

# Reflections from great leaders

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As leadership trainers we are constantly reflecting on what successful people are doing and how they are doing it. One of McKinsey & Co's most read articles in recent times is "Lessons from the generals: Decisive action amid the chaos of crisis". A quick Google search for *Lessons from the generals* found 21 million references!!! These included articles from prestigious universities, global consultants, research think tanks and an untold number of books.

However, we explore the reflections from two practice leaders – Alan Jope (Unilever CEO) and Major General Mick Slater (Head of Qld Flood Reconstruction) and two thought leaders (Daniel Goleman and Simon Sinek).

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## Alan Jope

Jope's entire 35-year career has been with Unilever (in today's world a rarity for leaders). Joining in 1985 as a graduate marketing trainee, he became CEO in January 2019.

His academic career is an honours commerce degree from the University of Edinburgh and completion of Harvard Business School's Executive Management Program.

Leading a global organisation with around 150,000 people (of whom some 50% are office workers) is a challenge in normal times and Covid-19 obviously increases that challenge. As Jope says "the impact on production, consumption and generation of profit is significant". Whilst there is an upturn in demand for some products, Jope said "the overall impact is not good news". In particular, he highlights what he believes is yet to happen in third world countries where residents have no financial safety net. His focus has been ensuring the here and now is properly dealt with to position Unilever for the future.

Jope has said that he has drawn on the corporate knowledge of Unilever. They are he says, an organisation quite familiar in dealing with crisis: be it from the economic crises they regularly experience in Latin America to managing social, political and war driven crises in the Middle East.

In March this year, Jope developed four guiding strategies: look after people; look after supply; look after demand; look after cash and two promises: job security and business partner support.



# The Right Mind

**Strategy one - People.** These were:

1. 100% of office staff to work from home;
2. Factories to operate in "Fort Knox mode" to prevent the spread of infection;
3. Sales teams are ordered to contact customers virtually; and
4. Acknowledgement. Jope is "amazed and proud" of the adaptability of his people in such things as turning around a factory in 3-days to produce hand sanitizers, partnering with Formulae 1 to develop new ventilators and so on.

**Strategy two - Production.** Jope worked closely with in-country authorities to ensure vital supplies and with their suppliers to ensure strict standards were enforced. One of the biggest challenges was ensuring a consistent supply of transport drivers.

**Strategy three - Consumers.** Tracking customer buying patterns was critical to ensure the supply chain was best informed to respond. Whilst some products such as soaps have had increased demand, restaurant and leisure foodstuffs have had a large reduction. The panic buying and hoarding is largely an American (and Australian!) phenomenon which Jope attributes to large houses and a bigger appetite for credit card debt. He is not seeing it in the UK or Western Europe. Tracking global differences in consumer behaviour is important for Unilever with 60% of their sales generated from the developing world. Jope is not seeing these trends in Latin America, Asia or the Middle East.

**Strategy four - Cash.** Unilever is in decent shape. It's debt is moderate, at less than two times EBITDA. It notched up €52bn (\$58bn) in sales last year. Most important at a time of a corporate cash crunch, it had €6.1bn in free cashflow.

**Promise one - Job security.** Unilever will maintain pay levels for up to three months for all who work for it either directly or, like cleaning and catering staff, through contractors.

**Promise two - Stakeholder support.** Unilever gave cash back to customers. They unlocked €500m of working capital to provide cashflow relief to small suppliers and offering credit to small retailers that rely on Unilever.

**Philanthropy.** Having a reasonable balance sheet, Unilever stepped up by donating €100m of product to non-profit organisations, hospitals and other service organisations.



## Major General Mick Slater

During 37 years of army life his operational commands included a stint as a staff officer in the United States 3rd Army Headquarters in Kuwait on Operation Pollard. He commanded and co-ordinated the International Stabilisation Force in East Timor, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Slater has augmented his army career with continuous personal development. He is a graduate of the United States Army War College, the Australian Joint Services Staff College, the Army Staff College Queenscliff and University of Southern Queensland. He holds master's degrees in Strategic Studies and Business Administration.



## The Right Mind

In 2011, he was appointed by then Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh to lead the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, responsible for rebuilding Queensland's infrastructure and communities after the devastating floods and Tropical Cyclone Yasi.

It was during this latter role I became aware of Slater and was very impressed with his style of leadership. This led me to pay attention to every interview and public address he gave over this period. My key take-homes from Slater's style of leadership attributes are:

**No 1. Listen.** As he said in one interview. "We've got to listen, listen, listen to understand what their needs are in different areas".

**No 2. Clear priority areas.** He consistently repeated his five-priority areas: social and support services, the economy, environment, buildings, and roads and transport.

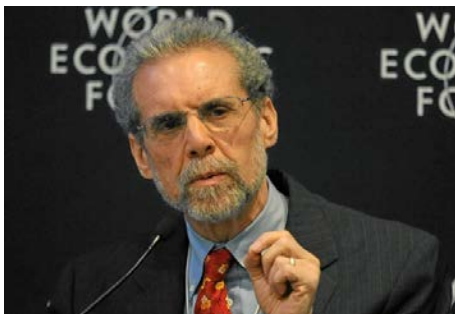
This was brought home to me clearly listening to a radio interview during one of Slater's trips to review the devastation caused by cyclone Yasi in Mission Beach. The reporter walking beside Slater with the wind still howling in background had a conversation that went as follows.

