Constant change: the leaders’ challenge

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Our basic assumptions about almost everything in our world are rapidly changing. The scope, scale and speed of change are each equally mind-boggling.

Enormous shifts in the simple functions of everyday life are accompanied by equally gigantic movements on the world political, economic, environmental and demographic stage. The late 20th century, for example, saw the end of North American and European dominance of global politics and economics. New economic and political powers, including China, India and Brazil, are emerging as super players of the future, connected by the internet and sophisticated logistics to a world that is effectively shrinking.

It doesn’t end there. As Jeffrey D Sachs points out in his stunning new book, Common Wealth, changes in the next few years ‘will be even deeper than a rebalancing of economics and politics’ around the world. As he says, “The challenges of sustainable development – protecting the environment, stabilising the world’s population, narrowing the gaps of rich and poor and ending extreme poverty – will take centre stage.”

Then consider the ramifications on everyday life of the technological breakthroughs and enhancements that challenge the way that we interact in our world, our communities, our workplaces and in our homes. And consider the implications of the social challenges facing us as traditional communities focused upon church and family diminish and new virtual communities, not reliant upon direct social connection, evolve on the web.

The rules of just about every game in town are being rewritten on a daily basis. And when the rules are constantly changing, it takes an astute captain to ensure the team is up with the play, knows the rules and can deliver on the day. And there is a need for many captains. There has never been a time when the need for competent leaders who understand their role and the nature of the arena in which they are playing, has been so great. Sadly, the demand is not being met with supply.

Leadership is not simply a skill set. Leadership is about empathy, understanding and, yes, ‘emotional resonance’ of the type identified and articulated by emotional intelligence writer Daniel Goleman. But most of all, in today’s world, leadership is about comprehending what is going on around us. It is about evaluating and interpreting the shifts, rips and tidal impacts of change. It is about conversation and inquiry and encouraging creative minds to envision and create opportunities. It is about optimism and energy and harnessing the minds of many rather than the few.

One of the first to articulate a model of leadership that could address the broad needs of a community was the late John Gardner, an American business and public sector leader and thinker. He believed that citizens have the opportunity to be active but not all respond. He called those that do the ‘responsibles’. They operate in different sectors of the community and the nation and the world – in corporates, governments, ethnic groups, special interest organisations and local communities. Their challenge is to find a way to connect, to communicate and to learn from each other.

John Rost, a professor at the University of San Diego, describes the “industrial thinking” of the last century focused on management, goal achievements, self-interest and individualism. By contrast, he proposes emerging values for the new century that are very different, including: collaboration, common good, global concern, diversity and pluralism in structures and participation, client orientation, civic virtues, freedom of expression and critical dialogue.

Our challenge in New Zealand is to recognise and embrace this paradigm shift – and to ensure that we have leaders who are able to engage with their communities at all levels, who can harness collective wisdom, who can assist to articulate a positive vision (leadership is not a negative trait), and who can ensure that we have the conversations, and through these the understanding that we have to adapt to a changing world. We also need stakeholders, “followers” and the community at large to engage in that intelligent, informed and considered conversation – for leadership is not about others, it is about all of us.