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Leading in a VUCA World

Integrating Leadership, Discernment and Spirituality
Preface

Revolutionary Times

We live in a particularly revolutionary time. To some it seems, in the words of W.B. Yeats’ (1919) famous “The Second Coming” poem, that “[t]hings fall apart, the centre cannot hold.”\(^1\) “It is both the best and worst of times,” to use the words of Charles Dickens (1859) in A Tale of Two Cities; our time could perhaps be called “A Tale of Twin Towers and Multipli-Cities.” Many would agree that we live in one of the fastest changing times in history and that the change we experience now might be just as large and significant as the change between the Middle Ages and the modern world. We live amidst a digital and knowledge revolution, a knowledge worker economy of which the World Wide Web is its utmost symbol. We are connected globally like never before, but in a sense also disconnected in significant ways (De Wachter 2012). We are flooded with and have access to exponential knowledge, literally in the palm of our hand, but often realize that having that knowledge at hand does not always mean we acquire wisdom, character and discernment. We are constantly digitally connected and are expected to stay in contact and virtually online. We have shaped our tools but quickly realize that our tools inexorably shape us. This constantly digitally connected universe created a new form of morality, as we all realize when not answering our emails or WhatsApp’s in what others consider to be a reasonable time. Thus, we are overflooded with incoming streams of communication on several platforms. Some people feel the need to announce their excuses on social media platforms if they will be “offline” for a couple of weeks and “take a break” from social media. The point is, we are overflooded with incoming information and impulses, and many do not have the luxury to stop and think or discern (Rosenberg and Feldman 2008).

\(^1\)According to a particular analysis in 2016 by Factiva, this line was quoted more times in the first half of 2016 during Brexit and Trump’s election, than the total amount of citation of it in the previous 30 years. See Ballard (2016).
Constant, disruptive and accelerating change is a phenomenon we experience all around us in different industries and even in our own societies. Steven Vertovec (2007) coined the term “superdiversity” to refer to diversity within diversity which is characteristic of our supermobile time. In the last few years, we have seen tremendous changes in immigration, multiculturalism and globalization. We could almost call this a “perfect storm” taking place which metaphorically could be related to a tornado sweeping over our global landscape, changing the very fabric of our sociopolitical and economic landscapes. The problem often is that we find ourselves entering a world which is wholly different than the world we knew and often discover that we are operating with an outdated cognitive GPS. We often come to realize that our old cognitive models do not fit this new world and what the new landscape demands of us. Covey (2004, p. 4) points out that in this complex era, people and organizations need to be effective on many levels and that this form of exceptional effectiveness is not optional, but rather a prerequisite for entering the game in the first place. Thus, we live in an extremely competitive environment, which demands more and more of people, requiring them to be agile and innovative. And for this to happen one needs engaged and passionate staff who feel fulfilled in their work and who feel that they make a significant contribution. What we need, says Covey (2012, p. 4), is a way to tap into the “higher reaches of human genius and motivation” and to tap into people’s “unique personal significance” (Covey 2012, p. 6) to “serve the common good” (Covey 2012, p. 6). The language Covey uses here is deeply spiritual in nature, for he accentuates the importance of the whole person, encompassing mind, heart and spirit, just as Margaret Wheatley, Sharda Nandran and others like Louis Fry do. In our opinion, it is both fascinating and stimulating to see leading scholars and practitioners turning to spirituality in the context of business—this is one of the ways in which we can see the influence of new paradigms in anthropology, in which the old conception of the human being as a calculating, rational being (the homo economicus of classic economic thought) is being increasingly overcome.

