LEADERSHIP FOR THE SOARING 20s
Balancing Six Countervailing Forces
By Robert Pater

Balancing change with constancy is an essential charge for most leaders. The challenge is generating ongoing improvements while concurrently sustaining the gains they realize.

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The bottom line is that effective leadership is essential for making the right things happen and to keep them happening. This doesn't just apply to a company, it is also important within families, communities, institutions, in peace and other times. Especially in polarizing times.

Each year, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) conducts a global CEO survey. For 2020, its survey of more than 600 global business heads is titled, "Navigating the Rising Tide of Uncertainty." Among other points, it reveals "a record level of pessimism" (PwC, 2020a). Bob Moritz, CEO of PwC, proclaims, "The only certainty we can expect is uncertainty" (PwC, 2020b).

Although Moritz cautions not to "overreact to risks in this survey," the reality is that in such an acknowledged stressful atmosphere many people indeed overreact, gravitating to the extremes to attempt to reach balance, like trying to pull a swaying pendulum to its opposite side in order to settle toward the middle. But this can be time consuming, waste energy and court extreme reactions. Best leaders, on the other hand, are able to calm fears and provide steadiness, reassurance and hope to keep the organizational ship on a safe and true course.

Because of a longstanding recognized thirst for continuous improvement, pointed attention has historically been directed toward discovering and honing leadership strategies and practices that maximize real step-ups. In fact, one of the main points of the PwC survey is that "to upskill or not to upskill is no longer the question." Moritz indicates that "upskilling is always mentioned as desirable by CEOs but most companies haven't done a good job of this. But those companies that do are much more confident about their ability to take control of their own future." The survey explains how organizations will have to grow their own future workforce. Developing higher levels of leadership (as well as personal safety) skills is critical at this time. This is exactly the thrust of our work and of this article.

Not surprisingly, many leadership principles have been counseled for millennia; those based on the essence of human nature still hold true and remain highly useful for leaders to know and practice to this day. For an ancient example, see Lao Tzu's advice for high-level leadership in the *Tao Te Ching* or *Instruction Regarding the Way of Virtue*. Tzu focuses on leaders developing their inner wisdom, patience, clear-eyed perception and calm actions, avoiding those external attributes that were hit-or-miss or actually increased pushback. Similarly, the ancient Greeks, Romans and even Shakespeare all contributed to leadership arts, emphasizing the development of inner knowledge and honing mental resourcefulness (Pater, 2012).

What do many of these approaches have in common? Leaders' ability to clearly perceive changing forces, then act calmly, decisively and most effectively to balance them. That this is founded on leaders' self-honest ability to note their own biases, triggers and personal concerns so that these don't become the tail that unduly wags and diverts the individual or company to fritter away energies or, worse, weaken the organization.

Countervailing Forces Are Always In Play

Mindful and insightful leadership is essential in these times of potential distractions and input barraging us all. Ironically, uncertainty remains a constant as things change in the midst of a new decade of even greater increasing worldwide competition and technological innovation. But one thing is certain for high-level leaders: leadership is never one thing, it is always a mix of countervailing forces. A countervailing force, power or opinion is defined as one that is of equal strength to another one but is its opposite or opposes it.

In nature, whether in the wilderness or in the dynamics of human or organizational nature, there are always yin-yang countervailing forces at play: hot and cold, attraction and repulsion, momentum and friction, centrifugal (away from the center of motion) and centripetal (toward the center).

Whereas lower-level leaders seek to block, fight, overpower or diminish surrounding forces, highest-level leaders aim to redirect and balance them. The latter better understands the underlying nature of organizations and people, and works to maximize others' strengths. This means identifying and then balancing those countervailing forces that abound in organizational and human nature.

As my colleague Ron Bowles says, "For leaders, the key is often to find the balance between control and influence, whether the situation allows for time to build consensus or requires a demand for immediate compliance."

