Quiet Ego Leadership After Covid-19: Releasing Compassion, Confidence and Creativity

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The world seems to reward loud-ego leadership, but that form of leading is not necessarily what the world needs.

Highly self-confident, risk-seeking, and callous leaders say O'Reilly and Chatman (2020) have profiles matching what the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) classifies as narcissistic personality disorder. Yet in the pre-Covid world it was people with just those characteristics to whom we often gave the highest power and the biggest jobs along with the right to mould the world the rest of us live and work in. We sometimes spoke of them as transformational players—the makers and shapers of our world. In several notorious cases, including some cited by O'Reilly and Chatman (2020), dysfunctional organisational leaders such as this created organisational cultures that led to the destruction of value amounting to many billions of dollars.

More often perhaps, and certainly less visibly, the consequences of such attitudes are less dramatic but no less serious. Employees in organisations run by narcissistic

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leaders often suffer in a bullying culture (Hoel & Salin, 2002) and organisations as whole can come to manifest a loss of curiosity and consequent creative possibility as contrary views are silenced. There is a disappearance of nuance and difference as people try to follow, and second-guess, the leader. Thinking and acting within the guardrails of the dominant style becomes the unconsciously enforced norm (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Noisy egos, at all levels in organisations, can bring chaos or stifled compliance in their wake.

As educators and consultants working in the process of leadership development, we have come increasingly to recognise some of the problems inherent in one of the most commonplace conceptions of leadership itself: the notion that leadership comes with a peculiar status—that the leader is always somehow special. This attribution to leaders of special status tends to create a pattern of self-selection, one which privileges a louder and more overtly confident form of personal style.

In response to this we have been working to develop an alternative. In our work with many different organisations through the recent crisis, we have noticed that loud and large ego leading has often not been the most successful. Many of the better outcomes we have seen have come from a different way of operating. One of the shared characteristics of the excellent leaders we have witnessed over this period has been that they have quieter egos.

This is not to say that they are ego-less. Barring a very few exceptional saints and sages, all of us have an ego—that inner voice which nature has endowed us with and which, for thousands of years, has played a key part in our rise to dominance as a species. That voice, abstracted from present-moment experience, helps us plan for the future, reflect on the past and stay safe. It enables us to navigate our surroundings, understand ourselves in relation to others and create effective social groups.

Before moving on, we need to make it clear that we are not using the term 'ego' here as Freud did to refer to the arbiter between the id and superego (Freud, 1961). Nor do we mean the excessively positive view of oneself, or the centre of will and self-control that Freud also sometimes referred to.

Rather, our use of the term relies simply on the original Latin meaning of 'ego,' which is synonymous with 'I.'

In our usage, an egoic state is one in which people are excessively focused on themselves and their personal concerns. It's a state in which 'I' and 'me' figure prominently in one's thoughts and reactions (Leary et al., 2016).

Of course, people are necessarily interested in their own well-being and in outcomes that are favourable to themselves. It seems obvious that natural selection would have filtered for organisms that focused on themselves and their own interests.

The problem we draw attention to is a subset of the more general issue that people often focus on and think about themselves and on self-relevant outcomes even when such thoughts are not needed or are counterproductive. Such egoicism often creates emotional and behavioural difficulties (Leary et al., 2016) and, we suggest, those difficulties are amplified and broadcast when they take place in leadership contexts.

James (1890, p. 333) observed, "My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing," yet, he noticed, people waste a great deal of their thinking on self-relevant topics that actually inhibit effective action.

Almost all of us run an inner narrative, linked—as Farb and his colleagues (2007) have noted—to our brains' Default Mode Network (DMN). That narrative is part of the way in which we create our sense of identity over time.

"Will I be OK?"

"Will they like me?"

"What did I do that she looks at me like that?"

"Have I got all the slides prepared for that presentation next week? Is it going to go well? Have I done everything I need to do? Have I?"

"One day they're going to find out I'm not good enough…"

"This is a good experience. I'm having a good experience right now. I'm fine. This is great, this is great…"

On and on and on.

When most of us spend a few minutes alone with ourselves in silence and turn our attention inwards to listen, we discover the noise of irrelevant self-focussed thinking. That is the DMN turning over and over and over. It's where we default to.

It is that persistent self-focussed narrative that we have in mind when we speak of the ego.

Because egos are generally disposed to seek out and prioritise self-interest, it is vital that leaders find ways to quieten excessive self-focussed thoughts in order to attend at times to the needs and opinions of others.

Failure to do this leads to the kind of self-serving attitudes to leadership we see reflected, for example, in the soaring levels of senior executive remuneration and increasingly problematic income disparity.

To lead well, leaders must learn to quieten their egos.

The quiet ego is not a fragile, squashed or unwillingly silenced ego. It is deeply resilient, attuned to its own and others' inner dynamics. It has no inherent need to assert itself over others. Loud egos, on the other hand, draw sustenance primarily from the world of external appearances to which they constantly turn for reassurance (Bauer, 2008).

