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LIGHTS - Leadership

Europe in pursuit of a vision: the urgent need for transformational leadership

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Abstract

This article introducing the interview with Jean-Pierre Raffarin addresses the issue of the transformational leadership of the European Union in a world in crisis. With complexity as one of the key features of its identity, the European Union is situated midway between the American and Chinese approaches to leadership. The distinctive characteristic of the EU is its diversity, which is both an asset and an obstacle when it comes to defining a strategic, compelling vision that serves to inspire all its citizens. What are Europe's priorities at the present moment? To govern, work towards compromise and promote transactional leadership grounded in verified logic rather than convey a transformative vision of its present. And yet, it is this vision of the future, when it is shared, that plays a role in creating the transformational leadership that will prepare the ground for Europe to have a lasting impact on the world stage. How can this vision be created? How can all the stakeholders in the European Union have joint ownership of it? What direction should it take? These are the questions that this article and the interview with Jean-Pierre Raffarin try to answer.

Keywords: European Union, complexity, polyculture, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, vision

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Our world is in crisis; you could even say it is broken (da Empoli, 2024). The environmental emergency, war, the social divide and fears about the boom in AI (S. Altman, 2023) are just some of the “giga threats” (Rubini, 2022) facing us today. These threats are common to humanity and, as Edgar Morin (1987) describes in *Penser l'Europe*, they are complex and diffuse, spawning strategies based on self-imposed isolation and division.

Never before in modern history has the need for international cooperation been so pressing, since these collective threats do not respect national borders or continents. Climate change concerns everyone living on our planet, just as the dreadful prospect of unregulated AI (H. Micheron, 2024) concerns everyone living on our planet.

Given this urgency, what is Europe doing and what is its role in the global arena?

Located geographically between the US and China, the EU upholds this “in-between” position not just in its political and social practices but also in its style of leadership. This champions a more complex approach than is the case for the US, and more direct than for China.

The European Union is a unique structure, one of a kind, a phoenix arising from the shared desire for peace. When the EU was created, this desire transcended the divisions of the national communities that lie behind its “polyculture”. It is this polyculture that makes Europe so unique and rich, but which is also its greatest problem for developing a joint vision. This is what Morin (1987) calls the “paradoxical Gordian knot of European identity”. It is an identity that has emerged from division and conflict, both a blessing for Europe but also a curse, since the Union’s nation-states are resistant to “any higher authority that tries to subordinate them”.

There emerges from this complexity a culture of constant negotiation, a determination to regulate and a never-ending search for compromise that is part of Europe's DNA – and which can on occasion slow down the decision-making process. It follows that describing Europe in all its complexity is not a difficult task, but can we describe what its leadership is like? Does it bring its nation-states together? Does it express its culture of compromise? Is it grounded in common values or a shared vision? Does it have a global reach – what kind of reach?

From transactional leadership to vision-based transformational leadership

Leadership is an influence process whereby an individual has the ability to guide a group of other individuals to achieve a common goal. For maximum effectiveness in pursuit of this goal, a well-known theory identifies two leadership styles that are very similar yet radically different: transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985).

Transactional leadership is based on a process of rationalization and exchange between the leader and his or her colleagues, who work painstakingly towards their goals because they will be rewarded at the end. Transactional leadership, it follows, is a rational procedure

between interdependent agents whose action is based, with some rare exceptions, on adhering to rules. With this model, the purpose of the action is of little importance except for the promised reward and the fulfillment of one's personal, often material, goals. The two parties – the leader and the group – are linked by a trust that is rational and based on potential punishment if the rules are not followed and, when the opposite is true, reward (Lewicki, 2006).

Although transformational leadership is similar to the transactional style in terms of the importance accorded to collective action, its goal is quite the opposite: to transform the group by internalizing the intended objective. The underlying idea is that the purpose is more important than the rules. In this context, the transformational leader galvanizes his or her colleagues through his or her acknowledged legitimacy and vision (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). This leader transforms their attitudes on a long-term basis, infusing a motivation that transcends simple respect for the rules. This is achieved by means of an ambitious, stimulating and higher goal together with due consideration for each colleague as an individual.

If we apply this frame of reference to European leadership, we soon realize that the structure of the EU is predisposed to transactional rather than transformational leadership.

Europe is complex and diverse, built on a set of rules and a culture of compromise. It views its nation-states as rational agents that know the rules to follow, rules that they have helped formulate during sometimes lengthy and complicated negotiations. However, this rationality-based leadership that unites the nation-states cannot deliver a common identity, a European desire-to-live and desire-to-be (Morin, 1987), that would transform their attitudes towards the challenges facing the world, and which would lead them to rise above their temptations to withdraw into nationalist ideas of identity and take up the cause of Europe.

A recent study by Dupont & Oberthür (2016) supports this observation, highlighting the difficulty Europe has in defining and delivering a common vision. The two researchers analyzed how European leadership has shifted in terms of international climate change regulations (COP 21). The authors reached the conclusion that, in spite of the European Council's determination to exercise transformational leadership, this approach was compromised by the difficulties nation-states have transcending their differences and reaching agreement. Is it because the perceived threat is of minor importance compared to national issues? Or because the promised reward matters less than the fear of regulations that are excessively restrictive?

Be that as it may, this raises the question about our future, this shared destiny that will result in a European desire-to-live and desire-to-be that will be the lifeblood of Europe and its ethos based on humanist values.

European leadership can only be transformational and long-lasting for it to exist. To achieve this, we will need to identify a vision that will galvanize Europe's members to transform their societies (Godelier, 2019), and will help them tackle today's global challenges.

This vision will develop out of a common emergency, such as climate change, a common destiny that is recognized as such. It will not be the result of regulation or negotiation even though its translation into concrete actions will have to factor in everyone's culture and specific local conditions. Glossing over our differences will not be an option. Quite the opposite, in fact: we will have to accept the individual symbolism and truth of each of the nation-states so that Europe's leadership goes further than a simple statement of intent.

As you will have realized, amidst the current global turmoil, our European leaders are duty bound to set aside their distinctive identities and national preferences in favor of a European, federal and transformational leadership based on a distinctive priority vision. This will be the only way to lend weight and meaning to Europe's actions and build the trust and support of all its stakeholders.

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