

*Editor's note: This article is dedicated to the memory of World Business Academy Fellow and Trustee Claire Nuer. It is excerpted from a speech Claire gave during a presentation at the World Business Academy in Chicago at last year's President's Council and Annual Meeting.*

## ECO-SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

*Claire Nuer, founder of Learning as Leadership (LAL), and a member consultant of Peter Senge's Society for Organizational Learning, was a business owner and international consultant and lecturer, based in Paris. She was also a World Business Academy Fellow and Trustee.*



**T**his year's World Business Academy conference had many presentations addressing the turmoil in the world as we approach the year 2000. I heard many ideas: "it is possible to shift paradigms"; "we are all interdependent"; "we confuse the cause and the effects"; "there is a Y2K crisis and the financial markets are in turmoil." I believe, therefore, the only hope is for human beings to start turning to other human beings.

We need to build interdependence beyond competition, to have confidence and trust in each other. We need honest, direct, truth-telling leaders to prepare for the year 2000. We are now in a world that we were not trained to understand—and it is escaping from our control. I heard that a leader is someone who invites people to participate, includes those who were excluded, and evokes the forgotten potential in people. I would like to address some of these challenges, and, using my own experience as a starting point, look at how we as leaders can create a shift, both individually and collectively, for the year 2000.

### **The Journey**

I want to share a little about my journey and the questions that have driven me for a long time. I was born in 1933 in the Jewish ghetto of Paris—not a wonderful idea to be born at that time in

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that place. Many people were talking then about commitment, as they are today. Grand ideas. Remember? Most of you are probably too young to recall, although you must have heard about it. We were talking about defending noble values such as “work, family, nation.” We were talking about recreating the world. We didn’t call it “new paradigm,” we called it “new order.” The communists, the capitalists, the nationalists, the leftists, the fascists—all the “ists.” Everybody wanted to make a difference. That is what I was hearing as a young child—and it all led to unprecedented destruction. I know it is not pleasant, but these are questions that never leave me.

Today, as well, we all want leaders who make a difference. We talk about the need for clear vision, passion, enthusiasm, commitment. Hitler provided that to millions of people—as did Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. These were people who, looking for how to make a difference for their people—but only for *their* people, with *their* truths and *their* values—led to the worst destruction, massacres, and genocide in the history of mankind. The perpetrators of these crimes were not barbarians, but well-educated people like you and me. Millions of men and women—leaders, scientists, philosophers, physicians, professors, artists, engineers, bankers, business leaders—became killers without whom such destruction would have been impossible. This has always posed a big question for me, because it shows me our daily responsibility—if we do nothing to take a stand, then we become implicit participants.

During the Holocaust, businesses made a fortune exploiting racism and hatred for their own financial gain. What would allow us to be certain to not reproduce or simply continue to create companies that can lead to an ex-Yugoslavia, Algeria, Auschwitz, and all the other current conflicts in the world today? I have to ask myself, if I had been born in Germany in 1923 instead of the Jewish ghetto in Paris in 1933, would I have been a Nazi? It is not an easy thing for me to consider. I wish I could say, “Who me? Impossible!” It gives me vertigo. But today, with my daughter, with my husband—mostly with my husband—and my colleagues, when I know that I am right, or when I think somebody is going to make me wrong, what do I do? What do you do? What are all the different ways that we “kill” other people every day, fearing for our own survival or loss of power? What does this mean? What is the teaching? How can we be leaders who will not perpetuate this kind of destruction?

If you look at little babies, they are born learners, until the point where they take on the culture of their environment. They are constantly learning, and once they learn something, once they

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know, they let it go and move on to something else. But as we grow older, we begin to do the opposite, driven more and more by our need to be right. We need to know more than others, so we hold on to our certainties.

Equality is not enough. We say we want to be equal, but for our ego, equal means more than, which is what we think we need in order to be acknowledged. Values like love and compassion—I can barely say these words. You are not supposed to mention such things, because they do not exist in the “ego” system. So what do we replace them with? With the constant search for other people’s acknowledgment, their acknowledgment of *me*. But for me to be more acknowledged than others, I need to push others down. I need to “kill.” In this system, I cannot be a team member. It is foolish to think that we can create functional teams as long as we each want to be the star that shines. We don’t want to be a link in the chain. This may seem pessimistic, but in reality it is optimistic, because when we take stock, when we see that this is not what we want, we can say, “I’m fed up.” As long as we kid ourselves and disguise reality, as long as we do not look at the costs, why should we change?

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### **Confronting the Wall**

Our safety is to stay within our habits, so there is no reason to change, unless there is an earthquake in our life—whether it is a disease, a separation, a bankruptcy—and then we are faced with a wall. I was a hidden child during the war, and all my family was deported except my mother. I cannot put that aside, although I tried until the age of 49. At that time, I went through a sort of second personal tragedy, which was disease. That is when the first one resurfaced. You never know when these things will resurface, but thank goodness they do, because our ego numbs these pains, and without them, we would have no way of shifting.

