

Economics, Psychology, and Professional Coaching I: Three Worlds

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

The mid-21st century is filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction (VUCA-Plus). The conditions of VUCA-Plus have left us gasping for breath and seeking some stability (Bergquist, 2025). In the midst of these challenging times, we are living in a world of mini revolutions. A digital revolution is found in the domain of Artificial Intelligence. The revolutionary reframing of democratic processes is found throughout our world.

One of these revolutions is more cerebral in nature. It concerns the recent interweaving of economics and psychology. Called behavioral economics, this emerging interdisciplinary field introduces new perspectives regarding the way in which we, homo sapiens, make decisions, solve problems, and basically frame and interpret the world in which we live.

I have prepared a series of essays that build on the implications for professional coaching of these behavioral economic principles, and specifically the way in which we anticipate and interpret our near future. In this first essay, I lay the foundation for this series by considering the shifting economic nature of the society in which we live and, more basically, the shifting way in which we view reality.

Coaching Challenge I: The Shifting Nature of Economics

During the 1990s, I wrote a book in which I described the premodern, modern, and postmodern societies that exist side-by-side in the late 20th Century. (Bergquist, 1993). These three societies still exist in the mid-21st Century and contribute to the VUCA-Plus conditions in which we find ourselves. Specifically, the economics of valuing and exchange operate quite differently in premodern, modern, and postmodern societies. The primary commodities to be exchanged in a premodern world are those shared via bartering (e.g., sewing is exchanged for tilling of soil or building a chair) or extracted from renewable resources (e.g., meat, grains, fish, timber) and some non-renewable resources (e.g., minerals).

By contrast, the commodities exchanged in the modern world center on manufactured products and formal services being provided for pay (e.g., housekeeping, accounting, or medical treatment). Once we enter the contemporary postmodern world, we find that information and technology become valued commodities. While money is the primary vehicle for exchange in the modern world, new forms (such as credit cards and Bitcoin) are being used to facilitate postmodern exchange. The informal exchange of products and services in a premodern world is no longer to be “trusted.” Premodern handshake agreements are replaced by formal, legally documented agreements in the modern world. Our preferred way to ensure compliance with postmodern agreements is still in limbo, with reliance, at times, on the old premodern notion of credibility and reputation.

To probe deeper into the economic implications associated with each of the three societies, I provide a brief perspective on each world and introduce a case study relevant to this world. Each of the case

studies is taken from the book on leadership that I wrote with my colleagues, Jeannine Sandstrom and Agnes Mura (Bergquist, Sandstrom, and Mura, 2023). In each case study, I first consider some of the coaching strategies and tools that might be engaged to assist this client and, more generally, assist clients who are living, working, and leading in this particular domain of economics.

The Premodern World: Simplicity and Tradition

We may be entering a postmodern era, but our sight is as much backward as it is forward. Everything seems to be in flux in our organizations. We look back with a distorted and often nostalgic perspective on a world that we assume to be simpler and conducive to strong leaders who could decisively solve straightforward problems. It was a world in which employees found gratification in the work they performed and found community in the people with whom they affiliated. Typically, our organizations were founded in communities that had an identity or at least homogeneity regarding values, culture, or socioeconomic status. Even in urban settings, our organizations were often founded to serve a distinct community group or need.

Nostalgia and Premodern Reality

Is our yearning for a simpler place and time nothing more than an attempt to escape from the vagaries of contemporary life? Given the pressures under which we live in our postmodern world, it is quite understandable that we might wish for a simpler place and time. Yet, there is also realism in our search for the premodern world. First, the premodern still exists in our society. As a world community, we are only a moment away from the premodern. Most societies were predominantly premodern less than one hundred years ago.

The premodern world is still prevalent in many American communities. A thin veneer of modernism covers the fundamental and deeply rooted premodernism of virtually all societies. Organizations are still concerned with shared values and play a central role in the creation or maintenance of a vital and caring community. This is a central message in postmodernism: a successful postmodern organization will inevitably incorporate diverse elements from many times and places.

The premodern world is also of great relevance because it holds at least partial answers for our emerging postmodern world. The premodern world can help us set the agenda for our organizations, with regard to re-emerging values. It also provides us with important insights into the human enterprise. Virtually all transformations in social systems begin with the bashing of the previous, dominant era. “We are no longer going to use the old horse and buggy. “Let me show you the *modern* way in which we build houses [or grow peas or serve members of our church].”

Many of the contemporary advocates for *new paradigm* thinking similarly begin with an analysis of modern world failure. This is quite understandable, given the desire to present something new and different. However, in the long run, it is foolish to leave behind the rich traditions of the past and knowledge gained from years of practical experience. Organizations situated in an emerging postmodern world are likely to be successful, in part, if they borrow from both the premodern and modern worlds, while also inventing new forms and formulating new perspectives that are neither premodern nor modern.

To bring some “life” into the concepts of premodernism that I have just offered, I offer a brief case study regarding a leader who is living in a premodern world. I also suggest ways in which one might assist this leader as a coach who is addressing economic-related issues in the life and work of their clients.

