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Headline: Towards a New Normal

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Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people all around the globe lived in different ways. Those who wished that there was a balance or equilibrium were constantly frustrated to find there was none. We are living in an imperfect world, with imbalance and inequality in many aspects of life, and there could perhaps never be a perfect balance.

The talk about the new normal seems like a way to quell uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. Before the pandemic, we were already living in a world described by experts as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). World leaders and politicians needed a compelling rhetoric to the effect that we will soon settle into a so-called 'new normal.' They theorize that things will never be the same, and we have to contend with new realities as they unfold. To the great unwashed, this sounds like hope. To those at the top of the totem pole, it is about greater opportunities.

Change drivers

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was already changing. Change was being driven by technology, information, and people themselves. Technology has changed the world of work and leisure. Information has doubled faster than every two years. An online weekend edition of today's newspaper has more information than a person in the 17th century can find about the world. People themselves are the major change drivers, as they cause the change – consumers demand more, audiences expect more, employers want more efficiency, businessmen want more profit, and constituents demand more basic services. If these behaviors are normal in today's environment, will these behaviors change in the new normal?

The change drivers are constantly changing not only the rules for many aspects of life, but also life itself. Experts have also agreed that there are megatrends that impact on what could constitute a new normal in the world of work. These changes are reshaping the future of work: (a) path of economic globalization, (b) shifting demographic patterns, (c) pace of technological advancements, (d) shortage of skills, and (e) changing climate conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not a change driver. It is a change accelerator.

New normal vs. reality

Persistent discussion about the new normal somehow helps bring some semblance of order to the disruptions and turbulence that we are now experiencing. Let us not confuse our concept of the new normal as the current situation, or believe that a new status quo is in the offing, or allow our concept of an ideal future situation to window dress the present realities. One reality is clear – the current normal and the 'pre-COVID-19 normal' did not work well for many people in the world.

When people talk or write about the new normal, the audience or readers often believe that the current situation is the normal (or regular). If this is so, what is normal or regular with living in fear of being infected by the virus, or with mass isolation, despair, or depression? Is this morbid reality the new standard today and tomorrow?

Perhaps, the concept of a new normal should reinforce our understanding that the world is radically changing. It is normal to admit that things are not normal, and that we are not comfortable with what's happening. What is worrisome is that the so-called new normal could in fact be a new reality to which many people around the globe will not have access.

Physical distancing served well those who have the means to seclude themselves without going hungry. Can you imagine what the estimated 100 million homeless people worldwide did to comply with the stay-at-home orders during the quarantine period?

There is much talk that the new normal will be about virtual engagement. Today, half the world remains offline. It is estimated that 87% of individuals using the Internet are in the developed world, while 19% are in the least developed countries.

Expectations

In the new normal, leaders must defer to expertise. Decisions should be made by those who know best, not by those with the highest ranks. Decisions must be made on the basis of facts and data. Imposing lockdowns, or relaxing quarantine rules, must be based on real and real-time data, as decisions have great socio-economic consequences.

Shotgun approach is not effective, as there are unique peculiarities and realities among diverse stakeholders. Across-the-board dole outs are often ineffective, too. In some countries, support is usually given to institutions that cater to the needs of certain sectors. In poverty-stricken countries, government provide micro-credit support to women borrowers who do not have access to mainstream financial institutions but who can help spur economic activity in their own communities as they attempt to keep body and soul together for their families. Forget the acronym for the projects, but let national and local leaders collaborate to develop differentiated solutions that can address unique needs of communities.

Instead of presuming what a 'new normal' is, leaders must continually seek to understand the needs of their constituents and develop insights that are borne by specific data. I hope leaders will not wake up one day and announce that there is now a new normal. Let us not forget history, but build on it.

Let us instead develop a new paradigm in leadership, and not force upon the people what we envision as the new normal, especially if we have not walked in their shoes. Let's not impose online shopping as the norm; for many people don't have the gadget to go online nor the purchasing power to shop. Often, where it's at for the leaders, isn't where it's at for the led.

After COVID-19, people will look forward to an improved world, where the rich and the poor, the leaders and the governed, can truly work together towards mutually beneficial ends. There should be no excuses anymore.

On January 17, 2017, Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala said, "Ensuring that our companies can contribute to societal growth, I believe, is both a moral and practical imperative. This is not mere altruism; rather, it is a deliberate strategy. Businesses cannot survive in societies where inequities thrive; in markets failing markets; and where the environment is socially and physically degraded. Tremendous value can be realized when we strive to build more inclusive businesses – not only can companies harness innovation and creativity in going beyond traditional models, we also help to empower the markets that have sustained our business."

While some people look at the new normal as a destination, it looks more to me like the journey.

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