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the nature and need for nuance

NUANCE: A SUBTLE DIFFERENCE IN OR SHADE OF MEANING, EXPRESSION, OR SOUND

Have you ever known someone who is technically smart and strategically dumb? Leaders who have good ideas but are politically naïve? Or what about a person who uses a particular change strategy and succeeds marvelously, while another person uses the same model and fails miserably? How about someone who works extremely hard and gets nowhere compared to another person who puts in half the time, but gets twice as far? The difference may be nuance. People who do not appreciate nuance are unwittingly

satisfied with superficiality. As society gets more complex, leaders yearn for clarity because their followers demand it. This is the trap that is becoming more and more evident. They become susceptible to off-the-shelf solutions. Leaders who seek or are vulnerable to such solutions (the majority of leaders) inevitably fail. Nuance's answer is don't seek the obvious; seek meaning with your people. Once you find it, it becomes more clear, deeper and lasting. It becomes, in a word, *learning* that sticks.

SURFACERS VS. NUANCERS

In the field of education, almost every school district believes it is doing the right thing: having a vision, endorsing student and teacher standards, considering data on student learning, implementing professional learning communities, and so on. Yet most districts are not accelerating student achievement. Then there are a few school districts that focus on elements similar to those of the unsuccessful districts, but they pursue them differently—more like principles to guide the discovery of specific actions that bring results. In this book we are going to examine the difference between these two types of leadership. I am going to call the first type of leader—a bit unfairly—the *surfacers.* They don't necessarily want to be at this level of superficiality, but they don't know what else to do. Indeed, they may not even know that they are reinforcing a backward trend where things worsen.

The second type I will refer to as the *nuancers.* Surfacers treat problems as technical—if only we can get the right stepwise solutions. Nuancers work with key principles that lead to adjustable actions. This parallels the fundamental distinction made by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2017) between technical and adaptive challenges that I will take up more clearly with respect to leading successful change in schools and school systems. Trick question: when you reveal a nuance, does it cease being a nuance? The answer is no. A nuance is not grasped by naming it. You must get inside it and learn its inner meaning in action—and that takes time and skill. We will find that becoming good with nuance is a conceptual and practical skill that requires immersive, reflective action. Each situation is different; one's own situation is constantly changing due to

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internal and external dynamics. Nuance is called for at every turn. Once you internalize the ideas in this book they become second nature. They can have an amoeba-like quality that adapts to each situation. You still need to reflect and articulate your leadership principles, if for no other reason than you want to self-improve and be a valuable mentor to others. You will need all of this and more as you head toward 2020, and beyond.

I am going to spend a fair amount of time in this first chapter defining what nuance is and is not. By definition nuance is tricky—a kind of "if you have to define it, you don't have it." Ironically, the danger is, once defined, nuance can be applied in a mechanical manner. By contrast, nuance involves the capacity to see patterns below the surface. In this first chapter we will get a strong feel for what it means to be a nuanced leader. I will provide concrete examples throughout the book from leaders whom I interviewed that I considered to be nuanced leaders who were effective in tackling deeply complex problems in their work. I was simultaneously encouraged and worried about their reaction to the interviews. Upon reading parts of the draft manuscripts, those I had interviewed said, "Your questions uncovered leadership qualities in me that I did not know I had." Marie-Claire Bretherton from England, whom we will meet in Chapter 2, said:

> I have to say that reading this was like looking in the mirror and seeing something of myself that I hadn't noticed before, or valued before, or even been able to put language to. I feel simultaneously comforted by what you have written in that I feel validated and understood and even a bit more hopeful about myself, but it has also left me hungry for more. (personal communication, May 19, 2018)

So, what's the worry? Leaders who are already nuanced will find the book additionally revealing, but the danger is that those not so nuanced will not get it, and as such implement the main findings in a superficial manner. All I ask of the reader is to keep this worry in mind as we work through the essence of nuance in the rest of the book.

To get us started I offer the example of Leonardo da Vinci. A key dimension of nuance is to be able to see the big picture—the *system*—while at the same time being able to understand the details and their connections and hidden patterns operating within the system itself. Such leaders comprehend and influence the dynamics of such change in the service of measurable improvements. Let's travel back 600 years.

