

An interview with Sudhanshu Palsule

The Social Leader

Sudhanshu Palsule is an award-winning author, educator and leadership coach. He is also an associate Professor at several business schools including Duke CE.

His recent book, *The Social Leader*, written in collaboration with Frank Guglielmo, explores the leadership challenges of “The Social Age”. Sudhanshu works with global leadership teams from organisations such as Unilever, Astra Zeneca, the UN and Roche. Much of his work focuses on the leadership and communication challenges implicit in technological and business model disruption. For him, great leaders embrace uncertainty, creating strategies that take disruption as a given.

Mark Johnson, Associate Consultant with Visible Leaders, talks to Sudanshu about his views on ‘The Social Age’.



The Leader in the Social Age

We hear a great deal about the changing norms of leadership. We are told that Millennials, now in their 20s, have a very different concept of what makes a leader, compared to the archetype admired by the generation that went before them.

Sudhanshu Palsule has studied this cohort and their views on corporate life and leadership. But he is no ordinary researcher. Currently based at the University of Cambridge, he is an ex-Physicist and an expert in chaos theory. He is also strongly influenced by Buddhism and its emphasis on the reality of the present moment over all other tenses and realities. He is not your average leadership coach, or your average business thinker.

A conversation with Sudhanshu is like a walk through a hall of mirrors, in which different strands of thinking collide for the good. He is at one moment super rational, the next almost mystic. He is both humble and evangelical. He is a one off and an original thinker. Above all, he radiates positivity and optimism, embracing disruption as a life-force, demanding that we face it with him.

We caught up with him in Cambridge, determined to better understand his thoughts on leadership and communications in the Social Age.

The Social Age

First, we were keen to hear his definition of the “Social Age”. In what way is our age “social” and how does this affect the role?

Sudhanshu explains:

“Years ago, the power of the leader depended upon their control over information. The leader held the information. Others did not. The leader chose who to share it with, and this was fundamental to their power, their authority – and their style of communication.

Over the years, major technological changes have democratised access to information. The invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1440 was one such event. The arrival of radio and TV were others. And the ubiquity of social and other shared online media is the most recent technological change that has influenced Millennials and the way they think. Put simply, social media has created a level playing field. We all have access to pretty much the same information. Businesses that recognise this are becoming less hierarchical and more open, as well as less bureaucratic and more like networked communities.”

Sudhanshu believes that this significantly redefines what a leader is, and how they should behave. He describes a world in which the lines between public and private information are blurred. He points to the rise of global, networked communities, held together by the knowledge that they share.

He goes on:

“Today, everyone has a megaphone. The inhabitants of the Social Age live life out loud. They can be heard just as easily as their leaders can be”.

We asked him about his research with Millennials:

“What we find is that they don’t accept the old idea that a leader has a right to be the leader because they are the leader. They see through this circularity. They are less deferential. They respect hierarchy less. They look beyond such structures to the individual. They are much more interested in the core values of the leader as a person.”

Sudhanshu’s research finds Millennials asking questions such as: will this person inspire me? Will they give me useful feedback? And - critically - are they authentic? In his view, these are findings that can’t be ignored by modern leaders seeking to lead effectively.

We pushed back on this point, highlighting the many successful businesses in which hierarchy is alive and well.

“I’m not saying that such businesses don’t still exist. But I do think that a modern leader has to think hard about what such trends mean for them and their organisation”.

The Leader as Mayor

At the heart of Sudhanshu's thinking is a view that the age of the leader "as General" is over. He does not believe that directing others with certainty and confidence is any longer enough. For him, the modern leader, operating in the Social Age should think of himself or herself as an elected Mayor with constituents. His book closes with the following memorable words:

"If this sounds like you need to act like a politician whose conversations, actions and behaviours will be covered and commented on by the media – well, that is the price of being a Mayor. As a leader, you are no longer the General. You are the Mayor."

Behind this simple metaphor lies an entire philosophy. And it is not easily summed up. The Social Leader is a complex, demanding read, full of insights and tangential explorations. We were keen to get to the heart of some of the key themes and strands. So we started with a tangent of our own, and asked how Buddhism plays into his work. He replied thoughtfully:

"That's an interesting question... I guess that one of the problems we all face as human beings is that we so rarely experience the present moment. So often, we are living partly in the past. Or, we are distracted and anxious about the future. Part of my work is about drawing people into the present, so that they can think and communicate without distraction".

Mindfulness and Leadership

Sudhanshu has a great deal to say about this form of mindfulness. For him, it is a crucial tool of leadership. He believes that great leaders are self-aware, have strong situational awareness (they can read the situation they are in), great peripheral awareness (they can spot the trends that will affect their future) and great “temporal awareness”, as in: an exceptional ability to compartmentalise and to stay in the present.

For him, these four aspects of awareness combine to help a leader to think more clearly and with greater strategic intelligence.

In an age where many traditional businesses are threatened by existentially disruptive forces, such strategic clarity matters more than ever. What is the *raison d'être* of a car insurer in a world of driverless cars? What is the purpose of healthcare when individuals own their own health data? What is the point of a financial advisor, in an age of reliable artificial intelligence? Such questions require a leader to have exceptional self-awareness and prescience.

As Sudhanshu says:

“Interpreting the future, in all of its uncertainty and ambiguity, is part of what leadership entails in the 21st Century.”

Clearly, this has profound implications for leadership communications. The leader must provide a narrative that helps his or her organisation to embrace uncertainty and necessary change.

We asked Sudhanshu whether or not, in his view, this has always been the case. Haven't self-awareness, prescience and an ability to communicate always been useful to a leader? And couldn't the same be said for authenticity? Haven't such leadership traits always been valuable?

