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Letter from the Editors

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...from the editor(s)

With the recent passing of Nelson Mandela, the world has begun to reassess the highlights of his life, his relationships, and his time in a position of formal leadership. Whereas 27 years of seclusion and incarceration would typically provoke revenge and exact a widespread call for justice, Mandela embraced his adversaries unconditionally. He understood that the only way to truly address the ravages of segregation was to encourage unity and collaboration – the “collective” – thus utilizing the talents of *all* citizens to elevate South Africa to the status of a formidable global power. Humility trumped braggadocio and absolution enveloped spitefulness. Such a purposeful leadership style was certainly not popular with many who had been marginalized and brutalized since the ascension of the colonial rule centuries ago. Under his direction, this courageous leader propelled his nation to the level of international recognition and market dominance. The countries commonly referred to as *BRIC* (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, and China) have been expanded to include South Africa – *BRICS*.

Applying Mandela’s style of relationship-building and leadership, it is clear that he firmly believed that divisiveness and derision rarely, if ever, achieve anything of worth, but instead suppress the effective use of a nation’s natural and capital assets. This analysis could certainly be applied to business governance and operations as well.

Regardless, for many such focus on the *collective* conjures up a negative sense of dependency and reliance. In juxtaposition, *individualism* is often equated with the rugged, pioneer spirit so often associated with the conquest and development of many nations – arguably, none more so than the United States. People are reluctant to disavow a legacy inextricably linked to the glorification of the singular over the group and thus champion unaided perseverance, “pulling one’s self up by one’s bootstraps,” unequivocal self-reliance, sole recognition, and “owning the glory.”

Yet in business as in general governance, what are the salient benefits of the collective ethos?

“Two heads are better than one” is an oft-used maxim describing the need for eliciting critique and acquiring additional information from advisors, cohorts, and colleagues while “what do *you* think?” not only diffuses the hierarchical distance between worker tiers, but ignites creativity, promotes participation, and may very well culminate in the development of a superior product or service. Regardless, each promotes a certain type of collective action.

There are myriad examples of natural collective activities which achieve a shared objective: for example, ants creating entire habitats underground, wolves hunting for game in packs, and elephants migrating together in search of water. Similarly, the human brain is naturally wired for empathy, connectivity, and collaboration. The occasional loner who wants to “get away from it all” is the exception to the rule. Studies show that the rest of us

live longer and feel better emotionally when we have a strong support system and are connected to family and community. And as the global business network expands, collaboration is critical.

An important issue may develop in another time zone or an immediate deadline may be encountered. Decisions may not wait until next Wednesday's scheduled meeting. Companies need to be agile and ever prepared to act quickly – yet an immediate executive decision is not necessarily the best call. To address the urgency of addressing certain situations, a well-coordinated, cross-culturally attuned, and competent group must be established and ready to act. Principled and sustainable progress depends upon an organization's ability to assemble highly functioning groups of diverse people. Executives and employees – as well as other stakeholders such as consultants, vendors, and customers – must all have a role to play in generating ideas and offering crucial feedback.

As both inter- and intra-organizational collaborative opportunities become more common, individuals previously unfamiliar with one another will ultimately come together to seek ways to accomplish a common goal. Ideally, each participant will have an *Emergenetics* “profile” – outlining his or her thought processes and behavioral attributes – to share with other group members to engender mutual respect and thwart misunderstandings. Cross-pollinating meetings encourages the understanding of other points of view, divulges skill sets, and promotes the ability to act collectively in the pursuit of the entity's objectives.

I have asked members of the *JVBL* International Editorial Board to provide their own comments on the value of “the collective focus.” – **Elizabeth F.R. Gingerich**

Christine Clements, Dean of the College of Business and Economics at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater:

I work in a university where shared governance is required by state statute. External parties often express wonder that anything manages to get done when so many have to be involved in decision making. Most of us learn over time, however, that if there are decisions that inspire extensive debate, it is usually because hearing what everyone has to say is essential to making the best decision. Our first inclination is often toward efficiency, but the risk is that we sacrifice effectiveness and commitment.