The Case of Kurt Seto

Kurt is not a real person; however, he is an amalgamation of many leaders with whom I have worked. Kurt Seto grew up in a prosperous Japanese American family that owned a chain of furniture stores in the State of Washington. Now, as a 45-year-old gentleman who “grew up in the business,” Kurt has been promoted to President. His father and uncle started the business 30 years ago and have seen it grow from one store to a chain of twelve stores located in eight Washington State communities. Kurt’s uncle retired from the business five years ago. Now his father is also retiring.

Until recently, diversity has never been an issue in the Seto organization or in Seto furniture stores. From the first, the two Seto brothers hired both Japanese American and Caucasian American employees to help run their company and serve as the sales force in their stores. Furthermore, the Setos tended to feature furniture from both Scandinavia and Japan.

The one feature that unites these two furniture styles is simplicity. The Seto brothers displayed furniture that was elegant and beautifully crafted. It cost a bit more for their furniture. However, their tables, chairs, sofas and coffee tables fit beautifully into the new Washington-style homes that were similarly simple and elegant.

This ethnic and product diversity is no longer sufficient for the Seto furniture stores to remain in vogue and profitable. The younger generation residing in the middle class is now no longer united regarding style preferences. Immigrants from other countries and cultures (notably Latin and Chinese) are looking for something different from the Scandinavian and Japanese style. Furthermore, big chain stores such as Ikea can offer Scandinavian simplicity at a much lower price than can the Setos. There are even stores, such as Wayfair, that sell discounted furniture shipped directly to your home (often for assembly by the purchaser).

Kurt knows that some changes will have to take place in his chain of furniture stores. Falling revenues are telling him that he must diversify the line of furniture he is selling and that he might have to reduce prices in order to compete in the changing Washington State market. Recognition is one thing. New ideas and action are another matter.

While there are Seto employees from both Japanese and Anglo traditions, they tend to think alike and, in most instances, have worked in this organization for many years. The Seto brothers exemplified the Japanese tradition of honoring loyalty. This is all well and good (especially with the current employee shortages in many businesses)—but what about a “breath of fresh air” for the Seto organization?

Kurt would like to recruit some new employees to provide this “fresh air.” However, this is not an appropriate time for expansion in the size of his business (given the reduced revenues) and he is quite hesitant to dismiss any of the current employees. He also doesn’t have sufficient funds to promote early retirement.

What then is the answer? Can he “teach an old dog new tricks”? Would a retreat facilitated by one of those fancy (and high-priced) “creativity” consultants make a difference? What about a potential merger with one of the companies producing low-cost (and fairly high-quality) furniture? Perhaps a furniture

store chain that features a different product line? Kurt knows, however, that any merger would be viewed with considerable disfavor by his current employees. They are likely to say: “Your father and uncle would never ‘sell out’ like this!” Kurt doesn’t know what to do.

Coaching Kurt

The world of economics in the primarily premodern world in which Kurt Seto operates is intertwined with the worlds of family, reputation, relationships, and trust. Like many leaders, Kurt is involved in a family business. Corporate life is unknown to Kurt. He has no interest in occupying a C-Suite in some large furniture store corporation. As is the case with most leaders who own family businesses, there is the matter of size and growth. At the personal level, there is the matter of work-life balance and the potential of burnout. Long-term, there is the matter of succession planning and even the possibility of selling or closing the family business.

What then are the specific questions I might ask or points of inquiry that might lead Kurt and me into an in-depth exploration of specific coaching issues? I would be inclined to ask questions in three domains: information, intentions, and ideas (Bergquist and Mura, 2011). The domain of information is entered when we seek clarity and confirmation concerning the current situation in which our client finds themselves, whereas the domain of intentions is entered when we seek clarity and commitment regarding our client’s desired state (goals, outcomes, aspirations).

We enter the domain of ideas with our client when considering ways in which to move from our current situation to our desired state, thereby reducing the gap between information and intentions. When working with someone like Kurt, who operates primarily in a premodern world, I am inclined to focus in particular on the domain of intentions. Matters concerned with Legacy are often of major concern (Sandstrom and Smith, 2017). Furthermore, in the domain of Ideas, I would also advocate for one or two specific ideas but then invite inquiry into the strengths and weaknesses associated with each idea I am advocating (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

I would probably begin with several questions in the domain of information. While the domain of intentions might be of greatest importance, it often is a bit challenging to open in this domain, especially in a premodern environment and when a family business is involved. Kurt is holding on to a rather large set of assumptions regarding the threats he is facing from outside his business. I might ask: “What are the major challenges you face regarding the diversity of offerings provided by your competitors?” “How do you know that these really are tangible challenges?” Several other questions would follow concerning the competitive advantages of other businesses, as well as the potential competitive advantages held by Kurt.

I would also turn to internal challenges: “What are your concerns about the loyalty of employees to your organization? How do you ‘know’ that someone is loyal? A series of questions would follow, encouraging Kurt to explore his own assumptions about what is happening inside his organization. Kurt’s response to questions regarding loyalty leads directly into the domain of intentions.