Process of the Book

The idea for this book was kindled after a discussion between Jacobus (Kobus) Kok and some members of the Steering Committee of the Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics (ILSE), part of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven (Belgium), based on the book Leadership, Innovation and Spirituality, which was published in 2014. As we shared our mutual experiences in the global South and Europe alike, we soon realized that we all struggle with the same questions and sense a growing need for leaders to make sense of the complex environment(s) in which we live and the need for discernment on deeper levels of consciousness. Both in the West and in South Africa, many in recent years turned their attention to “spirituality” or “ancient wisdom,” as can be seen in business books like those of Steven Covey (2004), Margaret Wheatley (2017), Sharda Nandran and Margot Borden (2010),
Louis Fry and Melissa Nisiewicz (2012) and others in the field of psychology like J.O. Steenkamp (2018). Johan Beukes, CEO, of in Harmonie, which is located on the picturesque La Motte wine estate, owned by Hanneli Rupert-Koegelenberg in Franschhoek in the Cape, runs a spiritual retreat centre in which they want to facilitate a space of rest, restoration and reconciliation where people could come to terms and discern. Similarly, the well-known business scholar and author Margaret Wheatley (2017), after her retirement, established a programme of retreats for business leaders to find “islands of sanity.” There are several reasons why leaders and organizations from different continents in this specific time in history turn to “spirituality” or “ancient wisdom” and do so within the denotative, connotative and associative framework of “harmony” and “resonance.” These phenomena reflect an underlying need in our societies. There is a need to “come to terms,” “rest,” “be restored,” “become whole,” “resonate,” “reconcile,” “retreat,” “reflect” or “discern.”

On 5 May 2017, a team of inter-and-transdisciplinary scholars and business leaders convened by Jacobus (Kobus) Kok came together for an expert symposium at the ETF in Leuven, the oldest university city in the Benelux in the heart of the European Union. This team consisted of scholars and practitioners representing different countries ranging from South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. During this expert symposium, it became clear that there is a need for inter-and-transdisciplinary research and learning when it comes to the relationship between leadership, spirituality and discernment. A follow-up meeting on 16 October 2017, again at ETF, helped to streamline the process—this effort was, among others, supported by Louis W. Fry, of the International Institute of Spiritual Leadership. At this meeting, the project “Roots and Wings: Building Bridges (in the spirit of rest, restoration and reconciliation)” was launched. The aim of this project is to bring diverse people together and discern on important socio-economic, political and socio-religious matters in an effort to enhance social cohesion, or what Anton Rupert referred to as “medebestaan” (co-existence).

This book contains some of the papers which were presented at these expert symposia and other papers of scholars and practitioners who were invited to make contributions to this book. ILSE was deeply involved in this process, particularly with Steven C. van den Heuvel coming on board as editor for the book.

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2This retreat centre was the vision of Hanneli Rupert-Koegelenberg, daughter of the business tycoon Anton Rupert.

3See http://margaretwheatley.com/ and also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtaYNxp56gs accessed on 28 March 2018. In the latter, Wheatley explains the background of her book Who do we choose to be?

4These meetings were made possible by a research grant provided by the South African National Research Foundation and the University of Pretoria.

5See the biography of Anton Rupert, written by Ebbe Domisse (2005, pp. 11–12, 13).
Acknowledgements

With all papers having undergone a rigorous double-blind peer review process, we as editors are deeply grateful to the many researchers who were willing to invest time and energy in providing us with thoroughgoing reviews, which in many cases have helped the authors greatly.

Dr. Prashanth Mahagaonkar, our editor at Springer, was gracious to accept the book into the series “Contributions to Management Science”—our thanks goes out to him as well as to other staff at Springer, who provided excellent editing service.

We dearly thank ILSE at ETF Leuven for financial support for the production of the book, which would not have been possible without their provision.

The Plan of the Book

The plan of the book is as follows. In the first, opening chapter, “The Metanarraphors we Lead and Mediate by: Insights from Cognitive Metaphor Theory in the context of Mediation in a VUCA World,” Jacobus (Kobus) Kok and Barney Jordaan start off by further introducing the phenomenon of the VUCA world. They focus on the way in which the mediation and resolution of disputes takes place, in this context. In particular, they look at the way in which metaphor theory can contribute to this process. They argue that the metaphors used in a mediation context often remain unexplored—doing so, however, might empower the mediator as well as the parties in a dispute and mediation process. While written with regard to the particular context of mediation, the intra-and-transdisciplinary insights of this chapter will be highly relevant in other contexts as well.

