

THE INESCAPABLE METAMORPHOSIS

Immune, for 75 years, from collective tragedy. The post-war generation could have been remembered for this rare, if not unique, historical characteristic. Although worn down by local natural calamities such as earthquakes and floods and hit by periodic financial crises this was, however, a generation whose only experience of real disaster was in stories told by their parents or what they saw in films and television documentaries. Living it – this drama – as actors in a film without script, with neither a yesterday nor a tomorrow, imprisoned in a stage-set surrounded by four walls at home, has been a tough assignment for everyone. Even more so for those, in positions of command, who have found themselves, on a daily basis, having to take decisions without the support of data, of history, or of intelligent algorithms able to offer guidance in the total darkness of an unfathomable future. In the vain search for similar experiences, in the absence of reliable advice, forced to improvise while trying their best to offer a solid point of reference. Hurlled suddenly into a river in full flood, with nothing to hold on to, and with the sole aim of staying afloat and bringing their people to safety. With pressure that increases day by day and that makes it increasingly difficult to think clearly. *“Calm – indeed very calm – reflection is better than desperate decisions”* Franz Kafka.

Management that is aware that it is unprepared for such an enormous emergency. In which listening, instinct, common sense and courage offer salvation.

Once the pandemic had broken out and war had been universally declared against the invisible enemy, almost all companies began their crusade by implementing – within a few days – epochal change, focusing completely on the principle of people-centricity. The health of employees, of their families, of suppliers and of customers became their number one priority. A sudden and significant change had taken place in corporate culture, shifting from a traditional concept of employee to that of the individual, flattening the hierarchy and putting everyone on the same level. *“There is nothing more difficult to manage, more perilous to conduct or more uncertain in outcome than introducing a new order”* Machiavelli.

This has produced a degree of solidarity that is hard to imagine in terms of cohesion and mutual support. With no one having had, in fact, any previous experience of managing a similar emergency, and no one being in a position to make predictions about the future, rather than seeking refuge in their managerial and professional expertise, managers found themselves sharing primary values such as respect, trust, humility and courage. Sketching, in this way, the outline of a leadership profile to which may be entrusted the complex relaunching phase.

RESPECT

What may seem an interesting concept but not so easy to implement, a goal to aim at, but at the right time, a principle that is shared, but with some resistance that needs to be overcome, was suddenly transformed by lockdown into a compelling and inescapable reality: purpose trumps profit. Forcing businesses to put the health of their employees at the centre of all their efforts.

Where there was a lack of means, this was made up for by solidarity and creativity. If there was a lack of experience, this was met with common sense and listening. When there was a lack of time, tenacity and flexibility were brought to the fore. What there was no lack of, in most companies, was respect for people. There was, in fact, a sudden rehabilitation of a value that had been lost over time and whose importance was realised as soon as the company became the guarantor of its employees in the workplace. Where there was a perception of an engaged caring that went beyond welfare practices, employees developed a strong sense of pride in being a part of their company.

It is to be hoped that managers who became aware of the ethical value of respect and decency in interpersonal relationships will cultivate this value with determination as a basic foundation of the long-term relationship between company and employee. This will give employees the dignity they deserve and release them from the reductive association with the purely emergency phases. We also know that this will not hinder the implementation of necessary, albeit painful, efficiency measures aimed at securing the survival of the business. But it is to be hoped that it will at least condition the way these are applied. *"With the condemned we must use humanity, discretion and mercy"* Machiavelli.

TRUST

If respect for people represents a tangible corporate value, expressed in practice by the shareholders, subdivided into specific operating methods and measurable in terms of actions and the way these are perceived, the same cannot be said for trust. Here the relationship is played out at an individual level, where the aspect of reciprocity as well as the impressions that operate in the emotional sphere become key. In fact managing the emergency suddenly rendered obsolete managerial methods rooted in traditional approaches such as the centralisation of power, a threatening authoritarianism, and playing the leading role alone.

Instead this facilitated the emergence of trust, now a key player in the relationship between managers and their organisations. Finding oneself, from one day to the next, in the hands of someone who had never faced a similar crisis, certainly required a great expression of trust in top management from the base. And, vice versa, having to rely on an organisation that was suddenly working from home in a

way that was more similar to freelancers than to workers clocking in, obliged top management to undertake a major revision of their approach to relationships.

Prompt communication, a widening of responsibilities, paying attention to motivation, focusing on results. And a great amount of trust in people's sense of responsibility, which derives its lifeblood from a sense that people are managed by bosses whose fairness is acknowledged. Thereby generating a feeling of rigidity associated with management practices based on taken-for-granted power dynamics, policies that divide up areas of influence, the irritating practice of roping together mutual interests, and opaque communication strategies. *"A prince will never fail to legitimise the reasons that break his promises"* Machiavelli.

HUMILITY

Notwithstanding the tempting guidance offered by the Gospel according to Luke, few managers have followed the tortuous path of humility when striving for success, preferring to take dangerous shortcuts instead: the search for power does not allow any distractions. *"Those who win, no matter how they win, never feel any shame"* Machiavelli.