Turning to Kurt’s intentions, I would first focus on organizational culture. “What does your distinctive culture represent in terms of core values that you never want to abandon? How are these values reflected in the daily work done by your employees and the way in which they relate to one another? A second set of questions concerns what Kurt eventually wants to do with his business. “Why might you want to keep your business in your own family?” “What would be the desired outcomes associated with selling your business?” “Why might

you simply close the business when you are ready to retire?" I would notice not just the words he would use when addressing these potentially challenging questions, but also the emotional reactions he is likely to have when considering the core values and decisions to be made about his business's future.

Finally, in shifting to the domain of ideas, I would first invite Kurt to share his own ideas, based on our excursion into the domains of information and intentions. I would then make use of the advocacy-inviting-inquiry to introduce the notion of cooperative advantage (as an alternative to the perspective offered by a focus on competitive advantage. I would "advocate" for Kurt's formation of a cooperative with other small, family-owned furniture stores.

This cooperative could offer shared purchases of furniture or auxiliary items (such as tables and lamps), providing a potential reduction in purchase price. The cooperative could also provide shared training programs, as well as a forum for the store owners to share problems, solutions, and future plans. Since these stores are not directly competitive with one another (featuring differing styles of furniture), a fair amount of candor and reciprocity is available. I would invite Kurt to identify and discuss both the positive and negative features of this proposal.

Another point of advocacy might relate to the matter of Kurt's business in the future. I could offer a "preposterous" proposal involving Kurt's sale of his business to a large furniture outlet. Why is this such a bad idea (probably bringing us back to the domain of intentions)? What would be the benefits, if any? This would probably bring us back to the domain of information. This advocacy-inviting-inquiry allows Kurt to think about the unthinkable and to discuss the non-discussable (which is probably not possible with anyone but me as his coach).

The Modern World: Giants and Managers

Large organizations represent the pinnacle of modernism in most societies. We know that we have become modern when the first high-rise building is constructed in our community. We know that modernity has arrived when men and women are being trained in our organizations and universities to fill technical and managerial positions in large organizations. Modern organizations speak a common language. They look alike and operate in the same manner. The languages of nations may differ, but the language of modern organizations is universal. Instead of the distinctive, vernacular (ritual, stories, customs) of premodern organizations, we live with the universality of modernism. Furthermore, we read not about leaders or administrators, but now about managers (a word that was not used until early in the 20th century).

The primary objective of modern organizations is to become and stay large. While premodern organizational leaders concentrated on organizational continuity and tradition (which usually required very gradual growth), modern organizations emphasize rapid growth. As modern organizations expand in size and add more units and levels of organizational structure to accommodate their growth, the organization becomes more difficult to control. While the premodern culture of an organization provides some integration through its customs, dress, ritual, and stories of great triumphs (and defeats), this premodern glue is often disparaged in most modern organizations. Furthermore, this culture does not offer sufficient integration for very large organizations.

As organizations grow more complex in the modern world, increasing attention must be given to those activities that enhance coordination and cooperation among the differentiated functions of the organization. As organizations become larger (or older), they also require clearer boundaries so leaders can maintain control. Financial monitoring and auditing functions are added. Personnel offices ensure uniformity of hiring practices as well as coordinate training efforts.

Newsletters proliferate, as do office managers, purchasing agents, and departmental administrators. These offices, roles, and management functions are devoted to the integrative functions of the organization. As the organization grows larger and older, an increasingly large proportion of the resources of the organization must be devoted to these integrative functions. As a result, modern organizations that are large (or old) are likely to become less efficient. Unless they control the marketplace, these larger or older organizations may be unable to compete with those that are smaller or younger.

Both personal and organizational boundaries are clearly drawn in the modern world. While family and work are closely related in the premodern world, modern organizations tend to discourage the mixing of family life and work. While family connections form the base for many premodern organizations, modern societies have made it illegal for anyone in an organization to hire a relative (laws of “nepotism”). Paternalistic concerns are considered inappropriate in modern organizations. Modern leaders are not allowed to regulate the lives of their workers when not on the job, although they have much greater control over the lives of their employees when they are at work.

When it comes to mission and purpose in the modern world, there is much less clarity and consistency. In general, mission statements have been created primarily for public image and marketing or (in the case of private institutions) the mission is directed simply to the “bottom line.” In contrast with their visible and clear boundaries, the mission statements of most modern organizations do not provide much clarity or guidance for those who work in or evaluate these institutions. While the premodern world is built on land and reputation (with a strong parallel emphasis on service and community), the modern world is built on a different form of capital: money. In a modern world that values democratic ideals and fosters the expectation (or myth) of upward social mobility, new wealth and a more transient bourgeoisie are dominant.

In essence, the modern world has produced a shift from direct sources of personal meaning in life (through one’s work, family, and church) to indirect sources (wealth and consumption). The premodern man or woman takes pride in the cultivation of crops or production of crafts, and in the raising of a family and provision of food and shelter to members of the family. By contrast, modern workers are often alienated from the products of their work and from ownership of the production process itself. Alienation from the direct sources of meaning in our work is joined with the alienation that comes from the loss of personal voice and influence, and with the loss of interdependency among people who once worked together in premodern communities.

