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THE CRISIS OF HUMAN LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF HIGH PERFORMANCE AN ESSAY ON EMPATHY, IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: In times of aggressive targets and accelerated technological advances, many organizations have reduced human beings to an operational element, neglecting their emotional, creative and relational complexity. This theoretical essay proposes a critical reflection on the crisis of contemporary leadership, analyzing how dehumanization in management practices compromises the organizational environment, team engagement and sustainable results. It argues that the recovery of leadership based on self-knowledge, empathy and human development is essential for building healthier and more effective organizations.

Keywords: Humanized leadership; Self-knowledge; People management; Organizational sustainability; Corporate empathy.

INTRODUCTION

The cult of high performance has generated a different type of leadership. At the same time, teams are emerging that match this profile. This dynamic is well illustrated by historical principles:

“If the general is indifferent to the well-being of his army, the soldiers will tire and become discouraged. If he is weak, indecisive and disorganized, the troops will reflect that state.” (*Sun Tzu, The Art of War*)

“As is the leader, so will be the people.” (Traditional Jewish proverb)

The relationship between leader and led is direct: the leader’s behavior, attitude and competence are reflected in his team. This raises a central question for organizations: what kind of leadership are we training and/or hiring?

Organizational goals have often become insatiable objectives. Meeting one goal only paves the way for another, more demanding one. Technology, while facilitating processes, also increases the pressure for productivity. This high-demand, often inhumane

environment is imposed by leaders at various institutional levels.

This scenario is a reflection of technical and functional leadership, disconnected from the human essence. The question then arises: what are the consequences of this dehumanization?

LEADERSHIP IS SICK

The figure of the true leader, the one who inspires, transforms teams and brings out the best in every employee, has become rare. Over the years, leadership has lost its human character and has come to rely excessively on metrics and results. In the name of efficiency, many leaders have neglected empathy and have often fallen ill themselves.

Many leaders are unaware of who they really are. They are disconnected from their identities, talents and weaknesses. They deny their own shortcomings and transfer the rigidity they apply to themselves onto others. This attitude compromises the organizational environment, making it toxic and demotivating, with obvious impacts on results.

The starting point for true leadership is self-knowledge. The leader must first lead himself. Although it sounds cliché, this statement is crucial and often overlooked. The mental health of leaders is fragile and, for fear of appearing vulnerable, many avoid seeking help. This omission has a direct impact on the health of their teams, generating a cycle of collective illness.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 1 billion people lived with mental disorders in 2019. A survey by the QualiBest Institute revealed that 73% of respondents had already experienced emotional symptoms, such as insomnia (40%), tiredness with no apparent cause (34%) and irritability (32%).

A report by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work pointed out that stress, depression and anxiety were the main

occupational health problems in the European Union in 2020. Belgium reported an increase in the negative impacts of work on health; Denmark noted that 33.8% of workers had depressive symptoms; and in Spain, 30% of sick leave was related to work-related stress.

In 2024, a study carried out in Austria indicated that 59% of workers suffered from stress generated by time pressures, high workloads, tasks that require extreme concentration and an imbalance between personal and professional life.

Mental health must be addressed when talking about leadership, as leaders face pressure from both their superiors and subordinates. This intermediate position requires emotional and mental balance.

Burnout syndrome, recognized by the WHO as an occupational disease, is caused by chronic stress at work. Its symptoms include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal fulfillment, as well as irritability, insomnia, headaches, gastrointestinal problems and social isolation.

Toxic environments, lack of recognition, overwork and conflicts of values are factors that expose executives and managers in particular. According to the International Stress Management Association (ISMA-BR), 32% of Brazilian workers suffer from burnout. The WHO estimates that 40% of the world's professionals live under severe occupational stress.

Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace" survey (2023) indicated that 76% of workers reported experiencing burnout symptoms occasionally and 23% frequently. In Brazil, the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) showed that 56% of home office and hybrid professionals during the pandemic reported significant emotional exhaustion.

Productivity is directly related to the emotional health of the leader. Sick teams require more effort and produce less,

overloading the rest of the workforce. The WHO estimates that 12 billion working days are lost every year due to depression and anxiety, generating losses of up to 1 trillion dollars a year to the global economy.

Faced with this, the leader, who is already under pressure for results, faces the challenge of leading sick teams, aggravating their own emotional state. The question then arises: does leading mean imposing productivity at any cost, ignoring individuality and human limits?

The answer is clear: no. We need to recover a more humane form of leadership, which prioritizes caring for people as much as results.