LEONARDO DA VINCI: THE PATRON SAINT OF NUANCE

Walter Isaacson (2017) has furnished us with a wonderful new biography of Leonardo da Vinci, the renaissance polymath who was "the master of all trades, the jack of none." How did he become accomplished at so many things? Early in his book Isaacson gives the reader the basic insight of how Leonardo became so good at what he did. Leonardo called himself a "discepolo della sperientia" which Isaacson translates as a "disciple of experience and experiment" (p. 17). Leonardo's modus operandi was: "First, I shall do experiments before I proceed further, because my intention is to consult experience first and then with reasoning show why such experience is bound to operate in such a way" (p. 18). He was a person of detail, but more for leverage than for limits: "true creativity involves the ability to combine observation with imagination, thereby blurring the border between reality and fantasy" (p. 261).

On the one hand, Leonardo's advice was to start with details: "if you wish to have a sound knowledge of the forms of objects, begin with the details of them, and do not go on to the second step until you have the first well fixed in memory" (p. 520). He dissected human cadavers—sinews, nerves, bones—so that in his paintings "it is not difficult to understand where each muscle is beneath" (p. 212). He wanted detail so that his ideas could be free to expand: "his observation skills colluded with rather than conflicted with his imaginative skills" (p. 264). Being grounded is a necessary condition for being innovative. Details and *their connections* enabled Leonardo to *see the system* at work.

There is a critical paradox here for our purposes. You need understanding of detail to have overall nuance! It is the key specifics and how they interact that allow us to grasp what makes something tick. Nuance *is* subtle—the exact opposite of superficial. Nuanced detail is efficient because it enables one to comprehend a great deal by knowing the inner workings of the patterns. This may seem a long way from the Mona Lisa's smile, but it is not. Understanding what lay beneath enabled Leonardo to capture what Isaacson calls "the uncatchable smile" (p. 490). Looked at from one angle it doesn't look like a

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smile. From another it does: "the result is a smile that flickers brighter the less you search for it" (p. 490). Observes Isaacson, "most miraculously, she seems aware—conscious—both of us and of herself" (p. 493).

We see in Leonardo that nuance is sometimes elusive, but often intriguing—that detail can be liberating when linked to a higher purpose and that purposeful experience is the bedrock of insights. Above all, though, you have to get behind the curtain to see the play. For our purposes the conclusion is that you can never fully understand something from its outer manifestations. But with nuance you have a chance of knowing more. With ever expanding complexity bordering on chaos, leaders will need even greater nuance than the present.

NUANCE: NEVER MORE NEEDED THAN NOW

There is an obvious and deeper reason why nuanced leadership will be essential and urgent. The obvious one that I mentioned earlier as a growing macro crisis is that society is becoming much more complex along with strong signs that life is deteriorating. David Brooks, the *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist, wrote a recent piece where he argued that the current system unwittingly encourages what he calls "five ruinous beliefs":

1. Exaggerated faith in intelligence

2. Misplaced faith in autonomy

3. Misplaced notion of the self

4. Inability to think institutionally

5. Misplaced idolization of diversity (Brooks, 2018)

As Brooks argues, intelligence favors intellect over feelings; excessive autonomy privileges the individual; preoccupation with the self, which values human over social capital; neglecting institutions (governments, schools, corporations) honors the short-term; and idolizing diversity becomes an endpoint not the midpoint to a greater more integrated society.

At present there are more pieces, more unplanned interactive factors at play than ever before. One doesn't have to be a genius to conclude that

complexity itself is becoming more complex. Joshua Cooper Ramo's (2016) *Seventh Sense* shows in great detail how networks have become ubiquitous, helter-skelter, impersonal and unpredictable. These "*hidden lines of network power*" can be used to build or destroy (p. 12, italics added). The "seventh sense" consists of the ability to connect with networks to see and feel "forces that are invisible to most of us" (sounds like a job for the nuanced leader). Humankind's possible destruction, argues Ramo, boils down to two groups: those ignorant of networks, and those ignorant of humanity (p. 300). In the subsequent chapters I will show how nuanced leaders come to the rescue as experts in both networks and humanity.