**Reporter** (after some preliminaries). The people of Mission Beach have lost all contact with family and relatives due to the mobile tower being out of action. Just being able to make contact would reduce a lot of anxiety on all sides. Would you be able to give some indication of the timeline when they might be restored?

**Slater.** Mobile towers and communication are very important. People first (a mantra repeated nightly). Our first priority is everyone is safe. Essential services are next – power and water back on to the community. Mobile towers are important, and we will get them done.

**No 3. Humility.** "I have been fortunate throughout 30-odd years in the military to see leadership in various forms. Leadership is not something that comes as part of the appointment – as in Mick Slater, general in the army, therefore leader. Leadership is about mobilising their imagination."

**No 4. Motivation.** It's about motivating people, not fooling them, not trickery, but speaking honestly with them... showing them the art of the possible. "It's about showing them what can be achieved, not by you the leader, but by the group that you are part of."



### Daniel Goleman

I feel privileged to have seen Daniel in person after having read his books and watched many video presentations by this man.

Goleman did his undergraduate degree in psychology and went on to complete a PhD in psychology at Harvard.

After a period of post-doctoral work and lecturing he became a writer at Psychology Today. Recruited by *The New York Times* as a science journalist he reported on the brain and behavioural sciences for many years. He came to global fame with his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence* selling more than 5,000,000 copies.



## The Right Mind

Goleman brings us back to ground. He emphasises - with strong scientific support - how self-limiting we become, if we lack the skill and discipline to remain in what he calls the brains "executive centre" and how it impacts on our thinking. A crisis, any crisis, will fire up the emotional centre and so a tension is created.

So, what happens? We experience a threat that sets off the amygdala and it takes over the executive centre (the prefrontal cortex). It becomes fixated on the problem resulting in a reduced capacity for lateral thinking or the capacity to generate agile solutions.

Sadly, if a senior team are all operating from the amygdala, this in turn, permeates the organisation resulting in reactive, defensive behaviours and a downward spiral.

As a psychologist, Goleman provides simple yet effective steps to manage this. The steps are:

1. **Self-awareness.** Catch yourself in this state. I am constantly amazed at the number of times I have seen organisations reacting emotionally to situations and what I call "**doing busy**". It becomes a constant state and they are totally unaware of it. Goleman often refers to this as 'Going to the Balcony' (a term coined by Fisher and Ury in the global best-selling negotiation book, *Getting to Yes*). Another term is Third Person or putting yourself in the helicopter.
2. **Name your state.** I am angry, frustrated, anxious, etc. Naming may seem an unnecessary step, however it has been used for thousands of years. The Buddhist Monks incorporate it into Meditation and more recently work at the University of California in Los Angeles has proven the impact of this step.
3. **Actions.** Each of us will have a different way of dealing with this, including amongst others, movement, music and third-party support. For any people interested, work being done by Dr Peta Stapleton at Bond University shows the impact of an Emotional Freedom Technique called Tapping, which works on brain waves and the ability to move from the Emotional Centre to the Executive Centre.



### Simon Sinek

Many of you will be familiar with this image of Simon, which is the start of his TED.com presentation, "*How great leaders inspire action*"; a presentation that is TED's third highest viewed video (in excess of 50 million views).

As an ethnographer, Sinek became fascinated by the people and organisations that make the greatest and longest lasting impact in the world. Over the years, he has discovered some remarkable patterns about how they think, act and communicate.

Simon studied law at London's City University, however switched to go into advertising. He received a BA in cultural anthropology from Brandeis University. His graduate career commenced with two of New York's best-known advertising agencies: Euro RSCG (now Havas Worldwide) and Ogilvy & Mather, before launching his own business, Sinek Partners.



## The Right Mind

Simon has presented some absolutely fantastic ideas in a very practical way and, if you have not seen any of them, then please do. Sinek has been coaching many leaders in the US and presenting virtual talks to global audiences.

With respect to the current crisis, he confronts many people by starting with the fact that crisis is not new. Throughout the ages, organisations and industries have been subjected to deep crises. The taxi industry being usurped by Uber, political interference in the live cattle industry for example, and we could go on. This one is more shocking and more global. Sinek however, suggests the way leaders and their organisations handle them is surprising similar.

His fundamental premise is the mental shift of leaders:

FROM Survival and a finite mindset (the way most react)  
...how are we going to get through this?

Emotional Centre

TO Reinvention and infinite mindset  
...how are we going to change to get through this?

Executive Centre

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## Summary

My take homes are:

1. In times of crisis be calm and considered;
2. Show you care for your people. Listen deeply;
3. Generate clarity on where you are going. You and your team need a clear strategy with 3-4 maximum planks.

Whilst being difficult for many of us, these times also create the opportunity for new learning. The challenge to us all is to observe and reflect on the different approaches and styles that will be evident.

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