Best leaders are aware of and make use of countervailing forces, finding and carefully balancing them for ultimate effect. In other words, this means maximizing the energy and strength of opposite sides of the same coin, rather than going all-in on one dimension, and not blindly allowing one side to neutralize the other. Not just persuading, but also being receptive to others' ideas. Not only initiating

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but also responding. Not just being a staunch proclaimer of compliance with existing rules but also finding alternative, more effective ways, and even balancing honesty with tact.

Best leaders have the perspective that everything is on a spectrum, just as there are always countervailing forces in nature: heat and cold (really, just a continuum of temperature), attraction and repulsion (the latter might be seen as negative attraction), momentum and friction, growth and entropy (erosion) (for more, see Pater, 2011).

In the same way that the proverbial glass is never just half full or half empty, it is always both (really, in fact, filled to this level), so do wise leaders understand that there can always be too much of even a good thing, that balance is critical for eliciting buy-in from a broad range of people and for sustaining improvements.

For example, have you ever tried to move an unwieldingly large object that is just too big or bulky to pick up? Trying to just muscle it alone can contribute to an array of safety problems, from soft-tissue injuries to pinched fingers to drops onto a foot. The solution can be leapfrogging, or moving just one end at a time, then shifting position to lift the other side. When one end is stationary, it serves as a pivot point that supports position and control, without having to juggle the entire load.

Think of opening a can with a lid that is stuck. Only prying up one side can actually force the opposite side to become more compressed so that you wind up working against yourself. The harder you try to get it open by forcing one side, the more stuck it can become. What works? Loosening one edge a bit, then moving around the rim, first 90°, then 180° and 270° to release the lid. This approach doesn't require an excessive amount of force, just a small amount applied in the right spot and direction.

This is akin to a purely (or mostly) top-down approach to organizational change. Sure, getting senior executives' active support is essential, but without also unsticking mid-managers' resistance (90° from the senior executives) and opening worker acceptance (akin to the side opposite the executives), efforts can become wasted and the lid can become even more jammed. This can then block access to a potential jar of energy, commitment and step change that can be uncapped for fueling company growth and improvement in engagement, safety performance and elsewhere.

Realizing Simultaneous Objectives

Bear in mind that balance is necessary for stability and sustainability, creating an organizational homeostasis (like a thermostat). This is not the same as blindly maintaining the status quo; it means ever monitoring and making small adjustments to keep company safety focus on track. But when seeking step change, it's critical to weight efforts more toward one side of countervailing force sets.

Organizations typically harbor a cauldron of ever-changing forces, especially when it comes to safety. These forces may emanate from outside the company (e.g., competitive pressures to sell, competition to hire best prospects, shareholder expectations, regulators) as well as from within (e.g., internal politics, personal concerns). The key for successful change agents is to note and then to redirect energies within the company, balancing them off when seeking sustainability after processes are humming. In the purview of an adept change agent, one significant countervailing energy pair is stability and mobility. Like many force sets, this works on both physical and strategic levels. On a physical plane, stability is counter to mobility; the more stable someone is (e.g., lying supine/face up on the back), the less they are likely to fall but also the less they are able to move to accomplish work tasks. Here, being too balanced might prevent certain injuries but also goes against the countervailing force set of productivity. Of course, lying in bed (highly stable) can also result in bed sores and other static-related problems.

Contrarily, when a great athlete runs at full gait (highly mobile), s/he can lose stability and fall even from just a nudge on one foot at the right time. In terms of safety, the greater someone's stability, the less they are able to move. And yes, while a too balanced person is extremely unlikely to fall, s/he also won't be able to accomplish many desired tasks.

In the same organizational vein, the more stable a situation, the less mobile and vice versa. The more a company cleaves to the status quo (i.e., continuing to do things the way we've always done them), the less it is able to shift, improve, change or quickly adapt to a threat. Change masters understand that there is value in both maintaining old processes and in trying out or incorporating new ones. They work to reap maximum value from each attribute. It is a matter of knowing how much mobility versus stability is right for a given situation.