The second chapter is written by Johann Kornelsen and is entitled “The Quest to Lead (with) Millennials in a VUCA-World: Bridging the Gap between Generations.” Kornelsen argues that, especially in the West, there is a disconnect between the current generation of leaders on the one hand and the millennials on the other hand. In response, he argues that a new leadership approach is needed to bridge the gap—specifically, he calls for the development of “responsible leadership,” a combination of qualities from transformational leadership, servant leadership and authentic leadership. This will lead to a certain reversal of roles, as current leaders will become the mentees of the millennials, who will help them adapt to the realities of the VUCA world.

The third chapter is entitled “Personal Leadership as Form of Spirituality.” Written by Joke van Saane, this chapter argues that there is a paradox in contemporary leadership studies: on the one hand, situational theories flourish, while on the other hand, personality traits and personal skills are being asserted as crucial for leadership. Van Saane argues that this paradox can be overcome by taking into account spiritual concepts. She focuses on three in particular, namely (1) the way spirituality creates openings for growth and values in leadership theory; (2) the
redefinition of traditional forms of religion, in religious leadership; and (3) the way that the concept of personal leadership brings in the crucial notion of “learning,” in leadership theory. These strategies for bringing spirituality and leadership together are crucial ones and form important recommendations for leadership theory.

The fourth chapter is authored by Barney Jordaan, Professor of Management Practice, with a specialization in negotiation and dispute resolution. This background is clearly visible in the chapter he wrote, and which is entitled “Leading Organisations in Turbulent Times: Towards a Different Mental Model.” He argues that the agility of an organization will help it survive and compete in the increasingly fast-changing VUCA world. He argues that this necessitates increasing collaboration in the organization—and therefore: trust. It is, however, precisely this trust that is often lacking in organizations, eroded as it is by the propensity to competition. Jordaan further investigates these obstacles to increased trust, in organizations, suggesting ways to increase trust and collaboration, as essential ingredients to organizational success in the VUCA world.

Anoosha Makka is the author of the next chapter, which is entitled “Spirituality and Leadership in a South African Context.” She argues that the leadership models and practices that are dominant in South Africa have been strongly influenced by Western leadership theories. She argues for combining these leadership styles with the Afrocentric notion of “ubuntu,” particularly in the context of South Africa. A possible contribution that this notion can make is the emphasis it puts on community and sociality. Makka’s proposal is an important one—one dimension of the VUCA world is the increase in diversity; it is a marker of good leadership to identify this increase as positive and to seek to learn from it.

The sixth chapter is written by the South African scholars Calvyn du Toit and Christo Lombaard. In their chapter, entitled “Still Points: Simplicity in Complex Companies,” they comment upon the tendency of organizations (and of social systems in general) to move to increased complexity. While the authors recognize the necessity of recognizing the complexity of today’s social systems, they nevertheless make an argument for simplicity as a spiritual orientation to life. An example of such simplification is “waste management”: the deliberate inclusion and ritualization of unstructured work periods, such as extended coffee breaks, in which unexpected connections can be made, and in which creativity can blossom. These “still points,” argue Du Toit and Lombaard, are essential for people and organizations to thrive in a VUCA world.

The next chapter is entitled “How to Integrate Spirituality, Emotions and Rationality in (Group) Decision-making.” In this chapter, Volker Kessler, the author, draws from the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, particularly to enhance the process of group decision-making. Volker explicates the three modes of decision-making that Loyola distinguishes, namely (1) immediate intuition, (2) emotional processing and (3) rational reasoning. Discerning parallels between these different modes and current management literature, he particularly seeks to assist in the integration of these Loyolan insights with the way in which managers can structure group decisions. In doing so, he further develops the concept of the “Six Thinking Hats,” as described by Edward de Bono. This further development of what has become a
classic model will be of relevance for the processes of leadership, discernment and spirituality in an increasingly VUCA world.