This dual form of alienation often produces profound (and at times isolating) individualism. We have to look inward for guidance and a sense of purpose rather than looking, as we do in a premodern world, to an external authority or community. Modern organizations emphasize individual rights and look to

individuals with specialized and technical expertise to solve complex organizational problems.

Most of the modern perspectives on motivation to work similarly focus on personal rewards and individual achievements. We no longer derive meaning in the modern world from shared societal beliefs or from institutions that sustain and interpret these beliefs (such as organizations, extended families, or governments). Meaning comes instead from the individualistic pursuit of wealth and the acquisition of goods that convey our personal identities and offer a (usually unfulfilled) promise of happiness and self-esteem.

The Case of Susan Telluride

Like Kurt Seto, Susan is a hypothetical person who represents an amalgamation of modern leaders with whom I have worked. Susan Telluride has been hired as Associate Vice President of Human Relations (HR) at a quite large insurance company. While she is pleased to advance in her career by being appointed (she was actively recruited) to this job, Susan is aware that they needed a woman in their quest for diversity. Susan is also aware that she was not the favorite choice of the gentleman who will be her boss.

Once she began to work in the new company, some of her suspicions regarding what was taking place were validated. The man who heads HR formally was head of Claims Processing-- but was too laid back for this demanding job. As Susan notes: "He is a very nice man, and everyone seems to like him, but I can't find any backbone in him." HR is adrift, and Susan believes (with some justification) that she was hired to stop the drifting. While her boss is very pleasant to be around, he is "softly" blocking everything that Susan is trying to do. Susan's very assertive orientation is finding nowhere to engage in the stagnant environment created by her supervisor.

Susan decides to take some unilateral action. She sets up a task force to recommend a new set of actions that should be taken to improve HR in this company. Susan got away with this by finding a document written two years ago by the corporate board that called for changes in several areas, including HR. She did let her boss know that she was setting up this task force and assured him that her group was only coming up with recommendations.

No actions were going to be taken without his approval. Susan was also aware that her boss found it hard to say "no" to anyone, so she predicted that he would reluctantly accept their recommendations. It is one thing to softly block the initiative to be taken by one person (especially a woman of color). It is quite another thing to block the work done by a team that has been carefully selected and is influential. (Susan has done her homework and knows who to get on her side.

The report is prepared. Susan joins with several members of her task force to deliver a set of PowerPoint presentations that summarize their recommendations. Susan's boss listens to their presentation and asks for the written report (which he has not yet seen). He is uncharacteristically cold during the presentation and asks some challenging questions after the presentation is concluded. While he will take the recommendations under advisement and is very warm in expressing his appreciation for the

hard work being done by the task force, he never mentions Susan and never does anything with the report.

Susan begins looking online for another job. One of the other Vice Presidents asks to meet with her. He reveals that Susan's boss is quite angry about how she "went over his head" (though she was only responding to a request made by the corporate board). The VP is also aware that Susan's boss is uncomfortable with Susan's "pushy" style—as are some other male leaders in their organization. Apparently, in some quarters of their insurance company, it is acceptable for a male to be "assertive" but not for a woman to be "bossy." The VP shares his own frustration with Susan's boss and with the chauvinism of other senior executives in their company. He asked Susan "to hang in there." Susan appreciates the support he offers; however, she still begins looking for a new job.

There is not likely to be any future fit between her "bossy" orientation and the need for a new HR vision and course of committed action in this insurance company. While commitment to vision and values requires some assertiveness, the heavy-handed way in which Susan approached the task wasn't going to work—though Susan's boss certainly didn't help matters. We wonder about his own vision, values, and motives. Chauvinism also made matters worse. It seems that assertiveness in a woman who provides leadership is not acceptable.

Coaching Susan

While as a coach, I could assist Susan in identifying another job and perhaps even assist her in promoting herself when meeting with a prospective employer, I entered the coaching relationship with Susan on behalf of Susan's desire to consider ways to remain in her current organization. I am fully aware that a successful coaching engagement with Susan that enables her to remain with this corporation would be warmly welcomed by members of the corporate C-Suite (and particularly the president of this corporation). Not only is Susan's forceful style widely supported by those leading her corporation, a potential public relations "disaster" would ensue if this woman of color were to leave a position of leadership in such a short period of time.

How then would I approach my coaching with Susan? As I have already noted, the domain of ideas is often of greatest importance for those working in large, modern organizations. People filled with ideas and oriented toward action are aligned with the primary values ("Bottom-line mentality") and perspectives ("win-lose") of corporate life. Susan is respected precisely because she is a woman of action (having set up the task force) and is unwilling to accept "No" (even though living in a world where minority status is still often associated with powerlessness).

Before moving to ideas and actions, I wish to begin more "softly" by gathering more information. I first want to take an appreciative stance regarding Susan's relationship with her boss: "When has your boss been effective?" "What are moments when your boss has been supportive of your work?" "Tell me about a time since you took this job when you have been most gratified and most interested in staying in this administrative position?" While Susan might initially be asserting that her job has "NEVER!" been enjoyable and her boss has always been impossible to deal with, I will gently encourage her to look beyond her emotional state and find something good in her current situation. This appreciative

perspective can be of great value in helping her forge plans (ideas and actions) to ameliorate the current difficulties.