Here are six countervailing force sets that I see as critical for next-decade leaders to understand and take into account. Of course, this is an overview; any of these could be significantly expanded. But I invite you to determine whether you are considering and addressing these.

How to make best use of these countervailing force sets? I believe it is critical for each of us to honestly examine our own biases so these don't (in the words of James Taylor) inadvertently sway us "careening in places where I should not let me go." Possible self-examination queries might include: "Do I think in terms of a spectrum of force sets rather than just seeing one side, and not trying to lead from the extreme of one dimension?"; "Have I monitored the effect of these force sets on both extremes within my organization?"; "Have I made assumptions about how these force sets operate in my company?"

Next, aim to maximize the positive aspects of each. For example, balancing the benefits of stability and mobility, adjusting the mix as situations change (like adjusting an equalizer's dials to get the best sound). There's a relevant ancient martial arts maxim: "Be water, not rock; be rock, not water." In other words, consider whether this is the time we need to hold firmer, reaffirm the processes and interventions we've been using long-term or whether it is time for bringing in entirely new approaches? What's the balance? To what degree should we change?

A strategic way to higher-performing safety leadership is to aim to attain simultaneous objectives, or doing one set of actions that accomplishes multiple tasks at the same time. It's like trying to hit two bull's-eyes. This can be accomplished either by shooting two arrows, each at different targets or by lining up the two marks behind one other and then penetrating both with only one arrow.

Balancing Six Countervailing Forces

Balancing these force sets entails moving beyond an either-or mindset to a both-at-the-same-time one. A common leadership danger is overcorrecting, going to an extreme, locking onto one side of a force set, then not be able to take advantage of the strengths of the countervailing force.

It's like when most untrained drivers first begin to skid on ice, they immediately tend to overcorrect by turning the wheel opposite, which can wind up putting the car into a spin. This is similar to those who try to avoid a fall on slippery ground and actually make potential damage worse by stiffening or overleaning rather than taking quick and simple actions that might lessen or even avoid any impact.

1) Overall approach: Safety, productivity and engagement. A triad force set that is highly relevant to every leader, safety professional or no. Again, don't settle for trading off Peter to pay Penny to pay Paul. In this case, three targets with one strongly pulled arrow. How? A good start is to simply ask, How would this proposed decision or action affect safety performance? How would it affect productivity and engagement? Just asking these questions

will direct focus to most efficient, highly leveraged decisions and strategies for maximizing overall organizational strength and health without settling for a strategy that promotes one side at the dear expense of the others (e.g., boosting morale at the expense of a process bottleneck). This means planning and acting to simultaneously attain multiple objectives.

Be sure to influence everyone to whom you have access to change their mindset that safety is not number one or number two. Neither is production or engagement. All of these together are critical for organizational strength.

2) Emphasis for efforts: Intelligence and action. By intelligence, I am alluding to attempts to elicit often-hidden information about what is really going on (as in a nation's intelligence service), not referring to spying on anyone or using "dirty tricks" in any way.

There has been an understandable leadership trend toward learning more about what is going on (see Pater, 2018a). While this is definitely useful, it is important to realize that there will always be a lot hidden from view (e.g., off-work influences, dispersed operations, independently operating workers) and that even were it possible to unearth influences or reasons for actions, this would not necessarily translate into effectively adjusting them.

For example, there is a lot of recent emphasis on attempting to discover the why: why there is lack of buy-in, why an incident occurred, why there is a high degree of distrust, etc. This is useful to a degree but knowing is not the same as doing.

Best leaders have a bias toward action. This doesn't mean going blindly into situations or eschewing getting information in advance; doing so is definitely important. They balance intelligence and action, not being satisfied with becoming mired in analysis paralysis. They understand that gathering information or even planning is not sufficient, and that action is the bottom line, the driver of all results, in the same way that watching or reading about others working out is not enough by itself to improve one's health.

