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Leading Social Adaptation (LSA)[1] – An Empirical Approach

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Introduction

Responsible social institutions of all stripes earnestly seek peace and prosperity in today's complex world. Toward these ends, institutional leaders seek ways to bridge 'cultural divides' from a business, economic, political and religious perspective. Worldwide leaders can be more effective in leading our futures when using tools based on science and cross-culturally moral standards.

This article describes an adaptive approach, an empirical process tool we'll call LSA™. LSA's significance is that it could make the difficult chore of leading broad social change, such as cultural adaptation, worthwhile in any organization. This process, based on 'social empiricism,' may be useful in conjunction with other tools, such as Cultural Intelligence (CQ) to encourage positive cultural acceptance in all parts of the world. It suggests using a better predictive science method than traditional Gaussian bell curves when using these leadership performance tools.

The Impetus

So, why is a new 'scientific' cross-institutional process needed?

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On the business front, and as one example alone, the rates of accelerating and seemingly haphazard trade realities strain most private supply chains' capabilities. While radio frequency identification (RFID) and other technologies are taming wild swings in physical demand, management and labour efficiencies and effectiveness continue to suffer[1]. This flailing of supply chains is but one factor helping to beat across our world an ever-broadening trail of confusion, for diverse populations in the thousands involved in chasing dreams of better employment. Changes in international employment and immigration standards rarely seem to meet local demands for new and skilled positions. If one could estimate them, the resulting social and GDP costs must be astronomically high. We need to better facilitate these changes.

A second, key reason is that leadership inside public institutions of every ilk appears less and less able to take appropriate action. These institutions appear crystallized…frozen in their culturally encased positions…and fearful to adapt. They fear their constituents, who may erupt and overthrow them. Who can blame these leader(s) if they are not able to first, explain and second, demonstrate to their constituents the benefits of a fair proposed change? Is it any wonder that much needed dialogue with other groups, as well as their constituents to achieve commitment is missing?

Sadly, such fears have appeared to be the crutch for leaders of crippling, isolationist or dictatorial 'take all and give nothing' regimes. In fact, it's comforting to know these debilitating practices can no longer hide in a world of (like them or not) split second sound bites. The Internet and other digital technologies are tools already at use to uncover the intentions of such power-driven organizations, simply by publicly exposing the leader's words or actions. Ironically and happily, these 'in the moment' sensors work to inspire most world citizens to follow morally persuasive leadership guidelines[2].

Furthermore, in the past, broad social institutions that set out with positive intent, such as world religions, have yet to bridge philosophical and sectarian differences. Perhaps these tools may help to achieve their common aims. These considerations notwithstanding, if we decide to go ahead with these tools, past efforts at collaborative change by public institutions must not be forgotten. Rather we should commemorate them in order to remember them as chosen steps along the way on a very long yet worthwhile journey.

Similarly, efforts at government levels include agreements that naturally protect their own political and economic interests, in spite of the open and sincere shows of cross-cultural courtesies. Rarely have leaders, openly encouraged any *potential changes in cross-cultural boundaries,* with the notable exceptions like South Africa or Ireland where a social crisis erupts. Even then, for all of the reasons already given, such crises sadly take decades to come under broad public scrutiny, sound bites or no sound bites.

Warning, Turkeys Ahead!

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, New York author of best seller *The Black Swan*[3], reminds us of our historical addiction to logical, Gaussian (bell curved) evidence when studying the impact of events on the future. This long-term, learned scientific habit has left us blinded to, though not shielded from, significant outlier events, which, he explains have the most impact on us. Can this be true?

Taleb uses the analogy of the domestic turkey. The turkey is fed and kept by the farmer in a relatively prime environment, day after day. To the turkey, the past shows a steady and seemingly, gradual rate of change – predicting future well being. The turkey is lulled into learned complacency. Using only Gaussian probability to predict its future, it has no way of knowing what will happen to it on the thousandth day – unfortunately, its last!

