



“IF YOU WANT TO LEAD PEOPLE, YOU HAVE TO ENTER THEIR WORLD”

LESSONS FROM WARREN BENNIS, LEO VARADKAR, BREXIT AND TRUMP

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This was the favorite piece of advice of Professor Warren Bennis, the world's foremost expert on leadership, who encouraged leaders to create followers by entering their world. To lead a nation or a business, one must understand the personal and emotional concerns of others. This is one of the first lessons of leadership, and it is also one that is most often forgotten.

At 38 years old, Leo Varadkar is the youngest ever prime minister of Ireland. He is of Indian origin and is openly homosexual. In a society as conservative as that of Ireland, such a considerable change of attitudes from the electorate would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. He owes his election to a campaign based on the daily and personal concerns of Irish people and not on figures and statistics. For example he posed the questions: "Do you know someone of a different sexual orientation or ethnicity in your environment? Does he or she not deserve equal treatment in society?" In addition, in his speeches, Varadkar sometimes used the Irish language. Even if half of the people did not understand but he was making an effort to meet voters on their own turf.

The same goes for Donald Trump's campaign. He voiced the anger of struggling white communities who think that their problems come from globalization. His campaign was emotional. He made them feel like he was one of them. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton responded with economic statistics. In Britain, those who were in favor of remaining in the European Union made the same mistake. They replied to the "Brexiters" with political theories. But this did not hit home with the majority of the British people. It would have been much more effective to talk about the missed opportunities for their children in a closed Europe, or about the administrative nightmare of those who trade, work or travel between the UK and the European continent.

People are not interested in economic statistics, budget deficits or a country's debt. It does not mean anything tangible in their daily lives. In the United States, the American National Election Studies (ANES) conducted by Stanford and Michigan universities found that 94% of those who voted Donald Trump and 90% of those who voted Hillary Clinton never went to a campaign event. They also found that only 20% of the American population seems to be interested in politics and its stakes. A case in point, 15% of those who voted for Donald Trump think Democrats are more conservative than Republicans!

Business leaders are facing a similar problem. They need to realize that what concerns them is not necessarily a source of motivation for their collaborators. Increasing the company's profitability, reducing costs, improving manufacturing processes, and growing productivity are rarely areas that arouse the enthusiasm of those working for a company. Employees are much more interested in their own lives and their role in society.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, said in a recent speech at Harvard University on this spring: " To keep our society moving forward, we have a generational challenge: to not only create new jobs, but to create a renewed sense of purpose.... But it's not enough to have purpose yourself. You have to create a sense of purpose for others". The younger generation, that of the millennials, is particularly sensitive to this approach. Beyond economic results, their motivation also comes from the contribution of their country or their company to the well-being of society in general.

Leaders who forget to enter the world of others pay for it by isolating themselves at the top of their organization. Generally, they do not survive long because they are disconnected from the emotional aspirations of those they lead. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: "It is a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are leading ... and to find that there is no one there!"

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