennedy's words are radically reversed: "Don't ask me what I can do for the country, but let me scream what I demand the country to do for ME."
- **'Only the false is tolerable'.** Reality is defunct, leading to the search for alternative truths, a haven that offers a semblance of protection and a breathing space in an impossible shortness of breath syndrome. Even though it is known to be untrue, a falsehood makes life tolerable. In the land of the false, everything becomes as it was 'before'.

Carried away by these powerful undercurrents, citizens will be particularly resistant. They will seek the flaws, the gaps and the evolutions to condemn official statements and recommendations. This becomes even more pertinent regarding constraints introduced within this pandemic, with some viewing them as illegitimate the moment they touch their personal realm.

Those in charge find themselves having to operate and communicate in the middle of a puzzle teeming with fragmented tribes, firmly buttressed in increasingly difficult positions, as we are seeing on the issue of vaccines.

What follows is only a very short list of tribal beliefs that can be identified, as observed and paraphrased by the author:

- **The tribe of 'There is not a minute to lose'** – "The collective risks are enormous, the studies carried out and the data from the field do not show any problems with vaccines, any delay would be high risk; do not wait until we have all the necessary buffers; when we are sure and 100 per cent certain, we will already be in the middle of ignominious failure."
- **The 'Let's go, but not with absolute urgency' tribe** – "We're not a few weeks away. Let's wait until all authorities have said their piece before we set off."
- **The tribe of 'Let's wait and see'** – "Everything is going too fast, we don't have enough data, let's wait a year, two years, but it would be better to wait ten years, you never know, there might be unexpected side effects."
- **The tribe of 'I don't understand a thing, we are being deceived'** – "When you can explain everything to me, when you have stabilized the matter, I will see."
- **The socially invisible tribe** – They are somewhere, but we do not really know where or how to reach them.
- **The tribe of 'I am against certain measures, but I am not anti-everything'** – "I am against health passes, but not against vaccines; I am against the vaccine, but not against masks; I am against masks, but not social distancing; I am against teleworking, but not social distancing…"
- **The tribe of 'I am against, therefore I am'** – "Against the vaccine, health passes, masks, social distancing measures, lockdowns and against the closing of nightclubs – against anything they want to impose on me."
- **The tribe of 'You are not credible'** – "I will identify all your hesitations, your mistakes, your changes of direction and your contradictions, to denounce everything you advocate."
- **The tribe of 'I can get around this'** – "The doctor here is giving sick leave with no problem. We are never asked for our ID when presented with a QR code. You can get fakes without any problem."
- **The tribe of '[Your bullshit is starting to take hold]'**
- **The 'Make vaccination compulsory' tribe** – "I have positioned myself as refusing vaccination; but if you make the vaccination compulsory you will give me a personal safe-conduct: I won't have to pay to justify myself to others or myself."
- **The other tribe of 'Make vaccination compulsory'** – "I was against compulsory vaccination, but we will be forced to get there since the reservoir of unvaccinated remains an existential threat to the community."
- **The tribe of 'MY body'** – "You will not touch my body, it is sacred."
- **The 'Hands off the children' tribe** – "There is no problem for children. We will see that when everyone is vaccinated. Classes are being cancelled at the slightest hint of infection. Stop with remote learning, it is too detrimental for children and is impossible for parents. And I refuse screening at school, my child is sacred!"
- **The 'IKEA' tribe** – "The authorities should simply have ordered enough hospital beds."
- **The 'Exhausted' tribe** – "Two years is too much, I can't take it anymore. So, let me have Christmas, just let me do what I miss so badly and that you are thinking of forbidding me from doing next year."
- **The 'Post Exhaustion' tribe** – "I feel sick, I can't take it anymore. Stop the bad news!"
- **The tribe of 'In mourning and in great suffering'** – "If my loved one had had the care they should have had, their cancer would not have taken them away from me. (The subtext of this is that: "Priority was given to those who refused the vaccine and 'cluttered' intensive care units, screaming about discrimination and betrayal of the Hippocratic Oath if they were not given priority over everyone else, and therefore over my loved one."
- **The 'Benevolent' tribe** – "We must respect people, not point fingers at them. We must not infantilise them; we must educate them for as long as it takes. We should definitely not take a firm position; we have to understand these new citizens who have been educated in worlds where coercion has been largely banned. You cannot ask a generation of individualists to comply with diktats; you have to work with patience and skill, respecting each person's rhythm."
- **The 'Stop lecturing us' tribe** – "Everyone is able to think and make their own decisions."
- **The 'Let Macron (or any other national leader) manage!' tribe** – "It's not us who govern, fortunately. If you start interfering with elected representatives in municipalities, you will be indicted for dictatorial behaviour; if you don't interfere and it turns out bad, you will be accused of failing to anticipate."
- **The tribe of 'Public debate or nothing at all'** – "We must stop with advice of all kinds, and open widespread public debates before making decisions."
- **The 'Revolutionaries' tribe** – "All power is dictatorial, and radically dictatorial in the event of a crisis. The powerful are fond of chaos strategies, so we must resist! We must oppose anything that they attempt to impose on us and take part in demonstrations."
- **The 'Delirium' tribe** – "Anyone who wants to override my opinions is a bloodthirsty dictator. The vaccine is rape. The third dose is like gang rape. Vaccines have already claimed millions of lives. Variants are caused by vaccines. Nazis, Gestapo, Yellow Star, Nuremberg…"
- **The 'Violence and terrorism' tribe** – "Covid is the perfect opportunity to fight, stockpile ammunition, and prepare for armed attack."