The humble approach is not one of the tools of the classic management stereotype. And even when lack of knowledge on a particular topic is there for all to see, it is often replaced by arrogance. Less disguised in youth, but subtler and more damaging later on. In any case, attached to power as corrosively as rust.

Managers have had to deal with an unknown pandemic with their bare hands in order to understand the importance of listening, of surrounding themselves with those who are really competent, of accepting and recognising their own mistakes without, at the same time, seeing their authority diminish. For many, more than being bathed in humility, this has been a real baptism. *"The best ideas belong to everyone"* Seneca. Listen, learn, follow examples. To fulfil oneself. And do this with an open mind while understanding that for many managers there could be an opportunity that until now has been little explored, i.e. to draw on the well of the world of women. From which could be gleaned and followed examples of values, ways of behaving, interpersonal approaches, exploring problems in depth, taking an overview. To be added to the toolbox of traditional command. Understanding that many things can be learned from women is a step forward that many men in power find difficult to take. In the direction of acquiring the awareness that top management positions are not inevitably the preserve of men. This could be significant in facing, with renewed spirit, a situation that is complex in itself, and which has become even more critical due to a prevailing and uncommon unpredictability.

COURAGE

“Courage is something you can’t give yourself” Manzoni. Facing events that are exceptional, unknown, unpredictable and surprising in their virulence requires an ability to look fear in the face and to try to do something that one did not believe one was capable of doing. Basically, to be courageous beyond any reasonable expectation. Managing the health crisis has brought out a significant amount of this talent in people who – quite apart from their hierarchical roles – have assumed major responsibilities. Generating a feeling of genuine admiration in those who have seen them at work.

The unconscious awareness of the real value of courage leads inevitably to using a different lens to evaluate the role of company bosses. Who are expected to be able to take decisions that are not limited to the actions required to manage an emergency, but which involve launching initiatives that will guarantee the future of the business in the long term. Which means taking responsibility for what may be elegantly defined as “sustainability”, but which for many companies is simply survival. The violent changes that have rained down on traditional organisational structures, rather than on distribution channels or on supply chains, are just some of the trampolines from which we have been thrown into the stormy sea. It is clear that staying afloat is only a short-term strategy. Identifying the right goals and guiding the company is the true challenge – one which requires courage, resilience and determination. *“The path cannot be left, even for an instant. If we could leave it, it wouldn’t be the path”* Confucius.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

“Even if there are more and more reasons for fear, choose hope ” Seneca. It is useless to take the side of either optimists (who are rare anyway) or pessimists. It is better to try to capitalise on what one has learned over these last few months. And not waste the values which have emerged from this monumental human experience in terms of solidarity, understanding and respect for people. These have generated energy and resilience which is uncommon and, almost, unimaginable. This sentiment of people-centricity should be protected, cared for and shared as the yeast which cements that cohesion and affinity between management and the rest of the company which is essential to plan and implement the recovery phase. *“To be truly great you need to stand with the people, not above them ”* Montesquieu.

The prospect of becoming poorer economically could be compensated for – at least in part – by feeling richer on a human scale.

The challenge and responsibility in the hands of the shareholders and the top management is to ride the growing need for a genuine and engaging purpose, moderating the primordial instinct of an

overriding search for profit. This is a path which had already been sketched out before the pandemic struck, but is now engraved in the expectations of those working in the company who feel the need for a major project which feeds their desire to fight on. And which will also help to combat a latent apathy that organisations risk sliding into – unconsciously contaminated by the long lockdown – coming from remote working, from incurable forms of welfarism and, last but not least, from a corrupting lack of trust.

Top management have a complex mission, condemned by the financial markets to deliver short-term results, beaten down by flattened structures, sucked towards the bottom by the frenetic whirlpools of compulsive control, always ready to respond to a stereotype which extols operational and reactive capacity. And proving to be saviours when handling an emergency.

“The gladiator decides what to do in the arena” Seneca. But if the role of gladiator is key to managing in the short term, equally so is that of the visionary *condottiero* who shows the way and outlines the long-term strategy, bearing in mind those irreversible changes that have revolutionised consumer behaviour on a global scale. So, a strong contrast between the short, which identifies itself more and more as a pragmatic approach in which one reacts immediately to market mutations, and the long, which defines the actions that one needs to take to guarantee the long-term future of the company. The paradox of reconciling the short with the long, without the mediation offered by the medium term, which has been overtaken by events. This is how the highly distinct roles of General Manager and Managing Director take shape – it is very unlikely that these roles could be covered by the same person. Who are always in conflict with themselves. In general over the years companies have, most of all, focused on the gladiators – often moulded at home – which ensures that the operational machinery is correctly managed. The priority for shareholders will, therefore, be to identify those forward-thinking *conduttori*, overcoming issues such as their previous business background, age constraints and gender bias. Too often companies have professed a desire for change, only to select their top management following traditional, and broadly conservative, methods. Does changing approach represent a courageous or a necessary action? In order to avoid being swept away by events we need an enlightened guide who is able to manage what is no longer a process of transformation, but is revealing itself instead as an inescapable metamorphosis.