We have more unknowns to worry about: the increasing prevalence of robots is scary and it is not just because of the "uncanny valley" (when robots become so humanlike they leave us with a weird sense of discomfort). Martin Ford's (2015) *The Rise of the Robots* argues that machines are "turning into workers" and that "the line between the capability of labor and capital is blurring like never before" (p. xii). Ford's chilling prediction is that there is no known cure:

> The unfortunate reality is that a great many people will do everything right—at least in terms of pursuing higher education and acquiring skills, and yet will still fail to find a solid foothold in the new economy. (p. xvi)

Consider also McAfee and Brynjolfsson's (2017) *Harnessing the Digital World* where the authors analyze the explosive and interactive development of *machines, platforms, and crowds.* Machines consist of the expansive capabilities of digital creations; platforms involve the organization and distribution of information; and crowds refer to "the startlingly large amount of human knowledge, expertise, and enthusiasm distributed all over the world and now available, and able to be focused, online" (p. 14). The authors then couple the three forces into pairs: "minds and machines," "products and platforms," and "the core existing knowledge, and capabilities and the crowd." They suggest that successful enterprises will be those that integrate and leverage the new triadic set to do things very differently than what we do today. If we don't learn this new way of learning and working, we "will meet the same fate of those that stuck with steam power" (p. 24).

In a word, society is in danger of going to hell in a handbasket. We can no longer depend on evolution to ensure that we come out on top. Actually, the evolutionary odds may be altering in favor of the likelihood of disaster whether through climate change, nuclear button pushing, or the sheer capacity for humans to self-destruct. Humanity has always been able to cope with, indeed take advantage of radical changes, through its own individual and especially group ingenuity. But this time it might be different. Looking back four billion years with increasing focus on the past 10,000 years, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio shows a trend of increasing closeness of humans to each other. *Until now*. His book title tells us that something different is afoot: *The Strange Order of Things* (2018). Damasio shows how humankind could always rely on the brain to adapt, connect with others and arrive at ever-higher levels of functioning. Homeostasis is his term for this recurring process that

> has guided non-consciously and non-deliberately, without prior design, the selection of biological structures and mechanisms capable of not only maintaining life but also advancing the evolution of species. (p. 26)

It is this process that allows us to claim century after century that life has gotten better on the average for the human race. We do know empirically that life has improved for most people over time over the past 10,000 years. As Damasio puts it:

> Barbarism leads to suffering and disturbed homeostasis, while cultures and civilizations aim at reducing suffering and thus restore homeostasis by resetting and constraining the course of the affected organisms. (pp. 174–175)

Damasio argues that historically it is *feelings* that are distinctly human and that arise via the biology of the brain as we interact with the environment. Having feelings is one thing that artificial intelligence (AI) does not have. It is these dynamic feelings that define humanity: "they are essential for us to experience personal suffering and joy and empathize with suffering and joy of others."

Here is the point. Our dependence on the automaticity of good evolution may be coming to an end. All of this is to our good, *until now!* Paradoxically in the digital age humans are more accessible to each other in

theory, but more fragmented, and less likely to connect to others based on *feelings*. People become increasingly aware that they are simultaneously closer, yet more distant from each other. Each person has direct access to the world through their portable device, but "there is little incentive to engage, let alone accommodate, the dissenting views of others" (p. 214). We do get more intense within our small groups, but this serves only to exacerbate the distance from other groups.

Here is Damasio's neuroscientific punchline:

> Homeostasis, as found in our individual organisms, is not *spontaneously* concerned with very large groups, especially heterogeneous groups, let alone the cultures or civilizations as a whole. To expect *spontaneous* homeostatic harmony from large and cacophonous human collectives is to expect the unlikely. (p. 219)

I have spared the reader (and me) the neuroscience detail, but I hope you can agree intuitively and experientially that we can no longer depend on evolution to take care of things. We are bombarded with massive connections to others that ironically are increasingly superficial. The greater the coverage the more extensive the veneer; the result is deceptive closeness based on distal divisiveness and non-existent feelings. This is the stuff of nuclear annihilation, and it will be nobody's—no one individual's—fault.

