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May 13

Leading in Crisis: A Meditation

Just as the strongest person can injure themselves by lifting a heavy load incorrectly, we must now attend not just to our strength, but to our postures as well.

Right now, many of us are being asked to lead — perhaps in familiar ways and perhaps in new ones. We have seen deaths that we cannot unsee. We are collectively experiencing a loss of comfort and uncertainty as the ground beneath us trembles under the weight of universal suffering. Especially during crises, we crave strong leadership and direction. But when we are the ones being asked to lead in the moment, how do we do it?

The grief that we are experiencing is crippling. It weighs on us mentally, but it can also change our physical postures — the way we stand in the world. As we work to regain stable footing in the new world we are leading and creating together, attention to the body is critical. Just as the strongest person can injure themselves by lifting a heavy load incorrectly, we must now attend not just to our strength, but to our postures as well.

With the task of designing, building, and leading in uncertainty and crises, this balance is essential. In our leadership discourses, we often talk about strong leadership, but we rarely consider leadership postures. How are we holding our leadership? What does strong leadership look like in crises? What does it look like when we share our strength? When we are all asked to stand on what feels like shifting sand, what postures give us the capacity to hold and support others?

The art of equitable leadership through crisis is not just holding fast or even moving fast — it is understanding the ground, knowing who shares it, and adjusting our posture accordingly. With months, if not years, of a “new normal” ahead of us, we must embody the leadership postures that will allow us both to lead effectively and to maintain the strength required for leadership.

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Politicians get things done. They see and balance the needs of all constituents and remain principled in the face of challenges. They understand that they belong to the people and that the people hold them accountable. Equitable politicians prioritize the experience of the powerless and historically marginalized when making decisions.

The politician's posture may be especially helpful when certainty is lacking. They stay proximate to the most marginalized and excluded while co-creating to-do lists and breaking seemingly overwhelming projects down into more manageable pieces.

Posture 2: The Pastor

The pastor is the shepherd — the one that creates space to nurture and care for people on the journey. The pastor moves with radical grace and mercy. They know that people may say the wrong things at the wrong time. When we fall, they remind us to practice radical grace and remember the divine in ourselves and keep trying. They know that the struggle is eternal, refuse to shy from challenge, and remind us of our innate power to become great.

The pastor's posture brings compassion during crisis, especially as the stress of suffering reveals our unique vulnerabilities and shortcomings. Transformative and equitable leadership in this moment not only understands the need to accomplish; it also embraces and holds us while we work. Leading in this posture is the big hug we all need, especially when we don't show up as our best selves.

Posture 3: The Prophet

Prophets see what others cannot. They hold a vision of the future that might seem unrealistic; unfathomable; even crazy. They are willing to "take one for the team" and are resilient in the face of challenges and adversity. They go first, set the vision, and inspire others to join them. They are joyous in the struggle and humbly hold their power to create a new world.

In the prophet's posture, leaders ask their communities to extend their sight and believe in things they cannot yet see. They ask us to see the future we wish to realize, give hope in the possibility of that vision, and encourage members of a community to unite behind a common goal. In times of despair, they see the power for transformation that lives in each of us and leverage both integrity and vision to maintain engagement in the face of the most formidable challenges. Prophets humbly hold their power to create a new world.

Close your eyes and take three deep breaths. As you reflect on your leadership stance, which words and phrases resonate in your body? What is your default posture? How can you adjust, minute by minute, to the needs of our community?

This is the time to reflect on how we are standing in the world, reassess our postures, and hold ourselves in different ways. Without this care and attention, we may not be able to see how moments of crisis can open us to new possibilities and how these moments can help us emerge as the leaders we were meant to be. There is always light in darkness, and new postures can help us see it.

We know how this ends. It's time to share the pen and rewrite the story.

Moving Equity Work Toward Action in the Age of COVID-19



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