Faced with such an unstable picture, examples of which are much more abundant than indicated here, the question remains – what course should those who have the formidable task of piloting the ship take?

One day a prefect in France [3] told me that he had asked 8,000 residents to evacuate a neighbourhood under imminent threat from a violent flood. "Few agreed to evacuate. They had to be hoisted out by helicopter during the night, which entailed very high risk. And the next day, while I was travelling by boat in the streets of the neighbourhood, some residents shouted insults at me from their windows: "You are a bastard, you should have forcibly evacuated us!" The prefect added: "You have to live with these contradictions."

Let's take the risk of making a mistake, and suggest these ideas:

- Always take a long view to try to discern as best as possible those trajectories that are not dictated by the heat of the moment, the latest moods, the latest authors or the latest contradictory demands.
- Be careful to avoid the triggers of fulminating masses in this supercooled material. Avoidance will often be the lesser of two evils (even a strong squadron cannot order a lighthouse planted on a rocky islet to swerve and let them go through).
- Make the most of calm, serene and rigorous education, to deliver continuously what we can to stabilise the system and calm tormented minds.
- Show the maximum respect and kindness to acknowledge the wounds and deep trauma as the situation continues to worsen.
- Advance, by showing responsibility as this provides reassurance. To abdicate all rigour and all piloting requirements would only enhance the feelings of loss of control.
- Constantly prepare for the (inevitable) possibility of mistakes, dead-ends and reversals that will require rapid corrections or even decisive changes of direction. Such agility is only possible if we constantly think in anticipation, and even in terms of surprise positive developments (for example: "We are told that it is impossible to develop a vaccine in less than two to five years. If we get there in a year, what are the pitfalls?)
- Choose the areas on which to keep a firm hold and prepare as best as possible for the inevitable battles. There are 'crises' that the person in charge must be able to trigger in order to change future into disaster themselves, and it is then that they must bring together all their preparations, situational intelligence and capacity for invention.
- Be prepared to experience attacks of unheard-of violence, commensurate with the terrors felt by the tribes that are suffering, or that are in radical opposition.

This is a narrow path through a minefield where anything can explode at any time. One word too many, and the conflagration will be triggered. One insufficient act could lead to the High Court. How to operate in such friable areas that are subject to brutal mutations and explosions?

Anyone in charge needs infinite patience, a treasure chest of creativity and boundless dedication to serving; along with a decision-making capacity that does not waver when surrounded by imploring cries from all directions, simultaneously pleading for the leader to solve everything, to do nothing and to resist and surrender.

It also needs, as I have constantly suggested, support from a Rapid Reflection Force, which is able to provide options and insights; not in terms of scientific expertise (also this is obviously essential) but also with regard to management navigational methods.

How to listen, speak, welcome and try to get off the precipice on the edge of the abyss? Education is simultaneously necessary and off-limits. Violence is present, both palpable and urgent. Will Socrates have to surrender the weapons of the Dialogue?

Difficult terrain is increasingly marked by cumbersome tendencies: a refusal of reality, a refusal of language articulated upon the truth, demands for forgery in order to be able to endure this era's anxieties. Deep down, this is underpinned by a definitive rejection of the democratic project.

Much of society seems too tired to expect anything from its leaders. In other words, society is yearning for a saviour. And the as Jaspers says: "When you wait for a saviour, it is the Fuhrer who arrives."
It is undoubtedly this deep wound, this archaic anguish when a person discovers that their parents are not gods that we must understand today, and to which we must strive to respond.

Some will do so by capturing these anxieties and turning them into the instrument of their power. They will thrive by going ahead of all these demands and by always promising more darkness and alliance with Thanatos. Until one day Thanatos finally settles everyone's account. It is not impossible, moreover, that the increasingly frequent accusation of 'dictatorship' in reality conceals a sort of aspiration as dull, as it is deep to see a dictator impose iron laws – and thereby relieve everyone of civic responsibility.

Others will seize the burden, listen to the anguish and find ways to open pathways between contradictions, dead ends, suicidal trajectories and exits, ultimately consolidating conditions more favourable to collective life than the prospect of violence, of camps and of death.

We must wish the best to the leaders and remind citizens that they too must prepare to navigate difficult oceans and rise to today's challenge: the ability to tolerate uncertainty and even the unknown. This condition presents itself as a profound characteristic of times to come. The answer will not be the frantic search for a convenient stopgap or silver bullet. The massive trap would be to choose, by default or by conviction, a suicidal, personal and collective surrender.

The path, on the contrary, is to through social links and common inventions that bring meaning and resilience. And this is the gist of this text: Civic responsibility.

Sources:

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