I AM NOT WHAT I DO

Self-knowledge is the first step to preserving a leader's emotional health. Sun Tzu said: "Know your enemy and know yourself; if you have a hundred battles to fight, a hundred times you will be victorious." Lack of clarity about one's own identity is a source of emotional and professional fragility.

Many people define themselves by their role: "I'm an engineer", "I'm an entrepreneur", "I'm a teacher". However, this represents what they do - not who they are. Identity is made up of a set of unique, personal and non-transferable characteristics. Unlike machines, which are replaceable and identical, human beings are unique.

Knowing who you are allows you to recognize weaknesses without shame and to develop complementary relationships. When a leader understands their limitations, they can delegate and build stronger teams. This awareness avoids the impulse to control and the search for acceptance based solely on performance.

Leaders who confuse identity with performance tend to seek validation in results. This attitude makes them vulnerable to failure and unable to lead their teams in times of

crisis. In addition, many permissive leaders avoid corrections for fear of rejection, creating environments of injustice and overload for the most committed members.

The absence of a cohesive identity is associated with depersonalization, derealization and existential crises. Studies show that individuals with a diffuse identity have a 3.5 times greater risk of depression, a 50% greater chance of burnout and 30% more cases of professional disengagement. The loss of authenticity creates emotionally exhausting and meaningless environments.

Self-knowledge strengthens leadership and promotes safe environments. Brené Brown says: "You can't get to courage without walking through vulnerability." A leader who recognizes their vulnerabilities and works on them is able to create a culture of belonging and trust. Leading is about more than hitting targets - it's about inspiring people and transforming lives.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership, although often associated with command and authority, is essentially an exercise in service. To lead is to offer support to the team, becoming the basis for others to achieve their goals. Just as a launch pad supports a rocket, the leader must support and propel their team, even without direct recognition.

Maturity of character is indispensable for this type of leadership. As Phillips Brooks says, "Character may manifest itself in grandiose moments, but it is built in small attitudes." The true leader is forged in the participation of the team, learning from the challenges and shaping their character on a daily basis.

Leading requires ethical decisions, the ability to guide and encourage even in the face of uncertainty. You need to see the potential in others, even when they doubt themselves. Jesus Christ is the greatest example of servant

leadership: in just three years, he prepared his disciples to transform the world. His legacy endures because he led with love, humility and service.

Therefore, to lead is to become invisible so that others can shine. It is to serve as a foundation, to promote growth and to sustain the team with vision and courage.

BORN TO LEAD

Every human being carries within them the potential for leadership. However, this gift manifests itself on different levels, often overlooked due to the excessive emphasis on institutional or business leadership. There are three fundamental spheres of leadership: self-leadership, family leadership and civil leadership.

Self-leadership is the foundation of all the others. Leading oneself involves governing wills, emotions, priorities and convictions. The absence of this foundation compromises the ability to lead in any other dimension. Hugo Grotius said: "Whoever does not know how to govern himself is incapable of governing a family, a city or a nation."

Family leadership is the elementary school of social leadership. The way a household is run shapes conduct in other spheres. Noah Webster reinforces this idea when he says: "Families are the nurseries of good and bad citizens."

Civil leadership, on the other hand, is the extended projection of the previous ones. A society that lacks ethical and conscientious leaders almost always reveals flaws in the formative foundations of these people. When the foundations are weak, the whole structure is at risk.

Therefore, not knowing the levels of leadership is like building on sand. Each of these levels is interconnected and needs to be strengthened with purpose, values and constant practice.

CONCLUSION

We live in an era marked by an emphasis on performance, but lacking in inspiration. Many leaders master tools and strategies, but lose their way in the face of human emotions. They are skilled in processes, but fragile in relationships.

The price of this gap is high. Cold organizations, emotionally absent teams and talents that survive but don't flourish. When leadership loses its human essence, the results become empty and unsustainable.

The idolization of high performance, when detached from human dignity, turns work into a survival camp. Technology speeds up processes, but it also increases anxiety. The

leader becomes an overburdened executor rather than a transforming guide.

In view of this, it is urgent to recover a new vision of leadership - one that integrates purpose, empathy and excellence. A healthy leader inspires, listens, recognizes and develops people. They understand that productivity cannot come at the cost of collective well-being.

The true legacy of leadership is not just in the rising graphs, but in the lives that have been touched, the bonds that have been strengthened and the cultures that have been healed. It's time to build that kind of leadership. That's the kind of leader the world needs now.

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