Wise leaders have quieter egos. In consequence, they are not taken in by their social image. They see that the self is simply a construction—a story that enables a sense of unity and purpose but throws the shadows of illusions that may sometimes be destructive (Wayment & Bauer, 2008). Noisier egos, by contrast, expend considerable energy in identifying and defending their constructed selves as if they were somehow real—asserting themselves into the world.

As Bauer (2008) shows, there is a virtuous relationship between ego quietening and personal growth. Quiet Ego Leaders are therefore also those who are able to build on their own strengths and to recognise, and engage in development around, areas where they are weaker.

Quiet Ego Leaders seek to grow and develop—and growth and development can produce wiser leaders. Quiet Ego Leadership, we suggest, is a trainable skill.

Later sections of this chapter will set out in detail what we mean by Quiet Ego Leadership and show both how it can be developed and why this is essential in addressing some of the organisational challenges ahead. Before that, we will set out our approach and some of the fieldwork observations on which this chapter is based.

Our Intention in Writing This Chapter

We have written this chapter for practicing leaders working in organisational life, for the consultants who work with them and the academics who research and write in this field. Our intention, since this volume is a companion handbook on leadership and change, is to produce a chapter that is, above all, a contribution to practice and to thoroughly grounded practical knowledge in the field. We therefore have chosen to write this as a piece of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Marshall et al., 2011), based on our day-to-day work as consultants to, and as leaders ourselves in, a range of organisations.

We are ambitious for the potential for this practical knowledge as an important contribution to organisational thinking. Although we have prepared this chapter based on direct experience of, and reflection about, organisations in a time of response to the pandemic, we do not believe (nor do the organisations or leaders we have worked with believe) that the learning is specific or limited to the COVID-19 crisis.

Our intention is to draw out practical lessons, perspectives and practices in leadership and change that are applicable to the wider forms of systemic shock of which the pandemic is only one example (Hardman & Nichols, 2020). We believe that this is vital and necessary because organisations today face several impending systemic shifts that have the potential to be as significant and disruptive as the COVID-19 pandemic. These systemic shifts include, but are not limited to, disruptions in the fields of climate and earth systems, geopolitics and trade patterns, economic and financial shocks, food security, microbial resistance arising from the widespread systemic medical and food system use of core antibiotic agents, the application of digital and connected technologies including AI and machine learning (the Internet of Things), and demographic shifts.

Each of these systems shifts, individually, has the potential to offer seismic and existential threats to the forms of organisation and to organisational practice. Taken together, since there is every likelihood of these shifts playing out in parallel and in combination, they offer an unprecedented challenge and opportunity to all aspects of life in organisations and in society (Marshall et al., 2011).

We are convinced that the pandemic crisis is merely one, potentially short term and containable, subset of a wider pattern of shifts and challenges. Learning lessons from the immediate challenges of COVID-19, seems to us to be essential preparation for a wider and more testing frontier of organisational transformation that lies on a near horizon.

Our Basis for Writing This Chapter

It seems appropriate to say some words of orientation about the foundations on which we have created this chapter, including the nature of the research and evidence that underpin our observations.

We position ourselves in the field as both scholar-practitioners and scholar-activists (Marshall et al., 2011) working with the organisational application of mindfulness practice in leadership and change, using an action research/action inquiry approach.

The challenges of large-scale systems shifts are in the heartland of our practice. We work with boards, executive teams, and whole organisations, to help develop strategic and leadership responses in times of uncertainty, turbulence, and incomplete information. Our client organisations are usually large and complex organisations, working across multiple geographies and cultures, and often with diverse business activities to coordinate. A common characteristic of our work is that we accompany leaders and organisations in situations where the future has become sufficiently unclear that rapid and deep learning is required, and where the only certainty is that existing knowledge and practice has become insufficient.

During 2020 we worked with several organisations where addressing the organisational and leadership response to the COVID crisis was a significant facet of the work we were engaged in with them. These organisations spanned several sectors and locations but included the following:

• UK hospitals in the National Health Service
• The Danish health sector, hospitals, non-hospital clinical care, medical sciences
• NGOs in the medical research and public health arena
• Government agencies and central government departments in the UK
• Regional and local government bodies
• Global businesses in material science, technology, engineering, automotive and pharmaceutical
• Retail and hospitality businesses
• Professional and financial services

Our observations in this article are drawn from our research in practice with these clients rather than from any form of empirical study. It is deeply engaged reflective research, focused on practical challenges and on experiments in live situations as these clients responded to the challenges and opportunities of their situation. We believe that what has arisen from this is an extremely robust set of cross-sectoral observations and reflections that offer some practical perspectives underpinned by both rigorous practice and robust theory.

