

The Fault only Partially in our Stars: *Leading with Purpose and Intent*

By Tiffany Missiha

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars/ But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

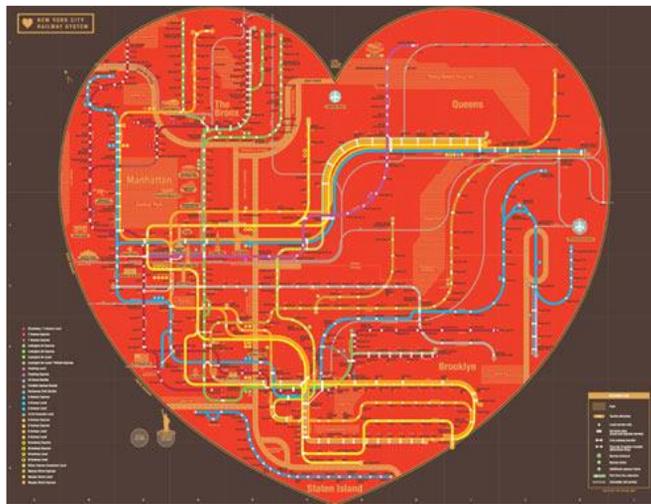
I assume that I’m not the only one who’s been involved in one or many conversations recently about the New Year. Resolutions, goals, plans, aspirations, planning, oh and did I mention plans? One conversation in particular led to an interesting debate between goal planning and the future. It was then that I noticed the stark contrast in the way in which humans are different in how we think about, feel about, and plan for our futures. While some placed more value on doing and making decisions based on what *felt* right at a point in time or stage in life, and as a result sat comfortably in the freedom and uncertainty that the future offered them, others instead couldn’t fathom the idea of not having clear goals, sub-goals, and plans and strategies set to attain them. Two very different approaches, both of which have very different implications on how we live, lead, and deal with change. In the business context, the same is true for how leaders lead and set direction, and how organisations remain agile and resilient during change. I considered what it would be like if both worlds, both ways of being and leading, could co-exist, and if leaders could reap the benefits to better leverage their agility during change.

Creating seeming certainty in the uncertainty

As humans we have an automatic instinct which is to make sense of things; to create meaning, to create shortcuts, and to understand. This has survival value in and of itself. We have evolved to feel safer and more secure with structure, predictability, and stability. Fast forward a few thousand years, increase the complexity of life to the *n*th degree and you have the need to create something meaningful that helps us deal and make sense of this chaos. So we plan, we plan, and we plan. Rather than trusting our instinct and gut, we trust structures and create overly engineered plans to help us create seeming certainty in the uncertainty.

Yet what are we if not a byproduct of all of our decisions, made *at each moment* in which we find ourselves? We are always choosing and the choices we make are highly, highly dependent on where we find ourselves now, and tomorrow, and the day after. Our feelings change, our circumstances change, and we change. We are always moving and to assume that what we may want for ourselves in 2020 will give us fulfilment when we finally get there, is, while safe in the short term, somewhat risky in the long term. What happens when we follow an especially rigid plan, finally reach our goal, and realise that it’s not all it was cracked up to be?

We seem to be living in somewhat of a paradox, then. In business we champion innovation, which inevitably stems from creativity and adaptability, and breeds change, yet we value extensible plans; we value knowing, certainty, and a degree of predictability and stability. Well this is an interesting paradox...



What if the majority of leaders fundamentally shifted the way in which they set goals and create plans?

When things don't go to plan: Intention & Purpose

Rather than assuming we might know what will make us happy and fulfilled in 5 years, what if we gained clarity about *how we want to be* (not *what we want to do*) and then make choices based on that? What if we valued feelings more than thoughts, just for a moment? How would your choices be different?

Plans must not be fixed. Plans ought to be dynamic, and held loosely. In order to adapt, we must be unattached to our plans when we are hit (or gifted?) with blocks in the road. It’s been said time and time again that the best leaders are agile leaders; ones who can adapt in the midst of change. Placing a large amount of trust in a rigid plan is risky. Not only are plans likely to falter or shift, sometimes when we grip strongly onto what we know and trust, we miss the other opportunities that pass us along the way.