I also encourage Susan to take a more “systemic” view regarding her relationship with the boss and her work in this organization. I ask her to consider the other side of the picture: “Is there any justification for your boss being angry about the task force?” “Are there reasons to be upset with or even fearful of any of the recommendations made by the task force?” “What is the nature and extent of support you have from members of the C-Suite?” “Can you rely on their support if you push back at what is now occurring in your work life?” Susan’s reflections on these questions can lead directly into the domain of ideas.

When working in the domain of ideas, I often bring in questions related to two words: “Why” and “If.” I bring these words into discussions regarding alternative actions that Susan might take in her current corporation. For instance, Susan and I might consider her actions in proposing that she will stay in the corporation if she can work in another division. A “why” question can be posed: “Why do you think this might be viewed as a good idea by members of the C-Suite?” “Why do you think xxx would be open to considering your proposal. Susan’s answer to this question can lead to the formulation of a persuasive proposal that is directed to the “right person.”

While the “Why” question tends to promote convergence (focusing) and leads to clear actions, an “If” question tends to promote divergence (envisioning) and leads to consideration of broader issues (often in the domain of intentions). I might ask: “If you choose to stay in this corporation, what would be acceptable conditions?” Or I could ask Susan an even broader question: “If you were the president of this corporation, what would you do to promote new ideas and diversity of background and perspectives?”

Answers to these two “If” questions would enable Susan to reflect on her own preferred work environment. I might bring in Simons’ (2005) organizational and job-design process, which focuses on the span of authority, responsibility, support, and influence in one’s work assignment. All four of these job elements would seem to be important for Susan. I could ask Susan to assess her span in each of these four areas and ways these spans might be revised. This broader focus can help Susan move beyond her justifiable “obsession” with her boss.

Finally, I would turn to the domain of intentions. In a large, modern corporation, the personal values, aspirations, and goals of employees are likely to be placed on a “back burner.” Even the corporation’s intentions (goals, purposes, values, vision) are usually set aside in favor of short-term “bottom-line” measurements. In Susan’s case, intentions are of great importance, especially as she considers departure from her current position and organization. I might ask Susan to focus on her current job: “What would your current job look like ideally?” Simons’ four spans could be revisited at this point—especially as she considers which span to focus on as a way to make her current job more palatable, or a new position in this corporation is likely to be one in which she would enjoy working for an extended period of time.

There is one other approach I might take as a coach to Susan Telluride. It involves a blending of the domains of intentions and ideas. We focus on a hypothetical interaction between Susan and her boss.

We first consider what would be a desired outcome of this interaction for BOTH Susan and her boss. I suggest a role play with Susan first playing herself and I playing her Boss (after a bit of information domain portrayal by Susan concerning her boss). Susan leads off with a statement regarding the desired outcome for both her and the boss. She also shares some information regarding what she considers the primary barriers to achieving these outcomes.

Playing the role of her Boss, I react to her opening statements and perhaps reflect on my own defensiveness in hearing what Susan has said (especially if she is being “assertive”). We try it out again, with Susan being a bit more sensitive to her Boss’s fears. However, she doesn’t “ease in” or become highly indirect in what she is presenting. She remains candid. There is nothing wrong with the Boss being somewhat “defensive” if what Susan has to say can in some way challenge his way of relating to Susan and other people with whom he often interacts.

The role play continues with Susan trying out several different approaches. We both reflect on the impact of each approach. We sometimes reverse roles. I play Susan and either replicate one of her approaches (so that Susan can get a first-hand experience of receiving this approach) or try out a quite different approach (so that Susan can evaluate this approach from her Boss’s perspective). As we move back and forth between different versions of Susan’s critical interaction with her Boss and view these interactions from the perspective of both Susan and Boss, there is an emerging clarity regarding not only the desired outcomes of this interaction (domain of intentions) but also the best ways in which for Susan to approach this critical interaction (domain of ideas).

While this coaching engagement may lead Susan to a decision that there is no other choice than to find a new job, she has come to this decision having gained greater clarity regarding alternative actions to take. Furthermore, she now has a much better idea about what she will be looking for when applying for a new position. Her perspective will be much more than: “Anything is better than working with that ineffective and blocking jerk who makes my life a living Hell right now!” A safe place (sanctuary) in which to test out alternative behaviors is rarely present, yet of vital importance when operating in the often mechanized and frequently unsafe environment of a large modern corporation.

The Postmodern World: Fragmentation and Complexity

As we enter the postmodern era, it appears that even if the integrative services of a modern organization are extensive, they often are insufficient to hold the organization together. Even with greater attention being given to organizational culture and to the creation of a strong feeling of solidarity, contemporary organizations are experiencing pervasive fragmentation, chaos, and inconsistency. One part of the organization does not know or care what the other parts are doing. Growing frustration is founded on frequent and counterproductive reorganizations, conglomerations of differing structures that always seem to be “in planning,” the failure of many divisions to coordinate their efforts with other divisions, the lack of clearly established organization-wide priorities, and a general sense of foreboding or panic (postmodern edginess).