The Theoretical Basis of Our Work

We are not neutral—we come to our work with a set of beliefs, assumptions and biases about "what the world is" and about how we can know it and act in it. We are explicit about these when we frame our work with clients. In brief an outline of our framing might be the following:

• The world is complex in that it consists of many interacting elements, forces and influences that do not have a linear, predictable and deterministic pattern (Hutchins, 2014).
• The world in which we work consists of participants beyond the human and when we work, we work with awareness of the wider earth and of the living systems of which we are part (Hutchins, 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2001)

- The world of society and organisation is complex and is largely socially constructed (Gergen, 1999): that is, it is made up of the stories we co-construct and the meanings we make (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). We are at the same time makers and consumers, weavers and woven
- We need therefore to take a systemic view (Whittington, 2020; Hawkins & Turner, 2020; Senge et al., 2005; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), seeing the world as an everchanging pattern in the form of a complex responsive process, where actions and reactions are connected but not necessarily in predictable or linear ways (Stacey, 2003; Boulton et al., 2015)
- There is much that cannot be known and much that cannot be seen at least in its entirety: so collaborative working (Salas & Tillmann, 2010) and diversity becomes essential in that this allows us to see more, know more and explore more that is seen by others but not by ourselves. We gain more insight together.
- Not all that we need to know can be accessed by conventional modes of research nor can it be contained in the conventional leadership or organisational vocabulary. So, we believe in the power of seeking insight from diverse and richer ways of knowing (Seeley & Thornhill, 2014). No way of knowing has a monopoly on the truth

Over the years we have adopted action research (and action inquiry) as a foundational approach for our way of understanding systems and intervening in them alongside our clients.

We define Action Research as a way of "being in the world" that is both empirically rigorous and at the same time promotes worthwhile social change. It is a tested and highly practical way for senior leaders to apply discipline to learning in real time in the heat of their actual work arena. It is also the mechanism that suits many forms of executive and organisational development work in the fields of practical learning, innovation and change. While there is no *one* definition of Action Research, most practitioners would accept the following.

Action Research, following Marshall et al. (2011) who draw on Reason & Bradbury (2001), is based on these five dimensions (and if one of the dimensions is absent, the work is NOT Action Research as we understand that):

- It **addresses practical challenges** often framed as "How do I …?" kinds of question: Such as "How do I increase genuine diversity and participation in my organisation?"
- It **focuses on worthwhile purposes** and is thus unashamedly value laden. We act and research on things we care about to improve society, organisation and the world.
- It **favours participation and democracy** and is based on the belief that people are social, learn better together and create change best if that change is co-created.
- It **features many and diverse ways of knowing** and believes that the questions we face can better be addressed by using a range of data sources, techniques and perspectives that sometimes lie outside the traditionally legitimate range of research.
- It is **emergent in form**. Later stages of research respond to what has gone earlier. It is hugely improvisational AND rigorous.

Torbert and his associates, developed the closely related concept of Action Inquiry which can be seen as an attempt to raise awareness in real time of the effectiveness, validity and legitimacy of our own behaviour and, through that, of framing and guiding purposeful change (Torbert & Cook-Greuter, 2004).

Action Inquiry argues that to be effective in all of our communities and organisations we need to pay rigorous attention to the congruence between our intentions and strategies, and the behaviours and outcomes we get. Being alert to this in the moment and acting creatively with others in way that are continually curious and seek to achieve worthwhile outcomes is at the heart of Action Inquiry.

Specifically, the transformational learning from action inquiry allows individuals, teams and organisations to become more capable of listening deeply; increasingly alert to current opportunities and challenges; and, from this, to become more capable of achieving effective and sustainable outcomes (Torbert & Cook-Greuter, 2004).

In working like this we are responding to one of the most powerful critiques ever made of traditional management education. Sumantra Ghoshal, the late and eminent academic and professor of business wrote "Bad Management Theory Is Destroying Good Management Practice" (2005). In this seminal piece Ghoshal provided a critique of the traditions of mainstream business education, arguing that by reducing management theory to a form of pseudo-physics, through trying to make everything empirical and mathematical, management schools have assumed away most of the more difficult and important issues in leadership and organisation including ethics and judgement. He called for this "pretence of knowing" to be replaced by a more modest, but more useful practical way of being rigorous about leadership knowledge that was more like 'temporary walking sticks', contingent practical knowledge to help real managers handle genuine complexity.

Our work is about using action research and action inquiry to develop a community of leaders with the skills to advance this kind of practice, day in and day out, and in doing so change the world in which we live (Salas & Tillmann, 2010; Marshall et al., 2011; Seeley & Thornhill, 2014).

The following section takes the work we have been doing with action research and action inquiry in a large range of organisations during the time of the pandemic and draws out some of the leadership and organisational challenges that have emerged and which we have been working to address.

What We Have Found in Our Client Organisations

During the initial days and weeks of the COVID crisis, most client organisations mobilised quickly to respond to the sudden, often existential, threat.

Health Sector Stories

Our health service (UK and Denmark) clients swiftly mobilised onto an emergency footing, rapidly prioritising COVID provision in new ways of working. It was stressful and turbulent work.