Compare Damasio's argument to Parag Khanna's (2016) non-nuanced conclusion in *Connextography*: "connectivity enables the empathy that guides our ethical evolution" (p. 383). Well, no. Not when the connectivity is shallow and devoid of meaning. The kind of connectivity most of us experience these days, far from generating greater empathy, inures us to closeness. The naïve belief that things will inevitably turn out okay no longer holds. Connectivity or networks themselves tell us nothing about being efficacious therein. Developing humanity has no privileged position in networks per se. We need leaders who are expert at humanity and expert at networks. Consider Damasio's argument carefully in relation to your own daily experience and you will likely conclude that we can no longer depend on evolution saving the day. Indeed, there is a strong probability that things will worsen, and it could happen abruptly.

These trends operate beneath a complex surface that will require nuanced leadership, which evidently is in short supply. Over 70% of

organizational change efforts fail. I would have to say that the main reason is non-nuanced leadership. The latter can be effective at getting the *wrong things done*. In a complex, confusing world people can indeed crave fake news that operates as a drug that establishes its own habit. In threatening times, surfacers provide false temporary clarity that allows perverse hidden forces to fester.

Remember that nuanced leadership is one that contains the ability to read between and see beyond the lines. It involves a subtle difference, but one that makes all the difference. Richard Rumelt (2011) analyzes good and bad strategy. Bad strategy, he argues contains a lot of "fluff"— superficial statements of the obvious combined with a generous sprinkling of buzzwords. "It [fluff] is long on goals and short on policy or action" (pp. 36–37). Bad strategy has lofty goals, "but skips over the annoying fact that no one has a clue about how to get there" (p. 54). Over the past few decades, Rumelt states, "there has been an increased penchant for defining goals that no one really knows how to achieve and pretending that they are feasible." Federal education policies—"No Child Left Behind" or "Race to the Top"—come to mind. Note, the more complex that society becomes, the more vacuous the solution. If you try to make me think harder, I'll think more superficially.

Thus, being ambitious by itself is not a strategy. Heifetz's and Linsky observe that in complex times there becomes "a political marketplace for certainty and answers" (p. xi). Implementers rightly complain and demand more clarity—tell us how to do it they say. Here comes a deal with the devil. Leaders provide more direction and steps, while followers end up on a stairway to

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nowhere. Then comes mutual blame. Heifetz and Linsky call this the natural outcome of using a technical strategy to solve a complex problem. With a technical strategy, according to Heifetz and Linsky, leaders "apply current know how" and "authorities lead the process." By contrast, complex problems require people "to learn in new ways" with the people who have the problem functioning as "the key actors" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. 14). We will return to this fundamental change principle in each chapter: the more complex the problem, the more that people with the problem must be part and parcel of the solution.

Learning new ways is, well, learning (and thus leading) differently. If you tackle real problems on a large scale, what we call whole system change, and try to understand your successes and failures carefully, you begin to get a feel for complex change. In this book I have tried to capture what we know about a new way of understanding and acting to contend with, indeed, create the future. Right now, global change forces are powerful and ubiquitous. As such they have equal chances of resulting in glory or gory. If you want to be a player in shaping the future for the better, nuance is worth mastering.

THE NATURE OF NUANCED LEADERSHIP

In education we are at a particular watershed moment. Conventional schooling is boring at best. We have known this for some time, but it has reached a point where almost everyone knows it is not working—ask a 10-year-old. Educational entrepreneur and philanthropist Ted Dintersmith (2018, p. 148) finds that most education systems in the United States are working diligently "Doing (obsolete) things better": tests upon tests, learning experiences that have little meaning for the student, punitive evaluation, excruciating remedial work, and the like. In the meantime, the gap between high and low performers widens, and even those who do well on tests are not prepared for life. The world is becoming more demanding at the very time that regular schooling is standing still—actually going backwards as fewer and fewer students and teachers buy into what they are being required to do. Many studies in the United States, the Gallup poll included, show that only about a third of students are engaged in school by Grade Ten, and many of these students are there for sports, clubs, and their friends. Even the high performing systems like those in South Korea, Shanghai, and Singapore are finding that an increasing percentage of their students, and the adults who teach them, are stressed out and worse. The power of the status quo to keep on doing what it is already doing—indeed to intensify it—is phenomenal.

