Paradox of navigating uncertainty: ancient 'soft stuff' makes us tough

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INTRODUCTION

All leaders are impacted by uncertainty and the accompanying stress. What is often missing is a framework for leaders to cope with and ideally thrive in circumstances beyond our control. Without a framework, uncertainty can cause us to become fearful, disoriented and uprooted. We cling to a life that may no longer be available, and consequently, we may struggle to adapt.

The central thesis of this perspective, which is supported by time-honoured concepts from great thinkers and current empiric evidence,[1] is that humans' ability to navigate uncertainty and stress and leaders' ability to lead through tough challenges is enhanced when their character—their identity—is anchored by what is often considered 'soft stuff'—the seven classic virtues of trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom, temperance and hope. As evidence of the robustness of this thesis, these virtues have been espoused as the way to live by great thinkers over millenia—Aristotle, Plutarch, Heraclitus, Confucius, Lao Tse.[1] Extending the concept that a virtue-based character is key to navigating uncertainty, we propose that our identity informs other important assets that build resilience—our purpose and our relationships. Taken together, these three elements—identity, relationships and purpose—have been espoused as tools to navigate transitions[2] and help leaders lead through the inevitable uncertainty that defines the human journey. We begin by framing the current state of stress in the world—dubbed the 'polycrisis'[3]—and then develop the thesis.

On the one hand, it is curious to think that we need research to prove that a person, team or organisation governed by trust, compassion, courage, justice, wisdom, temperance and hope would have higher levels of engagement despite uncertainty than a dysfunctional person, team or organisation defined by distrust, callousness, cowardice and despair. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that makes the case for virtue as a resilience builder; we offer these empiric observations from various sectors, including healthcare, to complement the age-old wisdom that endorses these virtues.

THE WORLD IS UNCERTAIN AND IN A 'POLYCRISIS.'

For 60 years, the International Monetary Fund has collected data on uncertainty[4] and in 2020, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, recorded its highest level of uncertainty ever. Although this level has since declined by 60% from the peak, it remains 50% above its historic average over the period from 1996 to 2010.

In 2023, the World Economic Forum used the term 'polycrisis' to explain how a cluster of global risks exerts an overall impact that exceeds the sum of its parts.[3] These parts include a global pandemic, worsening climate change, the existential threats conferred by artificial intelligence, the first war in Europe since WWII, eroding democracies and global social unrest.[3]

Because the human stress response is hard-wired as a survival mechanism, we default to caution even when some degree of stability requires change and growth. Carleton[5] and many others have suggested that fear of the unknown is the core fear that humans experience, which is the root of all other fears. While we cannot eliminate fear, we can—through developing virtue-based character—loosen fear's grip on us.

Also, at work, school and home, too few people are getting the character-building knowledge, skills and tools that cultivate excellence in uncertain conditions. This deficit creates the opportunity for leaders to develop organisational culture anchored in the seven classic virtues. Failure to develop resilience can lead to learnt helplessness—the reflex that when something bad happens, we treat it as personal (this stuff always happens to me), permanent (things are never going to get better) and pervasive (everywhere you look, the world is getting worse).[6] Even if personal or societal trends are less than ideal, leaders should avoid learnt helplessness, as it robs us of the agency we need to make things better.

HOW MIGHT WE NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY?

As noted, time-honoured wisdom and investigators from a wide range of fields have studied how humans boost resilience in the face of uncertainty, change and stress.[2 6–8] While their language varies, their key insights converge on the observation that resilience is built by strengthening identity (or character), relationships and purpose and that an identity that is anchored in the seven classic virtues buttresses our ability to navigate uncertainty. Consider some of the supportive evidence. At Parker, a Fortune 250 technology company in which one of the authors serves as a senior leader, leaders completed seminars on the virtues and were then coached for 3 months thereafter to integrate those virtues into operations. Engagement scores increased by 10%–20% year over year despite high levels of uncertainty. Also, virtue development underpins the training of the US military.

Experience at West Point, espoused by Professor Mike Matthews at West Point, has shown that virtue training helps cadets overcome the rigorous challenges of military training.

