

# The leader's focus

*Not just smart but  
wise – why great  
leaders need to have  
a focus beyond the  
boundaries of their  
organizations*

by Daniel Goleman

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Through the wasteful consumption of natural resources and careless intervention in the earth's ecosystems, humankind is endangering its own long-term future. In an essay for *THE FOCUS*, internationally renowned psychologist and bestseller author Daniel Goleman depicts the importance of a systemic focus on the bigger picture, not least for successful corporate leaders of the future.

I remember the exact moment when Paul Polman entered the pantheon of leaders I admire greatly. We were on a panel together at the Davos World Economic Forum, and Paul, CEO of Unilever, was describing his company's sustainability strategy. It wasn't the company's target to shrink the organization's carbon footprint that hooked me – as laudable as those goals are, these are common ingredients of corporate sustainability strategies. But Paul went on to announce that his company would strive to source raw materials in a new network of 500,000 smallholder farmers throughout the Third World. That was what got me. Around 85 percent of farms worldwide are classed as smallholders. The World Bank names supporting smallholder farming as the single most effective way to stimulate economic development in rural areas. In emerging markets, agriculture supports – directly or indirectly – three out of four of those in the lowest income brackets. Redrawing Unilever's supply chain in this way would leave more money in local farming communities, while boosting their children's health and education. In his thinking, the company's CEO had gone way beyond the normal boundaries of creating value for his own organization. Paul Polman's strategic vision exemplifies what I call an Outer focus, one of three kinds of focus every leader needs today: Outer, Other, and Inner.

### *Emotional intelligence competencies*

Inner and Other focus can be seen in terms of emotional intelligence competencies. The first two of four emotional intelligence domains – self-awareness and self-management – signify a healthy Inner focus. They manifest among outstanding leaders in self-awareness strengths like a realistic self-confidence and an awareness of one's own strengths and limitations. Self-management reveals itself in emotional self-control (like staying calm and clear under high stress or recovering from it quickly), in adaptability, and in staying undistracted in pursuing goals.

In addition, a well-honed self-awareness helps a leader attune to the subtle internal signals that are the brain's way of letting the mind know what our life wisdom says about a decision we are pondering. This mechanism seems to be the avenue by which we sense in the first instant where our guiding values point us. Integrity and a sense of ethics depend on this inner prodding: Only after we get this felt sense can we put our values into words.

A robust Other focus, in the emotional intelligence model, shows up in leaders as an astute empathy, sensing how others think about the world – and so putting things in terms they understand – and resonating with how others feel in the moment. From this clear sense of others come relationship competencies like teamwork and collaboration, persuasion and influence, handling conflicts, and mentoring.

These “people skills” matter for leadership effectiveness over and above purely cognitive abilities like crunching numbers. Claudio Fernandez Araoz, Senior Adviser at Egon Zehnder International, analyzed cases where seemingly outstanding hires for C-level positions ended up being let go. His conclusion: they were hired for their business expertise and intelligence, but fired for lapses in emotional intelligence.

### *Strengths of a third kind*

But in addition to Inner and Other focus, I believe leaders today need strengths in a third kind of focus: Outer. An Outer focus allows a leader to sense the workings of the larger systems that shape an organization's fate – or a community's or society's. This goes beyond sensing coming changes in the winds of the economy, to include, for instance, social, cultural, and environmental forces at play.

When it comes to identifying emerging leaders, even while they are still in school, these three varieties of focus offer clues. Research finds that many of the abilities that mark outstanding leaders begin to emerge early in life, long before they enter the world of work. An astute inner awareness might reveal itself, for instance, in teenagers drawn to doing volunteer work for a cause larger than their own personal concerns, like the environment.

Another manifestation might be in superior self-management in the form of a single-minded focus on goals; researchers call this mental capacity “cognitive control.” Many studies have found that cognitive control, when measured in children, predicts their financial success and health in adulthood more strongly than either their IQ or the wealth of their family of origin.

### *Skillful means*

A well-honed Other awareness takes the form of heightened empathy, the ability to sense how others think and feel. Tuning in to the inner world of other people creates a platform for concern about their problems and pains – in other words, compassion. That social awareness also manifests as the interpersonal adeptness seen in high-performing leaders (or teachers, for that matter) who can connect quickly person-to-person, listen deeply, and influence others for the better. When empathy and social adeptness combine in the service of compassion, it becomes what Tibetans call ‘skillful means,’ effectiveness that does good.