It is not that plans are bad- on the contrary, plans can be energising, enable people to focus, create energy and momentum, and offer a base to make more aligned choices. Plans can also be an outward manifestation of an internal aspiration, or purpose, driving a deeper sense of commitment to a goal and confidence in one’s own power and agency to reach or deliver it. They can be the center point and cornerstone of different branches of activity, giving purpose and direction to collaborative attempts within organisations. The key factor is that plans must be *dynamic* and open to the inevitable- variance and change- in order to remain robust and purposeful. And at the point when that same variance veers our plans, we must make purposeful choices at each moment, to exploit and leverage the unexpected. We must continually balance our long-term plan with purposeful momentary choices. This is the point.

In order to thrive when our plans go astray, we need to have set an intention beforehand, and we need to act with purpose. When we live with intent and act with purpose, there is a reason behind everything we do and who we are. We become mindful choosers rather than passive reactors to life.

Getting to know your internal compass

Our internal compass is the part of us that often drives our decisions and actions. It can encompass our values, purpose, core beliefs, and drivers, and is often associated with our feelings and emotions. If we let our internal compass make choices rather than our minds, might we live more human-centered lives? May businesses be led by leaders who are more empathetic, compassionate, and connected? After all we are primal animals with primal instincts, if we let them emerge. We are inherently good and innately want to do good for our people. It simply feels good to be kind; this is a fact. Might leaders be more caring of *their* people? Their tribe, their workplace community... On balance, we need each other to survive, and thrive. I wonder what it would be like if more leaders let their internal compass be their guide, even if just for a moment.

Take Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group, for example. Branson's purpose, or personal mission statement, is this: *"To have fun in [my] journey through life and learn from [my] mistakes"*. He adds that *"In business, know how to be a good leader and always try to bring out the best in people. It's very simple: listen to them, trust in them, believe in them, respect them, and let them have a go!"*. His mission statement gives us a clue into some of his values: Fun and Life-long Learning. Branson's purpose is an outward manifestation of his inner values, which is described more discretely by the behavioural tendencies he names as part of being a 'good leader'.

When leaders operate from their internal compass, there is intention and purpose behind more of what they do, the decisions they make, and therefore the cultures and organisations they gradually create.



What if the majority of leaders fundamentally shifted what they trust? Feelings versus Thoughts.

Trusting our Gut Feel. Well for starters, you probably won't get that horrible feeling where you know deep down that something's not right, or that you aren't aligned to something, or that you've said yes for the wrong reasons, and so on. That horrible feeling where somewhere down the line, hindsight always seemed 20/20 at 'that time where I *just knew* it wasn't right'. Congratulations for meeting your gut. Seriously! Next time maybe try and greet it for a bit longer.

More internal alignment. When what we say and do conflicts with our attitudes and beliefs, we feel discomfort. When we lead with our internal compass and make decisions from this place, we are less likely to feel this discomfort and instead, more likely to have alignment between our actions and beliefs. No, you won't always make the right decisions (after all we live in complex worlds and for every great decision there are likely compromises, sacrifices, troubles and risk to go with that). But you will know that you've decided from a more grounded place that reflects a more accurate you and what you stand for.

Illusion of Control

Control is a funny thing. Senior leaders are constantly struggling with the art of letting go while remaining in control. As humans we are constantly struggling between having a tight grip over the world around us while surrendering to the twists and turns that come our way. While we cannot have full control over how to get from A to Z; from where we are now to where we want to be in 5 years; from our current business performance to our forecasted performance provided that all goes to plan, what we can control is how we respond in every moment. Where we are at point Z, in 5 years, or at year end review is a direct result of the choices we have made at point B, in year 1, and at Q1. Actually, it is a direct reflection of the choices we have made in every moment. In the midst of the uncertainty of business and life, we cannot control the unexpected that steers our original plan. We can, however, adapt and be resilient, and even thrive if we choose, by accepting that plans are best when dynamic, and by choosing to set a clear intention and to make purposeful choices in every moment.

In a funny way, this might be all that we can do. And maybe that's all we really need.

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