From the Gaussian observer's perspective, this event simply ends the turkey's reality, unexpectedly and dispassionately – and must do so, because its math labels such an event 'discontinuous'. In plain scientific words, Gaussian mathematics deal strictly with the past! Indeed, Gaussian science cannot predict – nor query – the critical event, i.e., what happened on the thousandth day! Taleb states and one has to agree intellectually that Gaussian bell curves may work for 'anchoring' average demographic measures such as average weight or height in society and nature.

By definition though, an empirical observer (or scenario planner) using Gaussian methods alone is left scientifically ignoring the *real* likelihood of common events– both negative and positive – such as winning the lottery, predicting bull and bear stock markets, or even who will be leading a given organization in six months.

As the turkey illustrates, this self-imposed blindness to our social conditions leaves most institutional leaders guiding our future *only* by looking at probabilities of change in the rear view mirror! Yet, Taleb proves in empirical terms, the future does not separate itself from the past gradually. Aux contraire, it rips itself away from the past, suddenly taking a large leap forward, and landing with a significantly disruptive impact!

From this, it takes only a tiny leap to realize that those involved with human well being are unwittingly spending huge amounts of resources inefficiently, and most likely, ineffectively. Nevertheless, on a more cheerful note, we can make better decisions about the future.

For we humans to implement any new habits or processes, though we must turn immediately to the latest evidence on leadership neuroscience. *Harvard Business Review* recently reported how the human brain prefers to use 'old' neuron pathways, unless its owner *has both the desire and the discipline* to teach it to create new pathways that are more useful.[4] Disciplined thought drives change in our neural pathways and builds new neural connections. So, our species has used this ability for thousands of years to choose new and adaptive actions to protect us from harm. And, it is this knowledge that gives each of us, as leaders, the power to guide humans through Taleb's 'leaps of change'.

A Social Empiricist Comes Prepared

Let's first examine a group facilitation process tool based on 'social empiricism' and why it is necessary, before we look at worldwide examples of how leaders can apply its dynamics to their respective, 'in the moment' situations.

Social empiricism is the phrase that has literally inspired the following facilitation process to better enable organizational outcomes. The tool is called 'LSA', an abbreviation of 'Leading Social Adaptation'.

LSA's particular process steps are configured as follows:

1. Applying one's Emotional Intelligence[1] (EQ) to discuss and determine current situational opportunities for *mutual* success between two or more groups of people.
2. Openly observing and remaining genuinely curious, engaging in dialogue about the ways that the other group's social (cultural) practises are different than your own.
3. Discussing the implications of the difference(s) on the aims of mutual success, for each party involved.
4. Applying 'appreciative inquiry' process techniques to creatively diminish, or reverse, the negative impact of the key differences on the *other* group – and checking these out with the other group – until mutual consent is reached. Scenario planning can complement this step.
5. Following up by leading their own organizational members through 'appreciative inquiry' techniques, with the purpose of creatively initiating the collective, mutual consent suggestions.

Let's look at real example, where a company in the USA takes over a water works in South America with the honourable intention of modernizing the facilities in the new (SA) market. On takeover, the company immediately raised water prices, in part to pay for the modernization. The local population strenuously decried the price increases, then rioted. The government could not police the situation in that part of the country…and the company had to turn and run for it! Later, the company tried to sue the host country for failing to protect its interests. The negative publicity from the lawsuit, coupled with antiglobalization sentiment, gave the US parent company a negative reputation worldwide, and the suit eventually failed.

In this case, the company had used state-of-the-art budgetary tools, allowing a contingency swing of 10% in profitability for unforeseen factors and obtained the best international legal contract advice … but it failed to take the most important 'future' factor into account…the cross-cultural picture.

