

Breakthrough Leadership:

Believe, Belong, Contribute, & Transcend

Wayne Baker

University of Michigan
Business School and

Humax Corporation

Abstract

In these extraordinary times, leaders have an opportunity to become breakthrough leaders. This essay explores the new opportunities and offers some advice on how to make a practical impact in these trying times.

Breakthrough Leaders

Breakthrough leaders seize extraordinary moments to explore a world of new possibilities for themselves, for their organizations, for society.

People need to believe

The primary motivation in life is the search for meaning and purpose. Humans have a *will to meaning*.¹ Human beings, says Charlotte Bühler, live "with intentionality, which means living with purpose. The purpose is to give meaning to life..."² We cannot live without beliefs.

"Existence falters unless there is 'a strong idea,' as Freud put it, or a strong ideal to hold on to."

Viktor Frankl

"The man [sic] who regards his life as meaningless is not merely unhappy but hardly fit for life."

Albert Einstein

People need to belong

The need to belong is a potent human force that finds expression in personal relationships, work relationships, community involvement, participation in voluntary associations, national pride, patriotism, tribal loyalties, and religious allegiances. "Social needs" are powerful motivators—needs "for belonging, for association, for acceptance by one's fellows, for giving and receiving friendship and love."³ The need to belong is hard-wired. Indeed, the human brain has a specialized organic ability to perceive social events and human interactions.⁴ Belonging has measurable positive effects on subjective well-being, mental and physical health, and the body's biochemistry.

People need to contribute

The reciprocity principle—the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to repay—is universal. It is a principal component of all moral codes. The principle is so fundamental that it *defines* humanity. The need to contribute to others and to accept contributions from others is hard-wired into us as a species.

"We are human because our ancestors learned to share their food and their skills in an honored network of obligation."

Richard Leakey

People seek transcendence

Why do bad (or good) things happen? The need for answers may be especially acute in the face of disaster, but transcendence above the trials and travails of life is an

eternal and universal quest. Every culture grapples with the big questions: Why are we here? Where do we come from? Where are we going? The quest for transcendence takes many forms—science, religion, spirituality, philosophy, space exploration, devotion to callings and careers, the inner journey of self-realization, etc. Transcendence is possible in *any* circumstances. Victims of calamities, disasters, or life-threatening events transcend the suffering and sorrow of their experiences by construing meaning in them, using their experiences to enrich their lives and the lives of others.⁵ With a higher purpose in life, a person can survive and rise above almost anything.

"He [sic] who has a why to live for can bear almost any how"

Nietzsche

Leaders and institutions (organizations, governments, family, religion, etc.) facilitate or deny the human needs to believe, belong, contribute, and seek transcendence.

Leaders and institutions facilitate by creating the space, opportunity, and resources for the expression of belief, belonging, contribution, and transcendence; they deny these by limiting, suppressing, or opposing their expression.

Expression of Human Needs

Breakthrough leadership is critical for the expression of the human needs for believing, belonging, contributing, and transcending—especially in trying times.

Extraordinary events

Positive or negative—are temporary openings for breakthroughs in personal growth, organizational development, and human progress.