3) Emphasis for resources: Energy and structure. Related to intelligence and action, this is the countervailing decision as to where leaders place efforts. In working with global companies, I have seen how much of organizational safety is geared toward structuring systems, policies and procedures, purchasing, approval or reinforcement. This is indeed critical to ingraining safety within organizations, but when overemphasized, energy is reduced. That is, when too much focus is aimed at repeating the same-old training, messaging and reminders, energy becomes depleted and complacency typically rises (energy and complacency being another countervailing force set). I have often seen an overemphasis on structure being perceived by workers as a lack of concern about them as individuals, which can be highly demotivating and can even result in pushback against appropriately employing said structures.

Energy is critical for initiating, expanding and sustaining improvements. This is a leadership mindset that sets the stage for directing attention, efforts and

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resources. Yet, too much organizational safety is over-loaded toward low-energy or even energy-depleting activities. It is essential that leaders identify, comb out and reduce the amount of energy-sapping proforma or stale requirements within their company.

The highest, most sustaining safety results have come from self-renewing energy, especially with a dispersed workforce or where off-work and lifestyle decisions and actions spill over into the workplace. Much of this can come from a greater emphasis on internalizing the benefits and results from safer decisions and actions.

4) Focus of leadership influence: Internalizing and external. Historically, most safety has been approached externally, from the outside in, as in motivating, persuading, exhorting, pressuring, incenting workers to work safe and to not get injured. But there are many limits to this approach; people become jaded or complacent when they repeatedly hear the same things, especially when incidents do not occur. They can resent and push back on being told or threatened what to do, distant/far-flung/minimally closely supervised workers are difficult to see much less to reach. This tactic has limited effect on off-work influences and actions beyond work-site exposures, and it can be time-consuming or difficult to ongoingly reinforce.

Wise leaders balance external motivation and controls with an internalized approach, where determination and self-renewing or reinforcing comes from within. The emphasis here becomes on helping workers develop the mindset and practical skills needed to become more in control of their own safety, at work and at home. This approach has been proven to energize workers, raise morale and help significantly reduce injuries (Pater, 2018b).

5) Direction for change: Top-down, bottom-up and in-between sideways. Rather than debating the old, "Which is better for improving safety: working top-down by convincing/activating executives or bottom-up by grassroots engagement?" Again, the "correct" strategy is both. Like safety/productivity/engagement, this is another (at least) three-part force set. Include mid-managers, supervisors, bargaining unit leaders and staff leaders in the mix. To simplify this approach, break down top-down and bottom-up influence foci into what I call "scissors leadership," or two blades coming together to cut through a piece of thick cardboard. Note that your strategy here must be customized to the kinds of buy-in and resistance that currently exists in the organization.

6) Focus of programming: Improvement and sustainability. Toward one side of this force set, a sustainability approach seeks to hone and replicate gains from a thrummingly working approach, continuing to reap benefits from what has previously been set into motion. But make sure you are not sustaining oldy-moldy/doesn't-work-any-longer interventions/programs/approaches. Weighted to an extreme, this can shut down a how-might-we-do-this-much-better mindset, that would otherwise seek approaching and ongoing problems in totally different and potentially breakthrough, ways.

Conversely, too much of a front-end-loaded improvement focus results in continually chasing what is new, flavor-of-the-month, where recently shiny balls are dropped in favor of the latest trend. This wastes resources and can smack of leadership desperation to find the magic beans that will instantly and finally solve multicausal, longstanding problems.

Balancing these forces is critical. One proven solution is to harness the powers of discovery and openness to continuous improvement by building ongoing pilot trials into the company's default safety system.

By planning for simultaneous objectives, leaders can make this the decade of "and," where they glean maximum results from time, resources and efforts by strategically eliciting the most benefits from both sides of countervailing forces. At-work incident reduction and at-home safety at the same time. Injury prevention and safety cultural improvements, simultaneously. **PSJ**

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