How could the company have made buying the water company a success, using LSA, Step by Step? Hint: Start by contrasting the two companies' operating business cultures. They have two different measures of 'future success': Hard budgetary and legal perspectives vs. social acceptability of the key stakeholder (the customer) and corporate social responsibility within the local community.

1. People with high Emotional Intelligence (EQ) have the same types of Motivational goals as we all do. Most of us know what we want (or need) to get done in a day! They may also have high Autonomy, the ability to produce independent thoughts about a situation in relation to the goals at hand. Where high EQ people differ from others is that they define a situation's strategic issues and optional solutions in dialogue with others. This open dialogue would have uncovered the divergent strategic measures between the organizations and their respective key stakeholders.
2. During dialogue, both parties need to have a turn at remaining open to ideas and must listen for underlying key, socio-economic (key cultural) interests, and issues that require resolution. The customers' issue with pricing might have surfaced

without this step, but the due diligence and purchasing process likely would have stopped! This process cannot be applied piecemeal.

3. Discussing issues is the step that allows the parties to rise above their differences by applying common moral and socio-economic principles. In our case, all four specific measures of strategic success would have been mutually understood and agreed at this point! (If done sincerely, these discussions reach across most cross-cultural boundaries, when applied correctly.)

4. Where roadblocks remain, persistence on the part of both parties is critical. Being reminded of the potential value lying on the path ahead usually heartens the meekest of members of the parties involved at this stage. (Latecomers…the host government could have been briefed by all sides and join in even at this stage.) Political aspects should be minimal at this stage. It's amazing how pricipled negotiations diminish politically charged issues…which in this case had caused riots! All can join into the 'appreciative inquiry' and make changes or allow for others to continue their unique cultural practise necessary to reaching a mutual agreement. (E.g. the parent company CEO joins in Inca rain dancing to increase water levels, which come to think of it, would have made for much nicer press in other global communities!) At this point, scenario planning can well complement this step.

5. Implementing an agreement can be just as problematic as reaching one. This time, designees in parts and functions of the organization not yet involved now need to have input and their say in order to develop the operational targets needed to affect the overall strategic measures. (Simply repeat LSA Steps 1 through 4, for the best results.)

Academic readers should note that LSA's process also lends itself to the scientific model of 'social empiricism'[5], described by Miriam Solomon. However, the main and specific use of LSA is intended as a normative process, for innovative social policy application, *a la* Steve Fuller's 'social epistomology'[6]. Organizations, from businesses to universities and colleges to international states of any stripe and complexity can use this tool to resolve issues, provided the key stakeholders seriously want those issues resolved peacefully. And, science philosophers like Tetsuji Iseda are likely to have mollified their concerns about bridging these two approaches, if they read this article's section explaining fractal (geometric) measurement.

So, hopefully, one can see that a scientifically controllable process that involves constituents and offers inevitable moral transparency, like LSA, may be a constructive leadership tool in future.

Anthropologists and organizational psychologists explain that for centuries, any organized human endeavour has originated and evolved its own cultural change *based on its adaptive needs*[7]. In other words, how a social entity's culture evolves depends on that organization's economic, political, and religious influences *of the time*. The research evidence for this is available in any multidisciplinary account of institutional history, and in current magazine articles in any society. So, from this perspective at least, the need to apply a socially broad and empirical leadership model can easily be observed.

Perhaps leaders could look in the mirror and ask…do I really need another study in this regard, before I act? Well, there are signs that we are more than ready as a species to wade into managing this kind of change, as the next section will demonstrate.