We recorded some of the descriptions of this initial response period. People talked about:

"I am wearing so many different hats"
"The spotlight is really on us"
"Every day is a shitstorm"
"There are so many plates spinning—all of them different"
"I am struggling but my head is mostly above water"
"I feel like I am a healer on the warpath"
"We are short of doctors at every level—I spend all of my day trying to find more people"
"The laundry never stops coming, no matter what else is happening in the world"

Despite the difficulties people found great joy from working together in new ways to serve a shared purpose. They reported sentiments such as:

"We have achieved more change in a month than we've been able to get in 5 years"
"We have worked together—politics and organisational blockages simply dissolved"
"I realised that being a doctor is like being in a marriage for life—I'm here for love, however hard it gets"
"We're doing a lot of beautiful things every day"
"I believe in this"
"I've realised that the pharmacy department can learn to dance to many different tunes"

Once the immediate crisis was over, the same people noticed that many of the behaviours they'd enjoyed quickly began to move back into old patterns—as you would expect in complex systems. Much inertia was temporarily overcome by the crisis but, once the temporary impetus passed, there was considerable pull towards old relationships and structures, old priorities and previous patterns of working.
They reported things like:

"The old patterns have re-emerged. My boss is more remote than the Pope"
"I find that I am a lone wolf—I am used to standing out in a large field of men, but I do feel that no one has my back"
"It is a daily struggle to make ends meet"
"Our systems pull in the opposite direction to many of our aspirations"
"We've gone from priority number one to being the ugly duckling again"
"I've realised that if I want to keep any of the gains we made I have to be very loud to get attention"
"I want to keep the collaboration going—but it seems to take so much energy because it involves fighting against the way things are organised"

Our work with these health sector clients had parallels with those working in corporate environments.

Large Non-health Clients

Many of our commercial clients had an initial period of "panic/paralysis" where everything stopped apart from the effort to work out, in crisis mode, how to manage their businesses under new arrangements—usually on the assumption that there would be a "return to normal" after a few weeks. Within a month or two, most realised that there would be at least a prolonged dislocation and began preparing to work in new ways.

Over time, it became clear that organisations would need to adapt rapidly to new ways of working, often based on a rapid shift to virtual/digital and remote ways of working.

After several months we inquired into the experience of these new ways of working. There were many highly positive responses. Clients reported:

- Significant improvements in efficiency: an increased focus in meetings—online meetings are quicker with less social time and fewer distractions
- An increase in personal "effectiveness"—with the ability to do more, to "be in more than one place at a time"—coupled to "novelty leading to high levels of energy in the team"
- There's a real focus on sustainability—"there is far less carbon, fewer commuting miles"

Some also reported gains in work life balance, with more flexibility and autonomy, allowing more integration of family time and work time. But this was not evenly distributed. Some aspects of privilege appeared—younger employees tended to lack suitable workspaces and suffer more from the burdens of loneliness of remote work.

There were also reports of important changes in culture—which were similar to those reported in the health sector. These included:

"There's a lot more empowerment—trust levels are definitely up"
"There's much more autonomy"
"Teamwork is stronger—much more support among colleagues"

But people also spoke very strongly about the challenges they've faced in adopting new ways of working. Among the most commonly described challenges were these:

- Dealing with inequalities: flexible working doesn't suit everyone and not all team members have equally adaptable home situations. Staff may face difficult challenges in doing their work safely and healthily, and these may be difficult for bosses to see.
- Although virtual working feels accessible and "flat", new forms of exclusion and power dynamics have sometimes emerged and have exacerbated existing inclusion/exclusion issues in organisations. It is less easy to spot the politics of informal power as it flows in virtual space. People can be at formal meetings online and yet be excluded very easily from informal side conversations (in chat spaces,

on WhatsApp or Slack, on separate calls). Sometimes this is harder to see online than it is in the office.

- Maintaining the social fabric of teams is harder, with the loss of "watercooler conversations". The informal connective tissue of teams can suffer, it can be harder to include and "onboard" new members, and sometimes some team members health and well-being can suffer.

In addition to these challenges, the move to flexible work locations and meeting forms has presented some real challenges for more senior leaders. In some global clients, for example, very senior (group/divisional) leaders vested a lot of their identity in (almost constant) international travel, visiting offices and sites, and in hosting regional meetings. We have seen some clear examples of top management being an obstacle to new ways of working largely through anxiety about the loss of power and status in the familiar organisational rituals associated with their roles in the old ways of working.

Some teams also expressed a challenge in terms of finding ways to explore new thinking together. For many, teams had become increasingly slick and effective in terms of dealing with operational priorities and in addressing problem situation in crisis mode. In some ways, the slickness at "solving problems effectively" online also became an obstacle to exploring alternatives well. Finding a slick way of resolving a complicated challenge is NOT the same discipline as exploring a wider range of perspectives to allow new ideas to emerge. Sometimes the difficulty of the latter was expressed to us as a lack of time and space. The new rhythm of short virtual meetings simply didn't encourage the expression of open curiosity. But it was also expressed in terms of the inability to do even basic collaborative exploration well in the virtual space. Many leaders don't feel comfortable inviting large teams to explore the unknown in a virtual meeting—and many lack the technical knowledge of their organisational collaboration tools to do this well online.