At the same time the good news is that small but increasing numbers of schools and some systems are developing education programs and experiences that are personally relevant, connected to valuable individual and collective passion, and explicitly develop individuals as they "help humanity." Both Dintersmith and our own "Deep Learning" work (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018) describe by name hundreds of examples of this new

learning that is occurring in pockets around the world. We will feature some of this work in later chapters. In the meantime, a crisis is brewing, not only in public education, but in society as fundamental global problems mount, whether regarding climate change, refugees, social conflict, mental and physical health, homelessness, extreme alienation, or well-being itself.

I would hypothesize that however well-intentioned political leaders are, those using "obsolete" solutions are what I called earlier "the surfacers." They are going after the obvious—more college-ready graduates, remedial literacy, and performance appraisal—and missing the deeper point: they are failing to mobilize educators who can lead diverse groups seeking to develop a learning agenda to produce self-directed learners prepared for complex life, problem solvers, and team players. By contrast, those up for the job will be "nuancers"—leaders who can get below the surface; leaders who have a knack of prying out the essence of complex change matters; and leaders who can work with individuals and groups in a manner that develops personal meaning and collective identity to learn about and transform the landscape at this particular moment in history.

My main question then is what is there about leaders who seem to experience success time and again? Not leaders who look good at the beginning or are popular for a period of time, but leaders who help develop quality change that *sticks*—that has lasting value beyond the tenure of the leader. In subsequent chapters I will identify and illustrate a small number of key traits of leaders who are successful over and over. Traits or qualities that are not so obvious at first glance but that once uncovered are recognizable. I want the reader to understand these below-the-surface qualities, and perhaps react by thinking: "I kind of knew that, but I now grasp it." Nuance is having a "light bulb" or "aha" moment where something falls into place. When this occurs, it may seem obvious in retrospect, but it feels like—and is—a genuine discovery. That's my goal; you be the judge.

We have talked around nuanced leadership and the critical, growing need for it, but what exactly is it? Certainly, it is leaders who see below the surface, grasp hidden patterns, find new pathways to alter and shape better outcomes, and have a burning desire to make things better for the vast majority of people. Against all odds they believe that they can help the group tackle seemingly insurmountable problems. They have a profound belief in humanity and networks of action that will generate lasting breakthroughs.

So, let me offer a more formal definition that will form the foundation of the case examples that I will provide in the coming chapters:

> **Nuance leaders** have a curiosity about what is possible, openness to other people, sensitivity to context, and a loyalty to a better future. They see below the surface, enabling them to detect patterns and their consequences for the system. They connect people to their own and each other's humanity. They don't lead; they teach. They change people's emotions, not just their minds. They have an instinct for orchestration. They foster sinews of success. They are humble in the face of challenges, determined for the group to be successful, and proud to celebrate success. They end up developing incredibly accountable organizations because the accountability gets built into the culture. Above all, they are courageously and relentlessly committed to changing the system for the betterment of humanity.

Keeping our worries in mind (namely that nuance is not a mechanical enterprise), I have identified three big nuance characteristics of highly effective leaders under complex change scenarios: joint determination, adaptability, and culture-based accountability. I explain them in the next section and then devote a chapter to each one, with concrete examples of what they look like in practice. Nuance is hard work, but it is energizing and immensely satisfying. Our positive future depends on nuance because the solution will be collective and because only nuance is capable of sorting out complex dilemmas under conditions of adversity amid diversity.

THE NUANCED LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

So far, the dominant trends in leadership seem to be either being overwhelmed by the challenges to the point of inertia or spelling out from above what should happen. Both approaches fail—the more things change the more they remain the same. My goal is to identify the main themes of nuanced leadership and make them more accessible. In turn, this should lead to nuanced leaders developing other nuanced leaders to the point that such leadership gets embedded in the culture of the system. Let me give one general hint as

to what this entails: all good things (or bad for that matter) *happen within processes.* This is why we need the habit of da Vinci's detail that I will return to in each chapter. It is time to start "living within the processes of change."