David Brooks has summarised a body of evidence regarding moral development that shows that we are all capable of learning to restrain selfishness and care about others.[9] We can learn that helping people creates a purpose that offers stability, direction and meaning in the face of adversity. Finally, neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett's research shows that moral conduct makes us predictable to others.[10] When our brains can predict that we will support each other, we replace uncertainty with predictability and build resilience.

When we think of the three pillars of identity, purpose and relationships, it is identity defined by character that has an outsized impact on our relationships and purpose. It is a commitment to being a person of character and practising virtue that governs our purpose and strengthens our relationships. It is virtue that equips us to persevere through uncertainty. Without virtue, we become self-focused and internally fragile.

The Stockdale Paradox is an extraordinary example of practising virtue—especially courage and temperance—in the face of unimaginable uncertainty.[11] "I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus", is what James Stockdale said to himself about 30 s before he was captured when his jet was shot down over Vietnam. Against all odds, he survived 7 years in a prisoner-of-war camp; he was tortured, starved and isolated. As defined by what we now call the Stockdale Paradox, he credits the Stoic Epictetus and Stoicism[12] in general for saving his life. How did he do this? Stoicism is based on the practice of virtue, which taught Stockdale to retain faith that he would prevail, regardless of difficulties and, at the same time, accept the brutal facts of his current reality. Stockdale was able to embrace two conflicting realities—tremendous threat and hope—and still function and survive.

We can all agree that Stockdale's courage and realistic hope to develop resilience is extraordinary, perhaps seeming out of reach for most leaders. Still, leaders must not respond to uncertainty by simply growing thick skin, gritting their teeth or suffering in silence; nor should they try to overcome uncertainty with happy talk. Although not all leaders may be able to reach a Stockdale standard, all leaders can strengthen their ability to find hope and agency amid uncertainty and difficulty. The effort is worth the trouble because hope and agency are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, social support and a sense of purpose. Conversely, the absence of hope and agency is associated with a higher risk of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.[8] Another example from healthcare underscores the importance of leaders' demonstrating hope, compassion and stability in leading through uncertainty. In April 2020, just 1 month after WHO declared the pandemic, the whole world and certainly the world of healthcare was facing extraordinary stress and uncertainty. Healthcare providers were called on to manage a new, dangerous disease about which little was known and for which specific treatment was then unavailable. Similarly, healthcare institutions were facing sudden and profound challenges regarding how to provide care (including procuring personal protective equipment), pivoting to virtual care, retaining personnel and maintaining solvency in the face of tremendous financial stress. At the very time that hospitals were furloughing or laying off employees and in the face of significant financial challenge to his own institution, Dr Tomislav Mihaljevic, CEO of the Cleveland Clinic, committed publicly and to the entire Cleveland Clinic community of caregivers that we would navigate the pandemic together; specifically, no caregiver would be furloughed, laid off or experience a salary cut. This declaration, which epitomised hope and compassion, garnered record engagement among Cleveland Clinic caregivers, such that Press Ganey pulse survey data thereafter showed marked upticks in engagement from an already distinctively high baseline. Leaders' actions to demonstrate hope and compassion helps organisations to navigate uncertainty by unleashing the discretionary effort that drives high performance.[1]

UNDER PRESSURE, WE DEFAULT TO OUR TRAINING

So, how can leaders cultivate an identity that can withstand uncertainty? Archilochus, a Greek poet, wrote that we do not rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training.[13] We can better navigate uncertainty by understanding the relationship between pressure or stress and performance as an inverted U-shaped curve.[14]

In 1908, Robert Yerkes and John Dodson[14] discovered that the relationship between stress and performance is parabolic, that is, that while low stress begets complacency and complacency lessens performance, excess stress similarly undermines performance. There exists an intermediate level of stress—the apex of the parabola—at which performance is maximised.