Overcoming these challenges is important work as we all learn the lessons from the COVID crisis and prepare to address the challenges of the wider raft of systems shifts that lie ahead. The work needed includes many important edges for the future of leadership and change that should be on the agenda for anyone in Learning and Development and Organisational Development (Hardman & Nichols, 2020)—and needs to be on the risk register of all executive teams (Brissett et al., 2020; Whittington, 2020; Hawkins & Turner, 2020).

It is for this reason that we have brought together our work on mindfulness and strategic exploration. The bringing together of these strands into what we call Quiet Ego Leadership has direct application to all of the challenges we have found in making the most of new ways of working, as well as in addressing the creative response to significant systems change.

Quiet Ego Leadership

Drawing on our informal findings working with clients through the COVID-19 pandemic, as set out above, we have come to see over and again that in times of rapid change and uncertainty it is all too easy for leaders to default to safety-seeking, or

to self-referential 'me first' styles of leadership. The ego, as we have described it above, is in part a safety-seeking mechanism. Self-referential thought, after all, is often targeted on what best serves one's own perceived best interests. The ability to step apart from such self-referential thinking, allow that one has not got all the answers and openly explore new territories along with others is a vital skill in times of rapid change.

At times of crisis, moreover, when all are asked to give beyond previously contracted obligations, it is crucial that leaders are seen authentically to put others' interests ahead of their own. That applies outside of crisis as well. Leaders who are observably less self-referential will engage a more willing and therefore more engaged followership.

To lead well, leaders need to quieten their own egos.

Drawing on Wayment and Bauer (2008) we propose there are four factors which help the ego to quieten. These four factors should therefore be seen as crucial elements in any programme of leadership development. They are mindfulness; a sense of interdependence; compassion; and a framework of values that spring from these and which support continuous personal growth.

Considerable research over the past decade tells us that both mindfulness and compassion are trainable skills (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). A sense of the interdependent nature of phenomena can be conceptually taught. And training and/or coaching can help leaders to discover and become clearer about the values they hold which support the development of wisdom.

Let us turn to each of these factors in factors in turn.

Mindfulness

First described by the Buddha 2600 years ago (Wynne, 2007), what Buddhists long described using terms such as the Pāli word *sati* began to emerge in clinical (and therefore researchable) contexts in the mid-1970s following the pioneering work of Kabat-Zinn (1990) and colleagues. Since then, tens of thousands of research papers looking into the efficacy of mindfulness training in a wide variety of contexts have been published and the approach is consequently finding increasing acceptance in the workplace in general. A meta-analysis of Mindfulness-Based Programs (MBPs) carried out by Vonderlin et al. (2020) suggests that MBPs effectively reduce stress, burnout, mental distress and somatic complaints, while improving mindfulness, well-being, compassion and job satisfaction.

In leadership contexts, research into the outcomes of mindfulness training is relatively scant. But there seems to be no reason on the face of it why the workplace-related outcomes found by Vonderlin et al. (2020), and in the more generic or clinical studies carried out in the population at large, would differ for those who occupy leadership positions.

Out of the few leadership-specific studies available, we can turn to a wait-list controlled multi-method study carried out by Chaskalson and colleagues (2020) with 57 self-described senior business leaders. This study found that those leaders who attended an 8-week Mindful Leader program, and who meditated for at least 10-min per day, experienced increases in their overall resilience, their capacity to

collaborate with others and their ability to manage effectively in conditions of complexity.

Based particularly on their analysis of qualitative data from that research, Chaskalson and Reitz (2018) ascribe the changes experienced by participants on the Mindful Leader course to increases in three meta-capacities which they describe using the acronym AIM—Allowing, Inquiry and Meta-awareness.

"Allowing" refers to the ability to accept present-moment reality as it actually is and to approach the situations one finds oneself in openly and compassionately. This is not the same as passivity. Rather, the attitude we describe here springs from a deep reality-orientation. Many of us spend much of our time *not* allowing what is the case to be the case. "If only it were not like this—everything would be OK." If only I had a different job, a bigger house, a different partner, a different boss… If only I hadn't made that decision 2-weeks ago—everything would be OK.

But, as participants on the Quiet Ego Leader Process learn, the truth is that things are as they are and when, with an allowing, open-hearted attitude, we can allow things to be as they are then choice opens up for us. "It's like this—now what shall I do?" The allowing attitude carries over to the next step in the process. Because the interesting question is what would be best? Best for me, best for others, best for the situation. By implication, what would be kindest?

As one participant on Chaskalson and Reitz's Mindful Leader course put it:

> So [I think], "'Ooh, this is all a bit uncertain, and I'm quite unsure';" that's actually an okay place to be, and from there you can explore. (Chaskalson et al., 2020, p. 136)

"Inquiry" stands for an attitude of curiosity and open-hearted engagement with whatever presents in each moment.