Sudhanshu agreed up to a point:

“Yes, of course, you could go back to Roman times or to the mid 20th Century if you like, and mindfulness and authenticity would all have been useful traits for a leader. But our point, in the book, is that these traits are becoming more necessary. In the Social Age, there is no hiding place for the leader. So they need to be more self-aware, more prescient and more authentic as they lead.

Above all, they need to connect with their people. Hence the analogy of the Mayor and the General. A General doesn't need to know his people. They know him and that's enough. A Mayor can't behave that way. A Mayor needs to connect, and in an authentic way that inspires and wins hearts and minds. Their ability to lead depends upon the support they enjoy from those they lead. And this is much more the case in the Social Age than it used to be.”

The Leader as a Performative Artist

Sudhanshu's Buddhist influences add nuance to his definition of authentic behaviour and communications. For him, authenticity is not about a single sense-of-self, repeated without reflection. But, rather, about a core self that is revealed and modulated via a variety of conscious "performances" that are mindful of the situation and the audience.

It is typical of our fascinating and meandering conversation that, in the midst of a discussion about business leadership, Sudhanshu underlines his point by quoting from a transcendentalist poet:

"I don't really believe in the idea that we are one person. As Walt Whitman memorably said: I am large, I contain multitudes."

Sudhanshu himself is a multi-dimensional thinker. Indeed, what makes him unique is this guru-like ability to connect mystical, philosophical thoughts to the more practical world of business. In an instant, he does just that:

"In the Social Age, a leader has to be highly attuned to his or her various audiences, and able to flex their communication accordingly."

For him, there is nothing inauthentic about such social agility:

“Now, more than ever, it’s vital that leaders have this performative skill. A performative leader is able to connect on multiple levels. They are able to actualise the self that will be most effective for that particular situation or set of stakeholders. They flex their communication and behaviours without losing a sense of who they are, and without compromising their core values.”

In *The Social Leader*, Sudhanshu stresses that this only works if the leader has a strong sense-of-self, and a clear sense of their strengths, weaknesses and values. He is unashamedly critical of traditional performance management systems, and focuses instead on the need for leaders to find authenticity by getting to understand themselves better:

“I’ve seen organisations that attempt to measure their leaders via fifteen supposedly universal competencies. “My concern is that, handled insensitively, such systems focus unduly on how to fix the bad bits. They can easily overlook the point that we are all individuals, and that - by actualising our best self - we become more confident, more authentic and, yes, of course, better leaders”.

Lessons from Miles Davis

When we ask him about how to self-actualise and how to become more authentic, Sudhanshu replies with another left-field quote.

“As Miles Davis said: sometimes you have to play for a long time to be able to play like yourself.”

In the book, there is plenty of practical advice about this journey to self-awareness and self-actualisation. In particular, he recommends that we all focus on the “crucible moment” in our lives. He suggests that we think about events such as arriving in a new culture, taking on a new challenge or putting a big problem right. And, he suggests that as we look back on these “crucible moments”, we think about how we behaved, what we did right, what we did wrong – and what this tells us about who we are today.

This section of The Social Leader is highly practical, and asks us to build up a picture of who we are, based on all the past selves we recall. How did we deal with responsibility without authority? How did we deal with resistance to our ideas? How did we cope with promotion? How did we deal with success? Or failure?

Many authors have stressed that authenticity is key to leadership. But what makes Sudhanshu Palsule’s work unusual is that he acknowledges that discovering your authentic self requires work. Better still, he lays out a methodology for such self-discovery in terms that are easy to understand, and relatively easy to implement.

Leading Social, Networked Organisations

As we talk further, Sudhanshu connects this last strand of thought to another: the changing shape of organisations in the Social Age.

For him, transparency is a given, so the leader must embrace it. For him, shared information is a given, so the authenticity of the leader becomes key. In his vision of the future, there is scant respect for hierarchy and the leader must prove their right to lead, day-in, day-out. This sounds like a tough gig. But Sudhanshu qualifies the point:

“The era of the all-knowing leader is over. Today, strong leaders have to acknowledge this. They need to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty and their own lack of expertise. And they need to be aware of what it is that those they lead actually are looking for in a leader. This is changing fast”.

We are back to our core theme of authenticity. But Sudhanshu quickly takes us somewhere else:

“Today, some of the old societal structures, such as the Church and Class have fallen away. So many people look to work, and to their leader, to provide scaffolding to help shape to their lives.”

The Social Leader

In *The Social Leader*, he describes this “scaffolding” further. His view is that a leader in the Social Age still needs to provide clarity, as always. But he stresses that leaders today must also deliver emotional engagement, social inclusion and a sense of purpose. And, that in an age where disruption, rather than continuity, is the norm, the leader needs to be ready to evolve as fast as the networked world around them does.

Here, he seems to be ringing a warning bell about leaders who find themselves disconnected from those they lead, left behind by disruption that the network embraces, but which the leader fails to grasp.

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When it comes to leadership thinking, Sudanshu isn't just part of the zeitgeist, he's shaping it. I think his ideas about the leader as Mayor are as fascinating as they are insightful, and for us as experts in leadership communications, have a profound impact on our work.

In advising senior leaders we find more and more that we are having to navigate increasingly demanding and complex constituencies with all the nuances and uncertainties of a political campaign.

The concept of social leadership may contain some radical and challenging ideas while, at its heart, it's about how a leader connects with their world. And at the heart of that sits something we at Visible Leaders feel passionately about. Effective communication.



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