The critical insight is this. Stress is our response to an event; it is not the event itself. Thus, leaders who are deliberate in their practice can live by conviction, not by circumstance. For example, big-wave surfers need extreme stress to improve performance. They strengthen their ability to perform under pressure by actively seeking challenges. Like Stockdale, big-wave surfers simultaneously hold two ideas in their minds: they acknowledge the risk, and they prepare and practice to improve their odds. They know that an ocean that can manufacture 60–80 ft waves cannot be beat. Still, well-trained big-wave surfers manage what they can control by practising with intentionality, including being able to hold their breath for several minutes, getting physically stronger and selecting and maintaining the best equipment possible. Similarly, Dr Mihaljevic recognised the risk posed by the evolving pandemic and reasoned (rightly) that weathering the prolonged storm posed by the pandemic to the Cleveland Clinic (and every other hospital) would require maximal engagement by Cleveland Clinic caregivers.

Uncertainty is every leader's big wave, imprisonment in North Vietnam, or pandemic. How leaders live and how they perform is enhanced by intentionally cultivating an identity that is grounded in character and the virtues.

CHARACTER IS A PERFORMANCE AMPLIFIER

West Point's Mike Matthews reviewed 100 years of research on performance[15] and showed that ~25% of the variance in academic and job performance is explained by cognitive factors. The remaining 75% of human performance is explained by character, including the commitment to accept challenges. This observation is the basis for embedding virtue training at the military academy. The fundamental paradox that underlies this perspective piece is that leaders can cultivate resilience by embracing and practising the 'soft stuff' of the seven classic virtues. Consider courage and hope. The authors' organisational experience in multiple sectors—healthcare, technology and academia—converge on the observation that a virtue like courage is universally admired in leaders and is vital to their navigating uncertainty. As with all virtues, leaders can develop courage and grow from stress, pressure and adversity. In other words, courage is not born, it is bred. And what about hope? Rebecca Solnit states, 'Hope is the story of uncertainty, of

coming to terms with the risk involved in not knowing what comes next'.[16] Hope is a choice just as despair is a choice. Hope replaces being pollyannish with realistic optimism that accepts what we cannot change and develops optimism to control what we can change. Great physicians who lead their patients through the uncertainty of serious illness can mobilise patients' hope in service of healing; Kube *et al* observed that 'Hope belongs to patients. The role of the physician is to find, acknowledge and connect with appropriate hopes and try to reframe or at least not support contraproductive hope'.[17]

Demonstrating courage and hope in the face of uncertainty and associated fears demands practice. As Will Durant translated Aristotle's insight on character, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit".[18]

In developing the virtues, calibration is needed. When courage is taken to excess, it can lead to recklessness. Alternatively, the absence of courage is cowardice. This is where insights from the Greek Golden Mean are useful.[1] Character involves threading the needle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. Ilia Delio stated, 'Stability lies in change, not in remaining the same'.[7]

Without hope and courage, leaders can become condemned to their circumstances. Solnit states, 'It's tougher to be uncertain than certain. It's tougher to take chances than to be safe. And so, hope is often seen as weakness, because it's vulnerable, but it takes strength to enter into that vulnerability of being open to the possibilities'.[16] Furthermore, neurobiologist Lisa Feldman Barrett's research shows that "we have more control over our reality than we might think. We also have more responsibility for reality than we might realize".[10]

RELATIONSHIPS HELP US NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY

Developing an identity of virtue-based character is shaped by our relationships, by the company we keep, by the culture in which we operate and, importantly, by how we imagine ourselves relating to others. Our relationships can discourage or, alternatively, encourage us to navigate uncertainty. Strong relationships can buffer us against uncertainty.

