Beating the Burnout

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Burnout is a condition associated with exhaustion, stress, pessimism, cynicism, withdrawal and a bunker mentality. These symptoms are worrying in an individual, but can be disastrous in world affairs. In the run-up to the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, there is a distinct sense of burnout in the air. I hope that this year's Meeting will help to form a new model of leadership capable of overcoming this malaise.

After a year characterized by major upheavals, many feel like we are watching a global system disintegrate: financial and debt crises, unemployment, political paralysis, social inequality, food and energy crises, and the list goes on. Faced with so many simultaneous and interrelated problems, our leaders are stretched to their limits. At the same time, the systems and safeguards that underpin our existence as a global community are struggling to cope with today's complex set of risks.

The usual reaction to all this is to call for stronger leadership. Yet events during the past year have shown, time and again, the limits of leadership in its traditional form. Preoccupied with domestic concerns, rushing from one crisis to the next, leaders have made little tangible progress. Instead, we have mainly witnessed short-term fixes in a rapidly unravelling world. No wonder, then, that ordinary people are losing trust in our leaders. The various "Occupy" and "Spring" movements around the world are signs of this understandable frustration and distress.

There is an urgent need to act. As well as finding new models to collaboratively address all our global challenges, we also need to form a new model of leadership that is effective in the modern world: leadership that emphasizes both vision and values in order to overcome the current challenges. It is this combination that can provide leaders with a compass to guide their decision-making.

Vision is needed to interpret and deal effectively with a globalized world. Technological progress, interconnectivity and the dispersion of power have all contributed to a complex new reality, which requires clear sightedness. Vision is also vital to enable leaders to glimpse the opportunities that lie ahead and rigorously pursue them, rather than succumbing to the paralysis of burnout. Values are needed to create trust and underpin any action taken. But the values of true leadership must go deeper than short-term shareholder profit or the next election poll; only then will there be a real connection, and meaningful interaction, between the people and their leaders.

It is telling that, despite the dire economic outlook, we have reached record participation numbers for our 2012 Annual Meeting in Davos. This demonstrates the fact that leaders feel the need to come together in order to collectively and collaboratively address the daunting global challenges that lie ahead of us. Davos provides a real opportunity for leaders from business, government and civil society to hone a collective vision and build collaborative values. This Annual Meeting in particular will be important if we are to replace our current radar system of short-term, situational crisis management, with a compass providing clear direction and guidance based on long-term values.

The main topic on the top of everyone's minds in Davos will inevitably be the rebalancing and deleveraging that is reshaping the global economy. But let us not forget that the purpose of the Annual Meeting is also to ensure that leaders exercise their responsibilities with moral integrity, and that the entrepreneurial spirit is harnessed for the public interest. The theme of this year's Annual Meeting is "The Great Transformation: Shaping New Models", precisely because we are in an era of profound change that urgently requires new ways of thinking instead of just more business-as-usual.

Leadership based on vision and values will go a long way to regaining trust and beating the burnout, but only if leaders themselves can prove through concrete actions that social responsibility and moral obligations are not just empty words.