

BOB JOHANSEN/FRED

Playing the wisdom game in an age of disruption and anxiety

By Bill Taylor

Two books arrived on my doorstep on the same day recently: *Fascism: A Warning* by Madeleine Albright and *The New Leadership Literacies* by Bob Johansen. In very different ways, both address the question of how to lead hopefully and well in the midst of global fear and anxiety.

Madeleine Albright fears that we are becoming disconnected from the ideals that have long inspired and united us. “It doesn’t take too much imagination to conceive of circumstances – another major recession, a corruption scandal, racial unrest, more terror incidents, assassinations, a series of natural disasters, an overnight plunge into unexpected war – that might cause a split too wide for our constitution, democracy’s needle and thread, to mend.”

In his book, Johansen says that when you look back from the future, the long-term view is more hopeful. “I believe that the next ten years will be twisted and splintered - the most turbulent years in all of our lifetimes – and the most hopeful, if we play it right. Hope will be the key variable.”

I spoke to Bob Johansen and his research assistant Gabe Cervantes on a digital video link between London and the Institute for the Future in Silicon Valley. Both will present a keynote session at FRED’s Forum in Chicago in October.

They say we are living through several big global threats that are different.

- Climate disruption – “especially given the fact that many world leaders are not addressing it”.
- The rich-poor gap: “It appears to be growing and it’s more visible. Many people in the world have zero assets; even worse, debt.”
- The third big concern is what Johansen calls “weaponised everyday objects”. In our world, a very small group on the internet can have a very large impact. “Anything that can be distributed, will be distributed.”

“Everything will be a scramble. Your challenge is how you thrive in a scramble. In a VUCA world, you need to be very clear where you’re going and very flexible about how you get there. Young people aged 22 or less have a competitive advantage in this. They have grown up in a truly digital world. They’re able to fully engage with scramble and try out things.

“Businesses need to figure out their own right of way in this space. They are very well placed to thrive in this world if they understand what they’re faced with. Governments have a really hard time in this kind of world; the military has a really hard time; business has much more flex.”

Johansen believes the future holds great opportunities for ethical organisations. “This is the time when values-based leadership will have a new power.” Ten years out from now, it will

be possible to conceive of organisations created and run by algorithms. “Values-based companies can do something the algorithms can’t. If you don’t have the answer to that question, you’re out of existence.”

These successful future organisations will be “shape shifting”. Traditional, fixed management and leadership hierarchies cannot work in a world where authority and communications are widely dispersed. “In the near future, many traditional hierarchical structures will bend and break.” Indeed, says Johansen in his book, shape-shifting organisations will be difficult to lead. The growing sophistication of internet technology means we are moving towards a future where anything that can be distributed – including authority – *will be* distributed globally.

Not surprisingly for a man based in Silicon Valley, the imagery of the digital world pervades his latest book. “My career follows the arc of the internet,” he says. For example, what Johansen calls the new literacy of leadership for shape-shifting organisations has some of its roots in Paul Baran’s development of packet switching as a core technology of the internet – designed to help protect telecommunications networks from nuclear attack. “In [Baran’s] architecture,” says Johansen, “instead of centralised switching, packets were separated as they were sent and then put back together again as they were delivered ... which made it possible for the network to continue working even if a portion of it was destroyed. This disruptive improvement created a new kind of network that didn’t require centralized management.”

It is this very disruption that is so appealing to the generations born into the digital world. Gabe Cervantes, Johansen’s research assistant, has just celebrated his 27th birthday. “What makes me optimistic about the future,” he says, “is seeing greater opportunities, talking with mentors and leaders. I’m seeing there is more and more opportunity for young folks to step up and learn to become leaders. We’re moving away from a path of having to grind for years to get to the top. There are more opportunities to be able to do that.”

Throughout Europe and the USA, it seems that traditional liberal democrats are more questioning about whether the digital world is always a force for good, especially in those cases where big data breaches may have influenced elections. Even digital pioneers such as Jaron Lanier are raising concerns. In his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Lanier says: “Even if the current atmosphere – our hell of insults and lies – has started to seem normal, it really wasn’t like this before. I worry about young people growing up in our mess and believing this is how things always are.”

Johansen – who went to the same divinity school as Martin Luther King Jr and studied the sociology of religion – believes the answer is to make the case loud and long for the value of the liberal arts, however hard that is today. “I’m still a believer in a liberal arts education. Our children should study anthropology. Learn to live in other cultures; learn languages. Everything will be cross cultural. Learn also about science.

“My message to kids is: expect to live a long life. You’ll probably live to a hundred. For the first fifty years, try lots of things and work with lots of different kinds of people. Don’t worry about finding your calling for the first fifty years. In the second fifty years, only work with

people you're happy with and things you feel passionate about. We all want to find our calling, find a sense of meaning. It's very hard to do that when you're young."

Over the next decade, says Johansen in *The New Leadership Literacies*, the biggest positive disruptors will be young people who are hopeful and connected. At the same time, young people who are hope/less and connected will be the biggest negative disruptors. The key variable will be the degree of hope young people experience.

"The type of people who will succeed in shape-shifting organizations will be full of grit, hope and optimism. It will be up to leaders to keep people hopeful and optimistic; in turn they will be rewarded with gritty people who will see adversity and change as an opportunity rather than a challenge."

If you are older than 22 – and that will be most of the people at FRED Forum – Johansen believes you have licence to play the wisdom game. "And it is a game," he says. "Learn from the kids how to be a gamer. Wisdom links to ethics, to values and to meaning. That's where age and experience has a value."

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