Considering performance, there is unambiguous evidence that relationships come first, and performance follows—the order matters. For example, Google examined the performance of nearly 200 teams. They learnt that how people treated each other predicted performance more than who was on the team.[19] Similarly, in healthcare, Gittell[20] showed that higher degrees of 'relational coordination—the coordination of work through relationships of shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect'—are tightly associated with enhanced surgical performance and outcomes. In another example from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the moral of the story is that the 'soft qualities' of relationships are the best predictor of a space mission's success. One way that NASA strengthens teamwork is to enrol astronauts in a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) wilderness expedition. The wilderness is unpredictable and strips astronauts of their creature comforts. Experiences in nature tend to test our best selves and reveal or magnify our shortcomings. Shared hardship reveals our character, capabilities and willingness to support the team. When pushed hard, people seek help; it is predictable. It is known as the 'three-day effect', a term coined by river runner Ken Sanders, who noticed a significant shift in group cohesion on the third day of a rafting trip.[21] Either wisdom or discomfort leads people to swallow their pride and seek help to navigate the wilderness, which strengthens teamwork. NASA has learnt that experiences like a wilderness expedition helped inoculate people against fragility, which paradoxically is the result of relying on and supporting one another. The experience of NOLS teaches astronauts that relationships are essential to high-performing teams. As still further evidence of how critical relationships are, Harvard's 85-year study shows that the quality of our relationships determines how well we will live and how long we will live more than any other parameter.[22] A spouse or partner and social relationships account for >75% of explained variance in adult life satisfaction. When we feel safe with teammates, friends and family, we are amazingly resilient. Toughness is cultivated by embracing soft virtues such as trusting in others and having compassion for them. Finally, multiple observational cohort studies in healthcare affirm the strong association between enhanced teamwork in medicine and enhanced clinical outcomes.[23] Examples include lowering the rate of errors among emergency room teams that are formally trained in teamwork versus control groups without teamwork training, lowering surgical mortality among team-trained surgical groups versus control groups without the team training and enhanced diagnostic accuracy in assessing the aetiology of interstitial lung disease and rounded atelectasis when physicians engage in multidisciplinary dialogue with colleagues rather than interpreting images in isolation.[23]

PURPOSE INVITES US TO BE MORE USEFUL

As the third pillar that informs resilience, purpose involves committing our life to something bigger than ourselves, which again is strengthened by an identity of character. Purpose is not limited to lofty goals like curing disease or inspiring world peace. Purpose invites the pragmatic question, "What can I do to be more useful?" Here is an example of purpose applied to teamwork; these are lessons from what are arguably the most elite special forces units on the planet—the US Navy Sea, Air, and Land Teams.[1] Imagine teammates that put another person's success above their individual success. Imagine a team that trusts each other because they know their teammates will unequivocally back each other up. Imagine a team that does not expect perfect teammates or perfect strategies. This is how teams become fast, agile and learn quickly. Of course, these teams develop clear strategies and train to reach their goals. However, these teams assume that uncertainty will occur, so the team expects plans will have to be scrapped or changed. How do elite teams pivot quickly so they can adapt to unforeseen circumstances? They democratise the wisdom of the group rather than deferring to hierarchy or title. In elite teams, leadership is fluid—followers become leaders and leaders become followers. For this to work, teams need to rely on the soft stuff of vulnerability and humility, which are based on the virtues of trust and compassion. Taken together, teamwork involves selfless acts towards a common goal. As with Stockdale, the standards are high, but all teams can improve by deliberately practising the virtues and leaders can encourage the same.

Paradoxically, strengthening relationships through the purpose of giving to others also brings tremendous benefit to the giver. For example, Viktor Frankl's resilience in surviving the worst imaginable horror—the Nazi concentration camps—was ascribed to his unshakable commitment to finding meaning in three ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed, like writing a book about surviving the holocaust, (2) by loving someone and (3) by framing an attitude towards unavoidable suffering.[24]

Edie Eger, another holocaust survivor, and friend of Victor Frankl, cautions us against becoming self-absorbed by asking

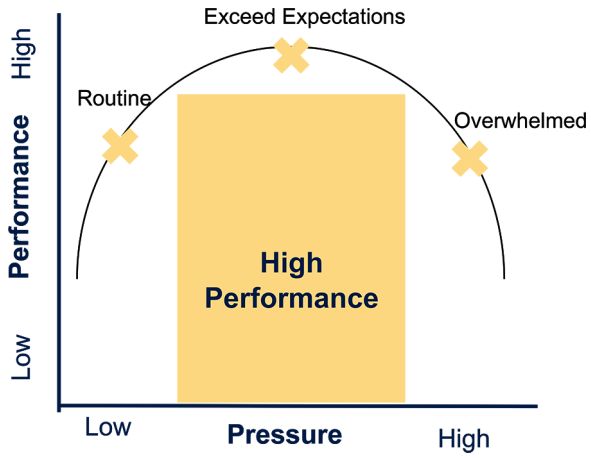

Figure 1 The relationship between pressure and performance.