Toward the Future, Empirically

Another empirical tool, already helping business organizations manage and improve their cross-cultural and strategic goal achievements, comes from Christopher Early and Elaine Mosakowski[8], who first described 'cultural intelligence' (CQ) – a personal measure of one's ability to blend into any cultural environment using more effective business practices than those with a lower CQ. These researchers report that CQ is measured on a scale and developed in real situations through learned feedback:
- Cognitive means – the head (learning about your own and other cultures, and cultural diversity)
- Physical means – the body (using your senses and adapting your movements and body language to blend in)
- Motivational means – the emotions (gaining rewards and strength from acceptance and success)

Example: Suppose there is a Caribbean black man, born 90 years ago on an island where black people were historically subservient to British settlers. He is raised by a strict father in a strict religious family, and chooses a career as an Evangelical Christian Minister. He raises his 9 children as strict Christians, with strict discipline. The family lives for several years in very hard economic times, in dirt poor conditions, until the young father (who cognitively learns the difference between his own and other cultures) moves them to another island, where the black culture is dominant by virtue of population numbers. (After a short while the whole family has easily adapted their body language and blends into the new cultural ways, save the patois accent.) Within three years, the well-spoken father (who has used a known vocational motivational means to adapt to the new society) not surprisingly becomes a known, successful and accepted Minister on the new island. While he's gaining rewards and strength from this acceptance and success, he suddenly recognizes and seizes on an economic opportunity rooted once again in the demographics of the island… and immediately changes his occupation to become an insurance sales person!

Now he has acquired a new motivational means to gaining rewards. And he becomes a sales 'star', a multi-year winner of the insurance company President's $Million Round Table. (Apparently the insurance president, too, has acquired the cognitive cultural learning and new motivational means to gaining rewards.) So, what is the consequence for the family? It joins the upper rungs of the island's black society.

And, over time, the oldest son becomes a political powerhouse on the island (a socio-cultural learning passed on by the father to his son).

And then, following the island's political independence, the whole family becomes the vocational crème de la crème of society (learning to move with grace among the new black and white mixed cultures, in which they are immediately accepted and successful). The whole family, led by the father, has adapted successfully to a diverse set of cultures. They can be described as a classic example of people using 'High CQ' in new social, economic and political

situations, even when the poorer island black people have become a rising new force, riot and eventually transition into a recognized socio-political power.

The moral of the story is that 'A new cycle of CQ learning is constantly before us' on every social organizational level, and is a reminder that CQ, or any other social 'process tool,' can be used for the betterment of mankind.

But, let's not forget these tools can also be used for sinister purposes. For example, we can observe the success of the drug cartels, black markets, and terrorist and other criminal organizations in any culture. Granted, most of the underworld's leadership techniques are dogmatic and cruel and (thankfully) suffer from the crossfire effects of cultural diversity and power politics…at least as much as our legitimate institutions do. Nevertheless, as professional crime fighters could attest, the most successful crime organizations are sophisticated enough to establish international ties based on a socially empirical leadership model of their own.

The Way Forward – Leadership Excellence Remains an Option

On a brighter note, no well meaning institution deserves to be left behind. And, the means to a 'breakout future' exist for any one of them. Assuming that powerful worldwide institutions work hard to support humanitarian organizations, for example those with social entrepreneurial interests, they can more easily initiate innovative change.

As leaders we can now easily concentrate on cross-institutional cooperation and apply these new empirical tools to envision and manage our future, provided we learn to get out of our own way. Here's what I mean…

Toward ridding ourselves of this human addiction, Taleb suggests using fractal (geometric) estimations[9] to help us predict the outcomes of potentially positive and negative events. Fractal estimations separate x, y data over time (t) using a 3D graph. Suppose 'x' is turkey feed in kilos per Euro, and 'y' is the number of kilos of turkey per Euro. The x and y axis on the graph display a pictorial typography of vertical 'waves of the turkey futures market' because the data of various 'widths' (turkey feed per Euro rates) and 'heights' (turkey meat per Euro rates) plotted for various world markets can better predict the next wave in world demand for turkey, than Gaussian bell curves ever could! The reason is that 3D geometric measures for any aggregate geographical market shows the exact shape (crest and valley) of each typographical wave… determined by the values of each (x, y) vector plotted over time!