Jack Barentsen provides the eighth chapter, “Embodied Realism as Interpretive Framework for Spirituality, Discernment and Leadership.” While he does not interact with the phenomenon of the VUCA world directly, he does provide a crucial building block for a new conceptualization for thinking through the nexus of spirituality, discernment and leadership, namely by seeking to overcome the conflict between two distinct ways of “knowing,” one driven by science and the other by intuition. Barentsen argues that the conflict between these is overcome by the concept of embodiment, as it is being developed across a number of disciplines. In particular, a focus on embodiment is able to show that spiritual knowledge is not opposed to scientific knowledge, but that both forms of knowing are part of our human system of knowing, as it is fundamentally directed and limited by the way our bodies interface with the world in which we live. This insight is foundational for a renewal of leadership, discernment and spirituality in a VUCA world.

The South African scholar Stephan Joubert is the author of the next chapter, entitled “A Well-played Life: Discernment as the Constitutive Building Block of Selfless Leadership.” This chapter argues that “discernment” is a crucial building block for especially selfless (or servant) leadership in the context of the VUCA world. In making this argument, Joubert asserts that discernment is not just a leadership skill for making the right decisions in the spur of the moment, but rather denotes a way of life, “a never-ending relational and rational process,” as he calls it. This more comprehensive approach to discernment certainly is of value in the context of the all-encompassing VUCA world.

The tenth chapter is written by Nelus Niemandt. He is a professor of missiology, which is reflected in the title of his chapter: “Discerning Spirituality for Missional Leaders.” As the title indicates, Niemandt addresses the question what kind of spirituality is needed, specifically for Christian missional leaders, particularly geared towards the South African context. To this end, he proposes to redefine spirituality, not seeing it as a process of “knowing and believing,” but rather one that involves “hungering and thirsting,” flowing from the recognition that longing and desire are at the core of our being. He argues that this new form of spirituality helps to give rise to a new form of discernment, which involves a trialogue between (1) church, (2) culture and (3) the Bible. While the particular focus in this chapter is the renewal of the spiritual process of Christian missional leaders, in the face of challenges in the VUCA world, the redefinition of spirituality will be relevant for a broader public as well.

Steven C. van den Heuvel is the author of the next chapter: “Challenging the New ‘One-Dimensional Man’: The Protestant Orders of Life as a Critical Nuance to Workplace Spirituality.” In this chapter, it is argued that while the renewed call for “spirituality in the workplace” is to be lauded as a good and necessary emphasis, there are certain risks and problems connected to it as well. Van den Heuvel focuses on three of these in particular: (1) the danger of instrumentalization and narcissistic misdirection, (2) the pragmatism often opted for in solving conflicts between different spiritualities in the workplace and (3) the dominance of radical social
constructivist approaches to workplace spirituality. In addressing these problems, he reappropriates the Protestant theological concept of the “different orders of life,” specifically as this concept has been developed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He identifies different ways in which this concept can help address the problems he identified with the contemporary emphasis on workplace spirituality. This chapter is a necessary correction to some of the problems with the current emphasis on spirituality, in the business world—it draws attention to the “dark side” connected to it, seeking ways to overcome these.

The twelfth and last chapter is written by Patrick Nullens. Like Johann Kornelsen, he too writes about “responsible leadership”: his chapter is entitled “From Spirituality to Responsible Leadership: Ignatian Discernment and Theory-U.” Like Van Saane, in her chapter, so too Nullens is concerned with renewing current leadership theory—in particular, he seeks to connect the emphasis on a leader’s self-awareness with the call for ethical leadership. In making this connection, he—like Volker Kessler, in chapter seven—draws on the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, which emphasizes the importance of humility, silence and detachment, among other things, as avenues into increased self-awareness. He brings his Ignatian spirituality in dialogue with Theory-U, as developed by Otto Scharmer. This results in an enriched understanding of the process of spiritual discernment, which can be beneficial to leaders in the current VUCA world.

Together, the chapters in this volume present a variety of contributions to the interrelated processes of leadership, discernment and spirituality, as well as to their integration, and with a particular view on the VUCA world. It is our express hope that as such, this volume will prove to be a timely and helpful resource, not just for academics, but also for practitioners in various fields.

Leuven, Belgium Jacobus (Kobus) Kok
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March 31, 2017

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The original version of the book was revised: Editor affiliation in Copyright page has been updated. The erratum to the book is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98884-9_13
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