Increasingly, two major questions must be asked by leaders regarding these postmodern conditions.

First, what is the right size for this particular organization or this particular unit of the organization? We have learned in our postmodern world that we cannot solve the problem of integration simply by devoting more resources to integrative processes as we grow larger. The integration of functions in large organizations may no longer be possible or if it is possible, it requires too great a percentage of the total resources of the organization for this organization to survive. Administrative costs tend to rise not fall with expansion in the size and complexity of organizations. Effective postmodern leaders speak about appropriate size rather than indiscriminate growth.

The second major question that postmodern leaders must ask concerns the nature of the integration that does occur. Traditionally, integration has been equated with control. We keep organizations from flying apart by ensuring that all operations of the organization are tightly controlled. In the modern world, this means that organizations will be structured hierarchically, with each person receiving orders from someone situated immediately above them on this hierarchy.

This emphasis on authority that is line-based and an accompanying emphasis on uniformity of practice supposedly keep the organization fully integrated. An alternative way to think of integration emphasizes influence instead of control. Rather than using the formal hierarchy of the organization, successful postmodern leaders deploy more informal and powerful channels of communication and leadership by example. Rather than looking to the hierarchy to gain control, they look to the network and the web to exert influence. Key people and groups located at nodal points in the network can be highly influential and often play a much greater role in bringing about integration than do those at the top of the organization.

Contemporary organizations are often both complex and fragmented. Postmodern organizations are typified by premodern, modern, and postmodern structures, processes, and procedures that intermingle. We find premodern elements in celebrations, ceremonies, and retreats that bring members of an organization together for recognition and reflection. Examples of the intermingling of modern and postmodern are even more prevalent. We find that many organizations exist as both independent, autonomous institutions that are very modern, and as interdependent collaborating members of complex consortia, partnerships, and alliances that are very postmodern.

As a result of the widespread fragmentation and complexity in our personal lives and organizations, mission has suddenly become very important. Bottom line and continuing growth are no longer adequate criteria of performance for either organizations or secular institutions. Postmodern organizations need clear direction, given the ambiguity of their boundaries and the turbulence of the environments in which they operate. Postmodern organizations are usually the inverse of modern organizations with regard to mission and boundaries. They may have unclear or changing boundaries; however, they must have a clear and consistent mission. Such an inversion tends to counter our normal way of thinking: we are more often inclined to construct firm boundaries when the world around us (as in our current postmodern era) is turbulent and unpredictable.

Some established organizations will be able to live off their substantial resources and reputation in the near future. Most, however, will only survive if they operate from clearly articulated statements of mission that relate directly to the impact that the institution has on key stakeholders. An organization

that defines a specific set of values and services as something needed by a specific constituency is likely to be successful in our chaotic, postmodern world. An organization that tries to appeal to a much broader audience with a variety of different services that do not hold together coherently is much less likely to be successful. Furthermore, organizations that have clearly defined and enacted missions, coupled with a compelling, shared vision, will tend to attract attention and commitment. The resources and energy of people working inside the organization are focused, as are the resources and energy of those who support the organization.

Any contemporary organization may choose to work from its mission and foster both learning and continuous improvement as a central feature of its organizational culture. In adopting this strategy, a contemporary organization is positioning itself for a postmodern world in which organizations must become increasingly flexible about their boundaries. These postmodern organizations can shift with the changing nature of their constituencies, while preserving a distinctive identity and purpose. They are likely to be much more open to changes in clientele and to moving across previously restrictive boundaries (such as product or service area, or even regional or national boundaries). In dropping their boundaries, postmodern organizations are likely to be more fully responsive to changing technologies and changing customer and community needs.

The Case of Jacinda Ardern

Unlike Kurt Seto and Susan Telluride, Jacinda Ardern is a real person who served as Prime Minister of New Zealand during the early 2020s. Jacinda surprised everyone by announcing her resignation as Prime Minister in early 2023. This resignation occurred before an election scheduled for later this year. Elected in 2017, at age 37, as the world's youngest female head of government, Ardern came into office on a wave of good cheer, proclaiming, "Let's do this!" She was offering "hugs rather than stoic nods." She preached kindness in governance. Jacinda began to advocate for members of the New Zealand community who were underrepresented in government or stigmatized because of their religious beliefs.

Prime Minister Ardern did an artful job of leading in 2019, when a gunman killed 51 worshippers at two mosques in the city of Christchurch. Ardern grieved with Muslim Kiwis, wearing a hijab. She then moved swiftly by toughening gun laws in New Zealand. Her effective leadership came into play one year later, when COVID-19 hit New Zealand. As Prime Minister, Ardern immediately closed New Zealand's borders, keeping the virus from its shores for months. Her hardline Zero-Covid policy gave the country one of the world's lowest Covid death rates. This Ruby Red action, with its immense economic impact on people's lives, sparked an intense backlash, and her popularity dipped. Still, her embodiment of "compassionate" leadership made her a global celebrity.