For complex change matters I try to keep things small in number (three or four), mutually exclusive (ideas don't overlap), and comprehensive (they cover the topic). These are tough criteria for nuance; Figure 1.1 is the result. I call this the JAC model: jointly determined, adaptability, and culture-based.

Figure 1.1   Nuanced Leadership: The JAC Model
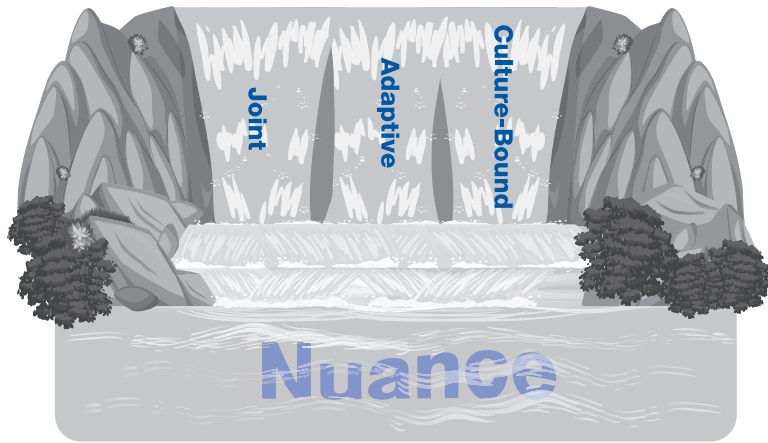
I devote a chapter to each of these powerful factors. We will see that:

- **Jointly determined** change involves developing unity of purpose and action with those in the organization, pursuing and staying the course through continuous interaction.
- Effective focus means that **adaptability** enables the organization to adjust or pivot, to use a modern language equivalent, according to what is being learned.
- **Culture-based accountability** establishes strong mutual commitment and responsibility through trust and interaction.

We have 10 cases across Chapters 2–4 that illustrate these three core concepts of the framework in action. Together the set embeds a self-collective process of effective change. A reminder, though: the three dimensions of nuance operate seamlessly, feeding on, and strengthening

each other, thus becoming a *system*. I will return to this fundamental matter in the final chapter. You don't create a signature dish by making alphabet soup! In the final chapter I will also close the loop by concluding that nuanced leadership is essentially a matter of engaging the world to change the world. You have to *be there* to make a difference.

Over the years of being close to grounded change I have identified what I call sticky phrases. These phrases are those that capture an important change phenomenon with insights that stay with you. Figure 1.2 links the dominant sticky phrase with the corresponding chapter.

Figure 1.2   Core Chapters and Sticky Phrases

Chapter 2	Jointly determined change: Be right at the end of the meeting
Chapter 3	Adaptability: Learn and lead in equal measure
Chapter 4	Culture-based accountability: Trust and interact

The nuanced leader gets below the surface, sees what makes good change tick, learns from others, and influences the nature and outcome of change by being present and engaged. He or she works with others in determining the direction, gets inside adaptation as necessary, is equally comfortable with individuals and groups as they secure natural accountability that is built into the culture of the organization. Nuanced leaders cause the groups to get better, which, in turn, enables those groups as leaders, to become better.

All of a sudden change has become more interesting. We have our work cut out for us! Never ask an Italian *nonna* for her recipe. Neither will you grasp nor can she explain her secret ingredients or touch. Nuance is an earned quality. The premise of this book is that nuanced leaders get deeper, lasting change because they get below the surface and tap into what activates and drives improvement, while the surfacers spin their wheels as they cavort across the surface. Once they get immersed in given change scenarios, nuancers learn their trade quite rapidly because they are in the center of action having committed to learn and solve problems in real time. As such, nuance is about forging integration of effort. Nuancers learn a lot in a short period of time, while surfacers take forever to go nowhere. Time to find your inner Leonardo!