As another participant on the Mindful Leader course put it:

> I think that bit of stepping back and just saying, "'What's actually is the problem here? What is it that's getting at me?'" I find really helpful, actually. (Chaskalson et al., 2020, p. 136)

"Meta-awareness" is akin to the more commonly used psychological term meta-cognition, but the broader use of 'awareness' rather than 'cognition' in the phrase draws attention to the fact that its target is more than thought—although that is included. It also refers to feelings, to sensations and to impulses. It is the ability to choose, when needed, simply to observe what you are thinking, feeling, and sensing. This allowed the participants on the Mindful Leader program to see that their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and impulses are just that—a combination of thoughts, feelings, sensations and impulses. "Thoughts are not facts," as Teasdale (1999) puts it. Nor are the other components of the experiencing mind.

Taken together, these three meta-capacities open up a vital space in the automated flow of a leader's experience.

Quiet Ego Leadership training uses mindfulness methods to help participants turn their attention inwards and observe their own minds at work. They learn to look *at* their minds, rather than just *through* their minds. With the consequent growth of

meta-awareness, they begin to see their own the narrative self-focus for what it is: simply a flow of thoughts, feelings, sensations and impulses.

As participants on the Mindful Leader program put it:

> … it gave me a way to take back, to own some of that control if you like, over my own thinking. So, recognizing that I'm choosing my thoughts, and they're not me, they're just the noise of what's going on. (Chaskalson et al., 2020, p. 136)

And:

> [The program has] allowed me to just be able to see these things—thoughts, feelings, sensations—separately from me, view them, explore them …. (Chaskalson et al., 2020, p. 136)

Participants on mindfulness-based courses often come to the realisation that "I am not my thoughts" (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Insights like that allow the ego to begin to quieten.

A Sense of Interdependence

A novel virus somehow emerges in Wuhan in Central China and within a few short months more than a million people die and the world's economies suffer a huge collective recession. We live, and always have done, in a completely interconnected world. This is not a novel phenomenon—the product of the twenty-first century's highly mobile, globalised culture. Interconnection is a fundamental property of all phenomena.

From the 'butterfly effect' described by Lorenz (1963) who suggested that factors such as the exact time of formation, and path taken by a tornado might be influenced by minor perturbations such as the distant butterfly flapping of a butterfly's wings several weeks earlier, to the notion that the elements in the human body were made in distant stars a very, very long time ago and have come to us often by way several supernovas (Schrijver & Schrijver, 2015), popular culture is gradually absorbing the notion that all existence is an unthinkably vast, constantly interconnected and complex system—a web of life.

The need for this understanding has, arguably, never been higher. In the unfolding climate emergency, we all of us need to realise ever more deeply the implications each of our choices has on the delicately interconnected processes on which we depend. Our choices of whether or not to fly, even whether to stream video in high rather than standard definition all have implications for the climate (Griffiths, 2020).

We all affect one another all the time.

Quiet Ego Leadership training allows leaders by degrees to discover, in their experience, that we are not each of us separate, isolated, ego-identities constantly striving in competition for one another for scarce resources. Rather, we inextricably inter-depend on each other and all things in a vast process of systemic relatedness and the choices we make ramify far beyond ourselves alone.

Compassion

Coming to see the interconnected, interdependent nature of living systems is a cognitive matter that has, we suggest, an affective counterpart as compassion.

As evidenced by numerous studies (Gilbert, 2009; Neff & Germer, 2013; Fredrickson & Siegel, 2017) compassion is a trainable skill and compassion meditation trainings are an effective means of increasing compassionate attitudes—both to oneself and to others. The other-regarding attitudes that both support and emerge from a quieter ego depend in part on underlying attitudes of care and concern to oneself and others and such attitudes, it seems, can be trained.

Participants in Quiet Ego Leadership training processes learn and are encouraged to practice compassion-based meditations as part of the training.

Values

Ware (2011) says that the top five regrets she encountered in her many years working as a palliative care nurse are—

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me;
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard;
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings;
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends;
5. I wish I had let myself be happier.

It can be argued that the last four of these regrets are in fact a subset of the first: I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself. Or, in other words, I wish I had stayed more often true to my deepest values.

Quiet Ego Leadership training processes use a variety of methods to help participants uncover and express what most deeply matters to them. Our assertion is that when mindfulness, a sense of interdependence and compassion come together with what our participants most deeply value then the actions that follow from that will be less self-regarding, more other regarding.

We have no interest in prescribing a set of values or ethics. Rather, we suggest that they emerge naturally from the inner attitudes that our course participants discover and make explicit to themselves as the process unfolds.

Why Quiet Ego Leadership Is Vital to Creating the Future

We said earlier in this chapter that we see the COVID crisis as one specific form of a wider set of systems challenges that are in train. The ability to work to address these crises is, in our view, the most pressing leadership challenge of our time. We also argue that the development of Quiet Ego Leadership has an important role to

play in equipping us to address these challenges well. This section explores why—in the specific connection between quiet ego states and the ability to engage in the exploration of the unknown, and essential skills for addressing post COVID systems challenges creatively and well.

The Difference Between Navigation and Exploring

It is clear that in any aspect of life some things are more certain and predictable than others (Stacey, 1993/2003; Boulton et al., 2015). We draw on a simple analogy to help get this thinking clearer. We call it the 'Navigate-Explore' framework.