Why then did she resign? It could have been because she was "piled-on" by "bullies, misogynists, and the aggrieved." This condition was certainly not unique to Jacinda Ardern. Many political figures around the world have been brutalized in the opposing media and often even threatened (as was Prime Minister Ardern) with physical harm. She was seeking to find balance (like many women and some men) between her personal life as mother and newlywed, on the one hand, and her work life and the demands for responsibility and accountability as Prime Minister, on the other hand. This balance didn't

always work. Jacinda Ardern now seemed exhausted, as is the case with many leaders who try to translate their visions into action. Her words justifying her resignation would seem to be echoed in the life of many compassionate leaders: "I know what this job takes, and I know that I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice."

There was also the matter of the Prime Minister's compassion sometimes breaking down. Jacinda was caught on a hot mic calling a lawmaker who opposed her an "arrogant prick." It is hard to always remain compassionate and caring when faced with ongoing opposition and hostility in the public forum. Apparently, Prime Minister Ardern began to believe in the hype about herself. This led to her overuse of humanistic practices. She seems to be blind to the requirements of sometimes harsh and sometimes thoughtful leadership strategies.

She was blind to some of the needs and challenges facing her country, which requires a heavy dose of thoughtfulness and decisiveness. In a country where agriculture is king, she was seen as waging a "war on farmers" with her "extreme climate-change agenda." While her environmental concern for the future of humankind and the world is to be (and was) admired, this orientation needed to be blended with some analytic leadership. A splash of collaborative leadership wouldn't have hurt, for it is always needed when matters of global survival are introduced in a public forum.

More generally, the lack of consistent tactical and strategic planning during this Prime Minister's period in office has led to a variety of problems affecting the country's economy and the human services being provided by the government. These services are particularly important in a country such as New Zealand, which is noted for a high tax rate that is required to support all its citizens.

Jacinda Ardern is accused of "lacking toughness" when fighting against the predictable backlash that comes from controversial actions that she took. Ardern is accused of quitting because she couldn't "cope with her halo having slipped." The story of New Zealand's young woman leader, at first heartwarming, has had a chilling ending. Can anyone serve in high office during the mid-21st Century with a heavy dose of care and compassion? Is a strong suit of psychological armor needed if anyone is going to do battle in our highly polarized world—especially if they are well-intentioned women?

Coaching Jacinda

As I have already noted, the domain of information is particularly salient in a postmodern world. As I have also noted, this world is filled with the swirling alternative realities of VUCA-Plus. The realities that one does "discover" are often volatile and complex. They are filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. Leadership in this world requires the ability to navigate turbulent environments filled with contradictions. In the midst of these challenging conditions, one must not only grasp onto a specific reality and be guided by it but also find ways to test the validity of this often "slippery" reality. Jacinda certainly had to provide leadership in New Zealand under these challenging conditions.

Furthermore, as a person with power and authority, she was easily presented with "realities" about herself that were neither accurate nor helpful. As noted, Jacinda may have started to believe "the hype about herself"—both good and bad. She would have required some clear and valid information about herself and the environment she is about to enter as she leaves her position as Prime Minister and

considers a “new life.” I offer a hypothetical case of how I might serve as a coach to Jacinda during this transitional period.

I begin with this essential journey into the domain of information. I invite Jacinda to reflect on information about herself as well as the world in which she will be operating. We begin with an appreciative review of times when Jacinda “was doing it right” concerning her use of thoughtful and assertive modes of leadership. When were there times that she was very strategic and “slow thinking” (Kahneman, 2011) in addressing difficult issues? What was the nature of a setting that encouraged (or even allowed) her to work carefully on an issue? Were these settings that allowed for (even encouraged) collaboration? How did various constituencies (including the press) react to her engaging a slow, “cerebral” approach?

Similarly, we can explore the times when Jacinda was being assertive as Prime Minister. What was the setting like, and how did various constituencies respond to this more “demanding” approach to leadership? It is important to note that while various constituencies might want Jacinda to be more forceful (or more thoughtful), they will often react negatively when she actually engages in this unexpected leadership behavior. Many folks that Jacinda was serving were more comfortable with the “usual” Jacinda than with the Jacinda that they called for in their public rhetoric.

We know that this matter of displaying unanticipated assertiveness is often particularly disturbing when the suddenly assertive leader is a woman. Calling an irksome male an “arrogant prick” is usually more acceptable if this pronouncement comes from another male in the heat of battle. “Proper ladies” are not supposed to be “nasty” like this. They are “required” to sit back and take the abuse. Only a sharp glance of her eyes is allowed—and perhaps a few negative comments offered to other “ladies” in the “powder room.” Thus, a careful appreciative examination of Jacinda’s successful use of assertive leadership behavior is particularly important: “When were you being directive or at least clearly advocating in a manner that led to a successful outcome?” An in-depth exploration of Jacinda “getting it right” is critical as she moves forward to post-prime-minister life.

Clarity regarding the environment in which she was working as Prime Minister is also important, as is clarity regarding the environment she is about to enter (or the various environments to which she might journey). Once again, an appreciative perspective can be used effectively, especially given Jacinda’s apparent exhaustion. I would ask: “When did you best ‘figure things out’?” Was she clearest and most confident about what was happening in her world when she was collaborating with other people or when she found time to be alone and carefully process the information she was receiving? What sources of information did she most rely on? And which sources were not only most valid but also most useful?

