

Connective Leadership for an Interdependent and Diverse World

By Jean Lipman-Blumen



John Kenneth Galbraith, the famed 20th century economist, insisted that the distinguishing characteristic of the great leaders he had met was simply their ability to deal with the critical challenges of their time. In the opening days of the 21st century, interdependence and diversity loom as the distinctive challenges leaders, as well as most ordinary folks, must confront. We find ourselves in a world where vastly different groups live and work cheek by jowl, a world in which inclusion is critical and connection is inevitable. This new world calls for extremely different leadership.

While most people probably would agree about the omnipresence of interdependence and diversity, few recognize that they represent distinctly contradictory forces: Interdependence draws us toward collaboration and mutual interests, while diversity pushes us toward the expression of our uniqueness and the pursuit of independent goals. It takes a very special kind of leader to integrate these complex forces threatening to set us against one another, as we jostle to pursue our own interests.

I call these distinctive individuals "Connective Leaders," and I have labeled this historical moment "the Connective Era," a time in which everyone and everything are connected. Consider the World Wide Web, linking us to millions of people around the globe, the organizations in which they work, and the products they create and promote. Or think about the financial crisis in tiny, remote Greece, whose precarious situation threatens the American colossus. This tightly-coupled world calls for leaders who can see the overlap in the agendas of groups blinded by their considerable differences.

How are Connective Leaders Different?

Connective Leaders are genuinely different from leaders who led the world from which we are emerging, a world based on geopolitical alignments, hardened into lumbering, long-term coalitions, such as NATO and the Eastern Bloc. Connective Leaders build

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short-term coalitions to accomplish goals relevant to those parties and then move on to tackle other issues, demanding a different coalition, composed of other members, with different concerns.

Connective Leaders do not ask us to compromise with opponents, recognizing that compromise requires each party to give up some dearly held value. Rather than starting from a sense of loss, they base their integrative efforts on the “positive zones of agreement,” the overlapping strengths of each party. They realize that once a sense of trust and understanding is built, the remaining conflicts can be resolved more readily or more willingly left in that vague, but now far less “charged,” environment of “agreeing to disagree.”

Connective leaders draw their amazing strength and flexibility from an underlying repertoire of goal-oriented behaviors, called “Achieving Styles.” You might think of Achieving Styles as personal implementation strategies. They are simply that set of behaviors individuals have learned to use to achieve their goals through their own and other people’s action. Connective Leaders stay tuned to situational cues and select those Achieving Styles most appropriate for the task at hand.

The Achieving Styles come in “nine flavors” from 1) doing it on your own and measuring your success against your previous performance, to 2) competing to win, to 3) taking charge, to 4) using yourself as an “instrument” to attract and persuade other people to join you, to 5) networking, to 6) entrusting other talented people to take ownership of your goals and fulfill them, to 7) collaborating, to 8) contributing to another’s success, and, finally, to 9) taking pride in others’ success, as the roaring fans of the winning team routinely do. We call the degree to which individuals can readily call upon each of these styles their “Connective Leadership Profile.”

Connective leaders are exquisitely tuned to the demands of the situation. They draw on their own and others’ strengths, easily changing and modifying their strategies, much as a chameleon changes its colors to adapt effectively to its environment. Because their behavior may change from one situation to the next, Connective Leaders know they must demonstrate bedrock integrity, laced with ethical accountability. Then, as they match their behavior to the situational demands, – for example, collaborating in one moment, but moving on to take charge in the next – their followers will be able to handle those behavioral shifts. Their constituents can rely upon the demonstrated integrity and ethics of the Connective Leader.

Now, you might wonder, can we train ourselves to be Connective Leaders? Fortunately, the answer is a resounding, “YES!” Based on almost four decades of research at the Peter Drucker Graduate School of Management, the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and the Pasadena-based Connective Leadership Institute, www.connectiveleadership.com, we not only can measure and train individuals to be Connective Leaders, we can do much more.

We can identify those organizational cultures that promote Connective Leadership

and help those that don't to create Connective Leadership Development Programs that will increase their chances of success in this interdependent and diverse world. Using this research, with an international database, and rigorous instrumentation, we can even identify the Connective Leadership Profile best suited for a particular role or project. Then, we can help match appropriate candidates to the jobs, teams, and innovative projects that will stoke the engines of success.

Interdependence and diversity are here to stay. In fact, they will only increase exponentially. Connective Leadership is the necessary pragmatic, but principled, paradigm we need to adopt to survive and thrive in the Connective Era.

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