Enough of turkeys! The point is that this scientific methodology can help us better deal with the probabilities of events that produce 'real change' in our complex world.

With the philosophical parts of our challenge understood, tools like LSA can be used consistently with leadership performance excellence as described by Harvard's thought leader on public policy and administration, Ronald Heifetz. He and many other researchers in the field of organisational development have shown human organizations are 'complex adaptive systems'. While a unique species, humans react in virtually similar ways that biological organisms and other social animals do.

In other words, as individuals and groups we respond to any life situation by *adapting* to it, one way or another. We formulate and choose a set of behavioural responses to threat, opportunity or both in each situation. Each human can decide these behaviours from a complex array of alternative behaviours (where each choice represents a unique vector), and do it instantly. So, Heifetz notes, performance unity and excellence depends on leaders dialoguing with others involved to envision desired outcomes. This includes each person estimating his or her role realities and making interdependent decisions 'in the moment'. He concludes that leaders must rely on those 'who do the work' to execute the 'complex adaptive' steps needed to fulfill mutually desirable, unified outcomes.

Certainly, no one has a right to criticize past actions! It's extremely difficult to deal with alligators in the middle of a swamp! Yet, there remains here an opportunity for leaders of all kinds to choose to be proactive about the future – and ensuring it is successful. Taking an empirical approach to social cross-cultural adaptation in any organization is an opportunity to learn successful behaviours on the job and avoid being in the swamp, once too often!

Conclusions

Where do these empirical observations about our world leave us? For one, they should leave us with deep respect about the future of the human race and what we can do to improve our lot, collectively.

If we refuse to try new ways to lead others to a better future and instead continue relying on current, Gaussian 'scientific' grounds, we are intellectual fools, or snobs, or both. Indeed, *The Black Swan* should be catalogued as a critically important, scientific document on social leadership and *acted* upon, when one considers its power to reverse a dreadful human blindness.

Our option as leaders is to endorse a human addiction that has us tossing lives and other human expenditures aimlessly against every vector of life. Hopefully, this point is particularly meaningful to those who really care to advance leadership abilities…in any domain.

And, if we are too complacent to act, we leaders should consider allowing these new ways to be applied responsibly by associates or underlings. Either way, a series of yes – practical, empirical trials – would likely challenge all of us to reshape some of our institutional roles, and enable us to better oversee the future of impending social change. We all know there are no silver bullets. On the other hand, is there any reason to ignore proven ways to improve our aim with the ones we have?

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

o *Cultural Intelligence (CQ) measures and practices highlight the 21st century imperative of learning to work and function effectively across cultures. When using an instrument such as the LSA© process, what should be the boundary marks between "adaptation" and "insulation" – that is, when should cultural difference be seen for what they are (differences) and when should cultures work together towards amalgamation?*

o *In his example, the author refers to a corporation's use of state-of-the-art budgeting tools. In what ways will such budgeting tools be different in 2018? Postulate and discuss a next-generation utility function that captures the long-term costs of business decisions (at least those costs that might be quantifiable).*

o *In 2018, will immigration standards better keep pace with the demand for workers, or will the gap be wider? (also see Taljaard and Aguilar-Millan articles, this issue)*

o *Will the accelerating pace of change result in more people being receptive to change – and if so, will this receptivity manifest primarily in a proactive, pre-adaptive way or in a reactive way?*

o *The author mentions sound bites. Are sound bites, perhaps in conjunction with information overload, leading to a society that favors superficial thinking in preference to in-depth thinking – especially among voters and consumers? If so, what are the implications for outlier data points, also mentioned by the author – that is, how will they be regarded? Conversely, will counter-trends prevail, for example, increased interest in cross-cutting, system level thinking?*

o *To what extent does receptivity to change – or tendency to risk aversion – correlate with personality types (e.g. the Myers-Briggs or Keirsey descriptors)? Of these personality types, which ones will best adapt to daily life in your part of the world in 2018 – and why?*