We would then turn to environments in which she might find herself in the near future. How might these environments differ from or be similar to the environment in which Jacinda operated as Prime Minister? How might the way(s) in which Jacinda took in and successfully navigated the challenging and stressful world of her prime ministership transfer to new environments? We can then turn to the less pleasant side of her performance as a governmental leader. “What can you learn from your less successful work as Prime Minister?” What do you want to avoid in the new environment you will be

entering?” I might challenge Jacinda at this point: “Can you really avoid these challenges in any new environment you might enter?”

The domain of intentions is next entered as we focus in particular on what kind of work she would next like to do and in what kind of environment she would most want to work. In many ways, I am taking on the role of career counsellor at this point—though Jacinda Ardern is no typical candidate for career advisement. She will be in the public spotlight as she enters the next phase in her still-young life. Furthermore, her new “employer” (if she has one) will hold many expectations regarding her performance. Jacinda is definitely not a “blank slate.” However, she is a slate on which other people can project their own assumptions about her competencies and aspirations. All of these matters have to be taken into account (returning to the domain of information); however, it is much more important that Jacinda gain clarity regarding what she wants to accomplish during the next chapter of her life.

It is not enough that she wants to escape from the position of Prime Minister and somehow recover from her exhaustion (though a few months of recovery is probably in order). “What would it be like if one year from now you are celebrating an extraordinarily gratifying 12 months?” We might instead try some reverse planning: “Imagine being highly successful three years from now. What would it look like? What would have to occur during the previous year for the third-year outcome to be one of success? What would you need to begin doing during the coming year to prepare the way for year two and year three success?”

We would also want to explore the characteristics of the environment in which she would be working. It is tempting to opt for serenity (the absence of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction); however, this is just an escape that is unlikely to be successful in our challenging mid-21st-century world. Especially for someone like Jacinda Ardern, who has been in the public spotlight. Furthermore, serenity is often only found in a bottle of mind-altering pills or in a bottle of some alcoholic beverage. Jacinda is certainly aware that many other “failed” politicians have taken this self-destructive route. It should not be an option for someone like Jacinda Ardern, for whom many more potential years of productive life lie in front of her.

The final act of this coach engagement should focus on actions that Jacinda will take in the near future. While there will be a frequent return to both the domain of information and the domain of intentions, when Jacinda is considering her next move, some chunk of time should be devoted to consideration of the best ideas and best course of action. During this final act, I would mostly be sitting back and listening to Jacinda reflect on what she has learned about herself and her working environment during our coaching sessions. Advocacy-inviting-inquiry and role-playing are not required. Jacinda is likely to have considered the goods and bads of many career moves. And there are too many different constituencies to consider when choosing the best person with whom to role-play.

As in the case of both Kurt and Susan, Jacinda might find that I am the only “safe” person with whom she can share concerns, fears, and hopes. Her need for a coaching-based “sanctuary” might be even more important, given her status as a public figure. I am likely to be most helpful at this stage when just witnessing her reflections, sharing of feelings, and consideration of different options. I offer my encouragement and empathy rather than my advice. I suspect that this encouragement and empathy

would be what Jacinda needed at this point in her career. This might also be what most of us need at critical points in our always challenging postmodern world.

By the way, Jacinda Ardern has been living in the U.S. since she left office two years ago. She is serving as a fellow at Harvard University and has written a new book, *A Different Kind of Power* (Ardern, 2025). Without my coaching assistance, Jacinda seems to have reflected on her own leadership in New Zealand. She has recently said, "I think, you know, there are different ways to lead. But I hope you also see that some of those character traits that we perhaps bring to it that we might believe to be weaknesses – imposter syndrome, or even empathy – actually are incredible strengths."

Ardern says her story is about finding her voice in New Zealand, a small nation of about five million people. "I never, ever saw myself becoming prime minister, ever," she said. Yet, it is in this role that Jacinda Ardern learned important lessons about herself. It is not often easy to learn about ourselves in a challenging postmodern world. Sometimes, as a professional coach, I can assist leaders who are trying to discover something about themselves. Jacinda apparently found a way to gain these insights about herself with or without a coach. Perhaps Harvard has provided her with the environment in which she can best "learn into the future" (Scharmer, 2009), best "lean into the future" (Bergquist and Mura, 2011) – and perhaps lead again in her future.

Conclusions

Jacinda Ardern is not alone in seeking to make sense of a VUCA-Plus world. She is joined by many of us who wish to find an environment that is more stable, certain, simple, clear, calm, and consistent. We are particularly inclined to look for such an environment when engaged in economic behavior. A professional coach can be helpful in this regard, as they might have been helpful with Kurt Seto, Susan Telluride, and Jacinda Ardern. In the next essay in this series, I turn specifically to the conditions of VUCA-Plus, trace out some of the economic implications associated with each of the six conditions, and consider ways in which a professional coach might provide some guidance or at least some empathetic support for us as we live, work, and make economic decisions in a world of swirling alternative realities.

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