

Applying the personal to philanthropy and the polycrisis

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Of late, I have noted increasing discussions within philanthropy about the polycrisis we face, in terms of the climate and nature crises, entrenched economic inequalities, and social injustices impacting people, society and the natural world. These discussions often consider philanthropy's role in response to the polycrisis to bring about meaningful and much needed change at a local, regional, national and international level. This includes things like the provision of resources, investing our endowments, for those of us with them, more ethically and sustainably, seeking to support and enhance civil society through our non-monetary resources like convening and influencing, and so on.

In spite of our efforts, the challenges posed by the polycrisis are stark. This requires us to ask difficult questions of ourselves. Are we evolving rapidly enough? Are we being ambitious enough? Are we doing enough?

It is these questions that lead me to think that when considering the assets at our disposal in response to the polycrisis, we must consider the role of leadership. In charitable foundations like John Ellerman Foundation, leadership spans three interconnected spheres. The first is leadership within individual philanthropic organisations, the second is leadership within the sector and the third, the most ambitious, is leadership in society.

Over the last few months, I have been afforded the opportunity to consider leadership and the polycrisis in quite some detail, as a guest editor, alongside Tendisai Chigwedere, formerly of TrustAfrica and now with William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, of the March 2024 issue of Alliance Magazine on the topic of 'What leadership can philanthropy provide?' (which can be accessed [by clicking here](#)).

Ruminations on philanthropy and the polycrisis have led me to realise just how much of a personal journey leadership is. I have long laboured under the notion that it was possible, and even my preference, to keep my 'work self' separate from my 'personal self'. This is by no means a unique stance, as it has not always been the way that one was encouraged to bring their 'whole self' into the different parts of their lives, including at work. The reality is that for those of us working in civil society, the professional is so often personal too. We are drawn to the work we do because of our values, ethics and experiences. Add in our more hybrid ways of working and the polycrisis, and it is fair to say that more than ever, the boundaries between the personal and professional are blurring, disappearing even.

Accepting the potential of applying the personal to one's leadership is part daunting, part energising and lots of other things too that I can't quite articulate. It reminds me of the Generative Somatics work that I was introduced to by the developer and founder of this work, Staci Haines, as a member of the funder group that supported the Resourcing Racial Justice initiative set up during the Covid-19 pandemic. Staci helped us to consider the ways in which our core needs of safety, belonging, dignity and resources, alongside our emotions, conditioned tendencies, embodied responses and feelings, and inherited ancestry manifest in all that we do. There is an enormity and overwhelm to such a realisation, but it also offers clarity and calm. The realisation is a lesson to us all that our past informs our present and future, and that in reflecting on and understanding our throughline as individuals and within the different communities and spaces we have been part of, we can be part of the solution to the problems we see and experience.

Another reason I resisted this idea of the personal in one's leadership is because of the concept of authentic leadership. On the face of it, it is a most laudable concept. It encourages self-awareness, transformative experiences, storytelling and a commitment to personal development in order to produce empowered and strong leaders that connect authentically with those they work with. So why do I find myself squirming when people espouse its many virtues and benefits? Put simply, I think that some people get to be more authentic than others. Some people risk less or very little by being their whole and authentic selves. Others know all too well that by revealing more about who we are, we can quickly be reduced down to a label or a stereotype. Or we can quickly find ourselves trying to put others at ease and to tamper down any discomfort or discord that might follow.

Slowly but surely though, I can feel my perspective on the personal in one's leadership journey shifting. This is helped enormously by those I have the privilege of knowing and working with across movements in pursuit of economic, social and environmental justice that do lead with their whole diverse selves within the communities they operate in. This is what enables us to develop inspiring spaces that contain a multitude of identities and ideologies. This is what enables us to make real progress. This is exactly what we need within institutional philanthropy.

In reflecting on the personal in leadership, I have been in discussions about the importance of allyship and accountability. I am sure we can all think back on times when we have worried that we failed as allies, or that we should have pushed for more accountability, but settled for the status quo. Practically my whole career has been within systems, sectors and institutions that are in need of disruption and change. I convince myself that as an insider with an outsider or pragmatist's perspective, I can, in community with others, bring about lasting and meaningful change. Sometimes this is exactly what happens. Other times it isn't.

I rationalise my choices by saying that 'One step forward, two steps back is still one step forward'. I wonder if this is enough in the face of a polycrisis. This leads me to reflect on how we can reimagine accountability so that it is truly multi-directional. It will mean taking the feedback we receive, sitting with it and using it as an opportunity to say yes to transformation and progress. It also requires us to resist that initial feeling that sometimes occurs when we hear difficult feedback and that is to take it personally and to become defensive.

When thinking about accountability, I wonder too about ambition. Not in terms of things like growing an organisation or an individual's profile, but rather about whether we are doing enough to optimise and make use of all our assets, including our social and political capital and our investments? Are we working towards a world where we will be required less, if at all? Are we centring credible and lived experience voices, rather than our own? Are we creating new things when better things already exist? This is what motivates us at John Ellerman Foundation to do as much as we can to share our assets, such as our independence, our wealth, our ability to operate in the long-term, our voice, and our access to power, with those seeking justice and reform.

I expect I will always struggle with the idea of bringing our whole selves to work. However, I am much clearer now in my belief that our professional selves will not get us far enough fast enough. Current and future generations are facing crises and difficulties that are the direct result of our failure to prevent and/or dismantle a wide range of oppressive and extractive systems from arising in the first place. We can delay no longer, and must do all that we can now and in the coming years and decades to imagine and resource new ways of being for people, society and the natural world.