"Why me?"[25] Her concern is that "Why me?" is the question of a victim. Asking this question takes an external injustice and internalises it, thereby developing a victim identity. Instead, Eger suggests that we ask, 'What's next?' The purpose of asking 'what's next?' is to give us a future—slowly moving us past our injustice to become a survivor. Once we understand that courage is about strength of character, we can see how brave people like Frankl and Eger demonstrate strength and resilient resolve in the face of danger or uncertainty.

SO WHAT DOES THIS TIME OF POLYCRISIS REQUIRE OF LEADERS?

In the current era of polycrisis, leaders must be resilient, which means increasing their capability to perform despite pressure, mistakes and failures. As reviewed, the evidence clearly shows that practising virtue, that is, developing character, cultivates a sturdy identity, strengthens relationships and enables leaders to be more effective under duress. For this reason, virtue is not just a 'nice to have', it is a 'must-have', especially when, not if, leaders must respond to uncertainty and adversity.

In further support of the importance of cultivating virtue, the opposite of hope—catastrophising—leads to paralysis and learned helplessness. Similarly, pollyannish optimism that denies the polycrisis leaves us ill-prepared to deal with reality. The paradox is that we want to avoid the struggle associated with uncertainty and yet it is the very struggle that strengthens our character, relationships and purpose. Recall the relationship between pressure and performance[14] (figure 1). Although a Stockdale standard may be beyond what most of us can imagine, we can develop character through deliberate practice. To offer practical steps to develop virtue-based character, an inventory of strategies follows[1 26]:

- *Identity*—Iris Murdoch stated that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous.[27] Too often, we lead self-centred lives. To enhance virtue through practice, we can reflect on four questions weekly:
  1. Did I reflect on the virtues?
  2. In what acts of compassion was I involved?
  3. In what acts of righting a public wrong was I involved?
  4. Did I learn from my mistakes?
- *Relationships*—it takes a lot for someone to feel that they belong. It is easier to lead a self-centred life staring at our phone than to intentionally connect with the person who is standing next to us. It takes practice to be grateful to help someone feel heard. Listening to others is a powerful way to demonstrate and cultivate humility. Humility does not mean we stop thinking about ourselves, although it does mean we think about ourselves less often and others more often.
- *Purpose*—think about how well we would perform if we were not afraid?
- Cultivate purpose (in ourselves and in others (eg, our children) by asking three questions daily[26]:
  - Were you brave?
  - Were you kind?
  - Did you learn from your mistakes?
- Since 97% of our worries never happen,[28] manage your fear by asking another three questions:
- What is the worst that could happen?
  What is the likelihood that the worst will happen?
  If the worst happened, could I handle it?

Leaders are not in control of uncertainty, the need to adapt to change, the polycrisis or injustice. But—and it is a big 'but'—leaders can be in control of how they react—how they show up in the face of a polycrisis. Through intention and deliberate practice, leaders can live by conviction rather than by circumstance. Of course, even the best among leaders will not practice virtue all the time. In fact, when it comes to virtue, we are climbing a mountain that has no summit. However, when we are ready and committed, virtue is always available to provide extra energy to navigate uncertainty.

In summary, we affirm that leaders can develop resilience to navigate tough conditions and to enhance organisational performance by ascribing to the soft stuff of the time-honoured virtues. In leveraging their character to develop supportive relationships and to galvanise purpose to contribute, leaders can unleash the discretionary effort in their organisations that can enhance the prospect of success in the face of polycrisis. As Plutarch pointed out over 2000 years ago, "What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality".[29]

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