And a precocious Outer focus might emerge in children and teens who are fascinated by natural systems, trying on their own initiative (rather than as a school assignment) to understand the workings of nature. This can also show up as a fascination with the ‘STEM’ topics: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Youngsters who

love learning how things work are expressing a natural openness to systems thinking.

Yet when it comes to an Outer focus – which allows us to monitor the larger systems that shape our organizations, lives, society, and planet – we touch on a domain where the wisdom of one generation needs to be passed on to the next. This has become particularly true in transmitting critical knowledge for our species' survival.

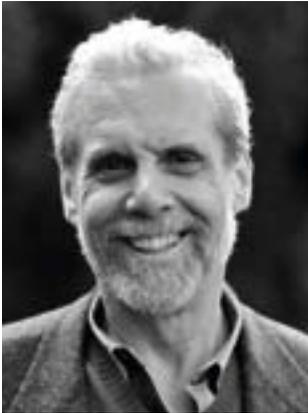
That transmission has broken down in some crucial ways; while native cultures have always been keenly attuned to the workings of their local ecosystem in order to survive, in modern life we can stumble through, oblivious to the ways in which our local decisions can harm not just nearby, but also distant or invisible ecologies.

### *The Anthropocene dilemma*

Perhaps the gravest systemic crisis of our day goes largely unnoticed: the Anthropocene dilemma. We entered the Anthropocene age with the Industrial Revolution. Since then human systems for transportation, energy, construction, industry, and commerce have been steadily decaying the handful of global systems that support life on our planet.

While carbon's role in climate change has been the most visible of these systemic impacts, a huge array of others, from phosphorous-based fertilizer runoff creating dead spots in the world's water, to the buildup in human tissues of toxins like endocrine-disrupters and carcinogens are largely unheralded.

Corporate leaders who demand more transparency about such impacts in their own operations and throughout their supply chain, and who make decisions that lessen their footprints, display outstanding systems awareness. Their Outer focus lets them operate in ways that go beyond the logic of economics alone, and to bring a more complex calculus into play that balances financial return with public welfare.



### *Daniel Goleman*

Daniel Goleman, born in 1946, graduated in clinical psychology, taught at Harvard, was senior editor at *Psychology Today*, and wrote for the *New York Times* on psychology and neurosciences. He made his name with his book *Emotional Intelligence*, which was published in 1995 and became an international bestseller. This was followed in 2006 by *Social Intelligence*, a work that focuses on human relationships and behavior in social contexts. His latest publication is *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*.

The leadership world has paid much attention to cultivating and identifying the abilities that allow an executive to navigate an organization through formulating smart strategies, to execute strategic goals and to grapple with the problems of the day. But we need more leaders with a wider vision, ones who do not settle for conditions as they are, but rather see what they could become, and work to change them.

### *To target the greater good*

Our times demand leaders who are not just smart, but wise. Wise leaders formulate strategies that target the greater good, not just one organization's aims. The more our communities, societies and the world at large choose such leaders, the better off we will be. And the more skilled we become at spotting the potential for such leadership in younger generations – and helping them cultivate those qualities – the more hopeful our future.

I'm inspired by the words of Larry Brilliant, President of the Skoll Global Threats Fund, which seeks to prevent worldwide crises like pandemics and global warming. He says: "Civilizations should be judged not by how they treat people closest to power, but rather how they treat those furthest from power – whether in race, religion, gender, wealth, or class – as well as in time."

In my view, truly great leaders act from aspirations beyond the goals or boundaries of one organization or group, and rather seek to heal humanity as a whole. I

think of Paul Polman, or Bill Gates in the philanthropic phase of his career, or Muhammad Yunus founding the Grameen Bank as exemplars.

These are leaders who grasp the pain of the powerless and of the planet itself, and who seek to repair that damage, whether in ameliorating the diseases that plague the poor, enhancing the viability of local communities, or fighting poverty itself. And the impacts of their strategies will matter far into the future. Wise leaders implicitly follow a dictum that I heard articulated by the Dalai Lama at an MIT conference on global systems. He suggested that when we are making a decision or consider a course of action, we should ask ourselves: Who benefits? Is it just ourselves, or a group? Just one group, or everyone? And just for the present, or also for the future?

These leaders engage people's passion, and foster organizations where work has deeper meaning. Jobs become 'good work,' a powerful combination where people's best skills are engaged fully, their focus fully immersed, and their labor aligned with their values. Such workplaces are potent magnets for the next generation of remarkable leaders.