I confronted the wall when I was very ill, and since day after day I was not dying, which was not part of the prognosis, I began on this journey. I wanted to tell people, “Don’t wait until that point to change your life!” Do you think I have been successful? Not at all. Business leaders come to our workshops and they say “My life is great, I was born very fortunate, I’m wealthy, intelligent, acknowledged, I have everything... Well, I am getting divorced, but that doesn’t mean anything—” Too often our happiness is just on the surface, the tip of the iceberg, the part we can see. What is the deeper reality? What does it mean to be happy? What does it mean to be connected? How can we be

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happy and be a killer? As long as we don't empower other people's richness and touch upon our collective potential—not just *my* potential—it will not be safe. We will always be a threat to others, and they to us.

I believe that as long as we do not allow our consciousness to emerge and be implemented on a daily basis, we cannot build companies that will be different. As a matter of fact, we are all in front of this wall, but we neither see it nor recognize it.

If there is a wall, there is the other side of the wall, and to go beyond it requires basic daily vigilance and safety, both of which can only come from us. When we function from the “ego” system, we judge with doubt, not with trust. Our opening to the world is through doubt. We think, “What are they going to do to me? What are they going to take from me? What are they going to say to me?” In those moments, we react, lashing out at others out of fear. We need instead to model vigilance with our words and our actions. We need to stop this constant flow of the “ego” system in all the little things, and it is difficult, because they often go totally unnoticed; there is no glory or acknowledgment in them. Yet there is a benefit to starting with the little things: Others really feel our honesty, and that can open the door of trust. Enough, hopefully, to begin the journey.

Now you may wonder, what about those who are not in power, the “little people,” who are innocent victims of these killer bosses? I hate my answer, but the fact is that Jane, Joe, or whoever, is also a killer—they are just not at the same level, and the day he or she will be at that level, they will be even worse killers than their boss, because they will be seeking revenge. It does not mean they do not have goals, or that they do not have the potential of being human, it simply means that, like each and every one of us, they are in the “human having” system.

Given that, starting the change process with leaders, in my experience, is much easier. Why? Because not only do Jane and Joe have all their doubts, they also believe in and envy the image of “successful people.” They will often begin the journey only if they see their leader doing it, too. If we start the change effort with Jane or Joe, their response is predominantly “Why me?” They feel like hostages. It is not easy, but generally speaking, if we want to move more quickly—and the year 2000 is approaching—we need to engage leaders of organizations, who can then involve the rest of the world more quickly.

### **A Larger Responsibility**

The United States is such a privileged place! From here it feels like the world is at peace. It is not, and it hasn't been since the last war. In the United States, we feel that it does not concern us

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or our companies. But to be responsible leaders, we need to take into account the whole world, not just our little piece of it.

Which reminds me of an experience I had with Joe Jaworski, the author of *Synchronicity*. We were at a gathering of business leaders in Bretton Woods in 1994, fifty years after the Bretton Woods Agreements. It was a very powerful session. It led me to ask myself, “Fifty years from today, looking back, what would I want to have decided?” That question led us to gather together over 300 leaders from around the world in Auschwitz. Why? Because it’s a place where in three days we can become aware of the ultimate destruction that our ego leads to. I like to remember that, because I really believe that the leaders who joined us there carry that experience with them on a daily basis with their families and in their organizations, like images tied around their fingers reminding them at each moment to step out of their prison, the prison of their ego. This brings me back to my question of how to engage others in becoming more aware when they are not in front of a crisis which leaves them no choice.

### **What is a Noble Goal?**

For me, the question requires clarity on what it is we no longer want to create, which in turn leads us to what I call our “noble goal.” What is a noble goal? First, it is not an objective. In our usual world of having, our goals are outcomes. As a matter of fact, I tell people to let go of the outcome, because when we are driven by the outcome we have fear. In fact, goals and outcomes play two totally different roles in our experience. A goal is something that is connected to the future. A result is something that belongs to the past and that can be used to analyze the present. When we believe that our goals are outcomes, they become the objectives that usually drive us to run and run—I want this and then that and then the next thing, and it is a never-ending race.

In everyday life we almost never let go of the outcome. We are just consumed with the hope of possessing more, impressing more, having more power over others, and so, within ourselves, we are always trapped in this insecurity. And yet there is a different starting point to be found in what we no longer want. We have not really learned how to find our passion, our noble goal, we are not taught that, but when we look at what it is we no longer want, deeply, and we squeeze it like a lemon to get that essential juice, my “never ever again” looks strangely like my noble goal.

For example, I no longer want to participate in creating a context for destruction, and my noble goal is to co-create a context for humanity. This goal can take on different faces; it can

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inspire our entire life. It doesn't mean that we ever reach it or achieve it; simply, it draws us ever forward. I'll use words that are strong, that frighten me: instead of being dependent upon my ego, my "little Hitler" inside, I choose to be dependent upon my noble goal. My objectives and goals begin to take on different faces. My path, my challenges, my relationships, my work—all will depend upon my noble goal. I don't know if noble goal is the right term; it seems very well-accepted here, but it is not at all in France. We are probably too Cartesian for that. Once again, though, the roots of our passion and *raison d'être* can often be found in clarifying what we no longer want.