- *The Navigation zone* is when things are relatively stable and familiar, when you're dealing with technical issues (even demanding ones) and your existing experience and expertise is a good guide for action. We call it Navigation because you already have a good enough 'map' to guide the actions you need to take. Navigation tasks may be lengthy and complicated, but they will feel familiar: the tasks of 'business as usual'—project management, resource allocation and so on—all with the aim of delivering specified outcomes.
- *The Exploration zone* is when things are more unfamiliar, for example when you're in times of change, when you're innovating, when you want different behaviours to get new outcomes. These times will all tend to have some elements of being 'beyond the known map'. In this type of activity your existing experience and expertise may or may not be quite so useful and may at times be a false friend.

EXPLORATION

Where existing expertise and experience can be a false friend

NAVIGATION

Where existing expertise and experience is a good enough guide

We illustrate the Navigation and Exploration spaces in this 'yin and yang' form because we like the complementary and flowing form of relationship that it suggests. We also like the two black dots in either section which we take to denote that that each section is to some extent affected by what lies in the other. Navigation is never *totally* without Exploration—and vice versa. This is not a polar relationship of opposites. Very often you'll face issues that lie more in one zone than the other, but most of our professional lives involve becoming adept and working with both, often at the same time.

Many of the challenges we will face, as organisational leaders, and in wider society, will lie in the exploring space—because they will be novel challenges which cannot be fully solved through the application of known expertise. The future requires new knowledge creation, which will arise from rigorous exploration.

What makes for good exploration? In our field work we noticed a number of positive behaviours that support effectiveness in this working well with the unknown.

Effective exploration rests on some behaviours that benefit from the application of Quiet Ego style of leadership. We cannot give a full account here, but some of the most important characteristics are set out below.

Taking an appreciative stance Organisational life, and society in general, seems to have a huge appetite for looking at what's wrong, who failed, where the problem is. A lot of effort gets poured into deficit thinking, plugging the gap, fixing the problem. It's not obvious that this always works—after all, the railways still fail, the hospitals still have waiting lists. Adopting the appreciative stance is in itself a radical act and sets the foundations for people to step into exploration with a positive energy (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). This matters because it is important to involve diverse participation—and an appreciative framing helps to bring this about.

Encouraging effective participation You can't explore from one perspective. So, the quality of participation is vital to good exploration. The capacity to shift perspective and to take other perspectives into account is greatly enhanced when leaders are able to put their egos aside for a time and open to the views, opinions and perspectives of others.

We have noticed that the quality of the quieter ego participation is influenced by some characteristics that we summarise under the headings of our 5P model (Hardman & Nichols, 2020).

Quiet Ego Leaders notice:

- *Participation*: ask who is involved and why—and who is excluded and why?
- *Preferences*: notice the psychological preferences in the room
- *Power*: notice the power dynamics in conversation: who and what is noticed and who and what is ignored?
- *Past Patterns*: What are the past relationships being played out in this strategic discussion? What impact is there on the conversation and the thinking?
- *Parental games*: Is this an adult conversation? Does anyone harbour saviour or victim positions? Who is the 'us' and who is the 'other' and what do we fantasise about them?

Cultivating richer ways of seeing and knowing The language of everyday organisational life is often too small to allow the system to be fully seen or understood. Good exploration requires new and richer ways of seeing, ways of getting different sorts of data (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Seeley & Thornhill, 2014).

Richer and more diverse work gives us the opportunity to go beyond the common-space, brain-only workings of the organisational world. There is a depth and a freshness that comes from experiencing something deeply, in the senses and in the body, that feeds the potential for profound learning. Even more so if that experience is used to make visible the usually unstated assumptions and frames of the organisation, context or situation.

The more deeply we allow our richly sensed and embodied experience to inform our questioning of the given frame, and to feed our creative reframing of things, the bolder and more fruitful our work is likely to be.
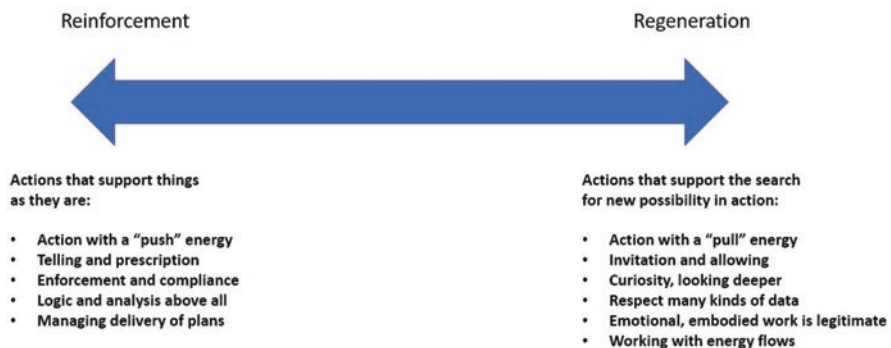
Part of the work of exploration is to become aware of the richer data all around us. Stepping into the experience of being a living part of a messy creative planet is a vital part of this kind of work. Intellectualising before experiencing guarantees a separation from the living reality: we need to step into action with all our senses alert.