In his seminal book on servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf¹ talks about the difference between knowing a lot and being open to knowledge, seeking not so much to be understood as to understand. Being open to knowledge and diverse views can be an act of courage, but it is a necessary act for principled and effective leadership. There is a tendency to view our groups, organizations, and world as being in constant crisis in these times of increasing complexity and dynamism. This perception is used to justify quick and decisive action and a more directive approach to leadership; but the inability to take time to listen and process may do more to contribute to crisis than it does to making sound, principled decisions that move us forward. In the larger scheme, there's

¹ Greenleaf, Robert M. (1996). *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, ed. Don M. Frick & Larry C. Spears. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

no one to lead if we aren't serving the needs of those around us. The rapid pace of change makes it even more difficult to "know a lot" and only increases the criticality of being open and hearing many voices. There is wisdom in the collective.

One of my favorite readings on this wisdom of being open to multiple voices and ways comes from *A Simpler Way* by Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers:²

"We have come to believe that to survive, we must control everything." Open and inquiring systems become wiser about themselves. "They learn that by reaching out, they become stronger. Their support comes not from unnatural boundaries but from the inherent strength of wholeness."

M.S. Rao, MSR Leadership Consultants, Founder, Author, International Leadership Expert, India:

"Once you *make* a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."
 – Ralph Waldo Emerson

We all make decisions in our daily lives. But how to go about them is a major challenge. It is true that all decisions cannot deliver fruitful results as we make decisions based on the present position, available information, and on our head, heart, and gut.

Sometimes leaders need to make decisions based on imperfect information. In fact, it is a great challenge as decisions might go wrong even when we make decisions based on the available information. Hence, making decisions is risky and achieving 100 per cent success with imperfect information is very remote. However, using head, heart, gut, intuition, and experience helps to a greater extent to make wise decisions to achieve the desired outcomes. The book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* authored by Doris Kearns Goodwin reveals how Abraham Lincoln inducted rivals in his team, and managed them to make collective decisions to end slavery and civil war in America by building trust and confidence in them. Hence, collective decision making has a crucial role to play to achieve the desired objectives.

The world has become a small village with the rapid growth in technology. It is tough to predict where we will land in the very next moment as there is too much volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Hence, it is advisable to adopt democratic decision making where all stakeholders are involved to add value and quality to decision making. This method helps acquire multiple ideas and insights from the participants with pros and cons of decision making resulting in effective outcomes. This style of decision making is collaborative, cooperative, egalitarian, inclusive, and participative. It is also known as participative decision making or collective decision making. It has both merits and demerits. Those who appreciate the idea will agree, and those who want to scuttle

² Wheatley, Margaret J. & Kellner-Rogers, Myron (1999). *A Simpler Way*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, pp. 94-102.

the decision will disagree – deliberately. However, the overall merits outweigh the demerits. Hence, it is advisable to adopt this decision-making style in all spheres.

Tom Karp, Associate Professor in Leadership, Author, Oslo School of Management Norway

In my research work I have realised that leadership is a much more collective-oriented phenomenon than the “leadership industry” likes to admit. Also, decision-making seems to occupy lesser space than proposed by classical theories. However, when decision making does happen, for example in top management teams, it is often principles – in the form of moral, values, norms, or attitudes – that shape those decisions, not formal or rational decision-making procedures. It is who the leaders are and what they stand for that ultimately governs the decision processes when leaders influence others.

John Renesch, Global Futurist, Social Activist, Author, International Speaker, San Francisco, California

We humans have created such complexity in our world that our social systems have become unmanageable – at least from the perspective of the leadership paradigm we built for yesteryear. That outmoded tradition still yearns for the super heroes – the history-changing, charismatic leaders in politics, religion, and civil society who will come to our rescue. But the time for individual leaders to save the day has past. Like Frankenstein and his monster, the systems we created to serve us are now ruling us and will continue to dictate the future as long as we stay rooted in yesteryear’s worldview.

The times call for collaboration on an unprecedented scale, where the collective will is followed by collective action rather than discordant strategies based on widely-differing ideologies. We can no longer afford to play the game of special interests, partisanship, or nationalism. The time has come for human beings to come together and focus on what is best for *everyone*, without special attention being paid to any one person or group.

In our ever-shrinking world, what R. Buckminster Fuller called “Spaceship Earth,” no group can feel truly secure today unless everybody else is secure. The global commons is too precious to squander by allowing any group to dominate or allowing grid-lock to prevent us from making progress. Collective choices are not only important, they are essential! We have reached a point in human history where we either subscribe to a new worldview that works for the future, or lose the global commons that sustains human life. The latter outcome will prevail if we insist on holding onto yesteryear’s ideas about leadership – relying on individual heroics instead of the collective “wisdom of crowds.”

It is our choice: **collective folly** leading to a more dismal future or **collective wisdom** and a vital future for all.