Worst of all, most of the time we don't connect with our passion; we make do without it. It is sad, because we do not enjoy ourselves: Work is work, and fun is fun; we fragment things and life becomes shrunken.

### **Making the Shift**

First of all it is true that this work on our ego takes a lifetime, but the shift, the decision, requires just one second. Once we are really aware of what we no longer want, at a cellular level, we see very clearly that there are two contexts we can choose to create: one of destruction or one of humanity. At every moment we have a decision to make. We can assess whether we want to make it in this context or that context, and so life becomes much simpler and clearer.

Whatever a person's noble goal is, if it is a *noble* goal, it necessarily supports all others. It may be expressed in a different way, but it usually points in a similar direction. So if we choose the context of the noble goal, which is a context that supports everyone, then it supports humanity and ourselves as human beings. In the years to come, it is important—moment by moment—to be vigilant of what context we choose for our thoughts, our decisions, and our actions. It is not that in this space we become saints, but that we realize we can actually be imperfect. The other context requires that we be perfect, and that is a heavy burden to carry.

### **Surviving in a World of "Killers"**

How can we survive without a noble goal in this world of killers? Where are we going and what will we become? Some people think we are more fragile functioning from a noble goal than without. I would say yes and no. We are very fragile when we are always against something; we become exhausted. I experienced that not only in the business world, but with illness as well: The fear of dying led me to fight against disease. A noble

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goal, however, is not about surrendering to the killers. If the Americans had not come to Normandy, I would not even be here today. So there are moments when it is really out of the question to surrender. It is not about surrendering to the dangers of the system of inhumanity, but rather not surrendering to my own danger, and then moment by moment co-creating something different. It is possible. It sounds crazy and irrational and is even difficult for me to think about, but it is possible. How many synchronicities, how much potential we reconnect with! It's not that they didn't exist before—or maybe they didn't—but the fact is that we see them when we act from our noble goals. How much constructive power is possible when we add upon each other to co-create something different?

I don't want to sound like I'm in the clouds and not in reality. I'm a very down-to-earth, rational person and I am speaking from my own experience. And it was a very difficult experience, believe me, because when I was told I was going to die in three months, it is not that I was happy three months later when I hadn't died. It's not that the physicians were happy. I was terrified because I had not died, and if I had not died yet, then surely it would be this morning. I had to live for a very long time with that fear of not having died—and of dying. The difficulty is to go through the fear and dissonance and to co-create, with others, in a framework different from our usual one. And once again to be driven by our passion.

Both my children went through business school, and in France the competition and the need to succeed is the same as here. But you don't need to go to business school to be a killer; we all learn it. Let us not kid ourselves, or else we will never change. It's not that we are good or bad, nasty or kind, it is just that we are afraid of others, others are afraid of us—and rightly so. We are dependent upon our “ego system,” the protective mechanism that we developed in order to survive in society—in essence, everything that I have been describing. In our constant rush to achieve more, to be better than, we do not see the costs—the pain we cause to others and ourselves. But when we see the rate of divorce, the violence perpetrated by our children in school, the ethnic cleansing in so many different corners of the world, we must face the fact that we can never really escape the costs of the ego-system. We are raising children who are killers, in the very real sense of the word. Is there an alternative?

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### **The Eco-System**

As we work on no longer being killers and enemies, we enter into a place that is very different, that of the “eco-system.” In the

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eco-system, we operate beyond competition, where there are no “stars”; we are all a link in the chain, adding upon each others’ strengths and weaknesses. We are safe and we make others safe to be and express who they really are. I am not speaking about a rosy Utopia. In this space there is compassion, trust, and communication, and creating that often demands going through our greatest fears. Instead of protecting ourselves, as we do in the ego-system, and perpetuating problems, we take the risk to surface tough issues and communicate directly about them. We support others toward our collective goals.

And it can create disturbance. Pioneers have always created disturbance and turbulence, and that is the difficult part. So are we ready to bear with that for the sake of creating a context for humanity?

Please do not walk away without changing anything for yourself. You can take that decision I have been describing right away—even if you do not yet know your noble goal. Do you want to remain a killer? Do you want to contribute to killer companies, or not? And that question already provides you with a different context in which to experiment with something new.



*Claire and her organization have been working with my company for more than two years to help us align with our goals and implement our mission. With her passing last month I feel I have lost a teacher, a mentor, a soulmate, and very close friend.*

*Claire was not religious, but in my opinion, she was one of the most deeply spiritual people I have ever met. In many ways, she taught what all the great prophets taught, about the power of love and connection to our highest and best self, which she called our noble goal. She believed profoundly in synchronicity. She reveled in it as it unfolded in her life and in the lives of others. So as painful on many levels as it is and as deeply as I feel the terrible loss of Claire’s passing, I can’t help but feel that the universe continues to unfold in its mysterious and synchronous ways—and that the flame of Claire’s passion will continue to burn and be carried on through her work.*

*George E. McCown, Chairman, World Business Academy  
Co-Founder and Managing Director, McCown De Leeuw & Co.*

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