To allow the sensory experience to do its work, we must give it some time and space. Part of the work of artful knowing is to create experiences and exercises that temporarily derail the ever present 'brainy' mode of organisation and leadership. This is essential if we are to stop the rush from experience directly into expertise and problem-solving based on old frames and existing ways of seeing.

Noticing the Impact of Your Own Actions on the Exploration

When a leader is exploring, they are part of the bigger system, not just an objective observer. So the leader must learn to notice the effects of their actions on that system.

We have created (Hardman & Nichols, 2020) a model that maps this onto a continuum.

Reinforcement ← → Regeneration

Actions that support things as they are:

- Action with a "push" energy
- Telling and prescription
- Enforcement and compliance
- Logic and analysis above all
- Managing delivery of plans

Actions that support the search for new possibility in action:

- Action with a "pull" energy
- Invitation and allowing
- Curiosity, looking deeper
- Respect many kinds of data
- Emotional, embodied work is legitimate
- Working with energy flows

Reinforcement action   Activity coming from the left-hand side of this continuum comes from a place of fixed knowing. It is often based on expertise and knowledge, and from having some kind of authority and power that comes from a role within that system. Very often this approach makes use of the prevailing logical language of organisations.

Regenerative action When there are significant systems challenges to be addressed, reinforcement action isn't enough: the attributes and skills from the right-hand side of the continuum become more important. Here the interventions are based on explicitly not knowing. This is a position of courage and authority, of clearly stating that this is a situation of not knowing so therefore good exploration is needed. Here it becomes especially important to state assumptions and to be deeply curious about the assumptions that others bring. This is an act of inviting curiosity about the deeper reasons for an action or a statement. Attention to these assumptions makes more of this usually hidden foundation visible and invites others into an understanding, sharing and exploration of what is communicated.

Each one of these attributes of good exploration are best supported by the approaches of Quiet Ego Leadership. The allowing of what actually is, lets us to see the situation more fully. It enables us to appreciate the limits of our knowledge and opens the door to exploration.

The nurturing of compassion and values lets us invite others into exploring, and to support them in bringing their full range of energies and fears. This, and the gentle setting aside of our egos insistence on being "right", is an essential cornerstone of richer ways of knowing, and is a foundation of cognitive diversity in a team or organisation.

The practice of meta-awareness allows us to see ourselves, individually and collectively, thinking while we are in the act of doing it—an important element in not getting stuck in the familiar round, but instead allows stuck patterns to be avoided, exited, and new conversations to be opened up.

Towards a Continued Practice of Quiet Ego Leadership

We end our chapter by making a bold claim. Although our human society and its many connected systems are deeply troubled, and many of them are in crisis, we remain optimistic about the possibility of human society sustaining itself and learning to solve the problems we face. We believe that organisations, particularly business organisations, but not only businesses, have a particular role to play in this, and that leaders at every level in those organisations have a central role in making this potential become realised.

Our capacity for reflection and inquiry makes such ambition possible and reasonable. All of us can play our part in keeping life, society, our organisations and

institutions alive and fit for the future. We can do this because we are drawn to participate, to join in and imagine something better. Sure, we are a species that often gets this wrong. We can veer down blind allies of closed minds and false certainty, and deny our capacity for curiosity, sharing and learning.

We do not believe that the potential can be realised from positions of expertise alone, nor can mere heroic achievement deliver this for us. The time for the deep explorer, based on the AIM model of Quiet Ego Leadership is dawning.

Takeaways
1. The Covid-19 heralds the first in what we believe will be a series of impending systemic shifts that have the potential to be at least as significant and disruptive as the Covid pandemic.
2. To lead well in these conditions of uncertainty and turbulence, leaders must learn to quieten their egos.
3. Quiet ego leadership is a trainable skill consisting in four primary elements: mindfulness, a sense of interdependence, compassion and the values that flow from these and accord with them.
4. Leaders with quieter egos are better able to move between the modes of 'navigate'—where what is called for is known—and 'explore', where what is called for is currently unknown. They are also better able to bring their people with them on that journey.
5. Loud-ego leadership leads to an organisational loss of curiosity and creative possibility as contrary views are silenced. There is a disappearance of nuance and difference as people try to follow, and second-guess, the leader. Thinking and acting within the guardrails of the dominant style becomes the unconsciously enforced norm. Quiet ego leaders draw out the best in their people and are better able to lead in contexts where they themselves do not and cannot have all the answers.

Reflections
1. When I, or someone close to me, worked under a loud-ego leader what was the impact on my own, or their, performance?
2. Can I notice the voice of my own ego? What effect does it have on me at work (and at home)?
3. How much do I live, and act, in awareness of my being embedded in a completely interdependent web of life?
4. Might I be a little more compassionate in my daily life. What would that look like?
5. What *really* matters to me? What would I want people to say about me at my funeral? How does that compare with the ambitions I have for my developing career?

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