

# SUSANA MALCORRA

## IN PURSUIT OF WHAT MATTERS: PASSION FOR THE BOTTOM LINE

*Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions*



UPEACE PRESS

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University for Peace



# **IN PURSUIT OF WHAT MATTERS: PASSION FOR THE BOTTOM LINE**

Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions

SUSANA MALCORRA



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Primera Edición

***Pasión por el resultado.***

***El liderazgo femenino ante las grandes decisiones.***

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First Edition

***In Pursuit of what Matters:***

***Passion for the Bottom Line.***

***Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions.***

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*“To Torcuato, my husband, who gave sense  
to Mario Benedetti’s verses  
If I love you it is because you are  
my love, my accomplice and everything  
And in the street, elbow to elbow  
we’re much more than two”*

*My thanks go to Lisa.  
Without her support and advice it would’ve been  
very difficult for this book to take shape and  
accurately reflect my voice in English.*



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PASSION FOR THE BOTTOM LINE**

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## **Presentation**

A study of specific practices to resolve complex situations involving hundreds of thousands of human lives or aspects essential to building sustainable peace, is indeed a unique and significant contribution. Especially at this moment, during a time of great uncertainty, great instability and serious threats to humanity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And even more so because of the need to make real progress in relation to climate change. This is one of the great contributions of this book, written by Susana Malcorra, *In Pursuit of What Matters: Passion for the Bottom Line. Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions*. From it, we can extract positive lessons and good practices about leadership in an era where space and time have changed, where these two determining variables – life and death – both of human beings and of the planet, have mutated. We live in an era, in a historical period, in which space is global, interdependence is planetary and time is characterized by "instantaneity", where everything

moves in immediate real time. These aspects make decision-making, facing crises and seeking innovative solutions more complex.

Every crisis brings with it a lack of adequate, accurate information and a perception of urgency with regards to decision-making. This places greater demands on leaders and a greater pressure to generate new responses that go beyond bureaucratic routines. Previous responses have been overtaken by the crisis situation. New, innovative, inclusive options are required from various actors in accelerated times. In this book by Susana Malcorra, *In Pursuit of What Matters: Passion for the Bottom Line. Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions.*, readers will find real experiences in solving different situations in both the private and public spheres, as well as within the global international sphere, in the context of multilateralism and the United Nations. This book brings together the life experiences of Susana Malcorra, who held several directorial positions at IBM and served as CEO of TELECOM Argentina, Chancellor of the Argentine Republic, Senior Official of the World Food Programme, and Chief of Staff for former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon.

In a direct and enjoyable way, Susana Malcorra sheds light on the complexity of decision-making processes, which always involve negotiations, and how leadership is crucial for achieving effective and stable solutions capable of resolving life-or-

death situations for millions of human beings.

Within the current context of the great COVID-19 pandemic that is sweeping the world, there is only one essential goal: saving lives. That is the task today, in the year 2020. This will be achieved through cooperation and solidarity between people and through international consensus. Experiences in the humanitarian field, such as the fight against Ebola, allow us to visualize experiences – even if they did not reach the widespread expansion of the current pandemic – that are significant for understanding the role of international cooperation, which currently shows serious deficits. This is an essential part of this book.

In Pursuit of What Matters: Passion for the Bottom Line. Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions. teaches essential aspects of leadership that are vital to those interested in conflict resolution and transformation, diplomacy, prevention and negotiation. The book points out, in my opinion, three very relevant aspects, among many others: passion for the task at hand, empathy to undertake consensus-building, and perseverance and tenacity for effective achievement.

A passion for the final result is the central element for amassing achievements and reaching the designed goals. This demands innovation, imagination and creativity. And in this, the role of women is essential. Empathy is a fundamental quality; it is about understanding the other in his/her cultural context, and from there, being able

to build a shared vision. There is no achievement when something remains unfinished; it amounts to nothing. Perseverance and constancy are crucial in reaching these goals. This is achieved when a passion for the result is expressed and empathy is put into play. This outstanding book teaches us a foundational trilogy for good decision-making.

Passion is the vital energy for overcoming difficulties, even more so in highly complex contexts such as multilateral decision-making, in the face of serious crises which, due to interdependence in the current context, become global crises. In all spheres, the presence of women in management and leadership positions is limited. It is essential to overcome this situation. More women in decision-making positions will help solve problems and strengthen peace. This is also part of this book.

In short, the results are what counts. But we only know this at the end, when we are certain, when the result is there and visible. In the context of Susana Malcorra's book, this is evident. Firstly, from the fact that thousands of lives have been saved. Secondly, by the assessments made by the different actors, including the United Nations Security Council. Finally, in an essential way, by a self-evaluation of the proposed achievements, into which the energy of passion, perseverance and the capacity to work together with the most diverse state actors, international organizations, NGOs and other relevant political actors in each case,

were invested. All of this is immersed in different bureaucratic cultures that make decision-making processes even more complex. We are in an era of great turbulence. Learning from how decisions are made, how spaces for dialogue are generated, how to empathize, and how words and action are interpreted during negotiation processes, is an urgent need.

For the University for Peace, established pursuant to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 35/55 of 1980, it is a privilege to make Susana Malcorra's life experiences in decision-making processes, which are of great importance, available to a very wide public. This UPEACE Press book makes an essential contribution to the UPEACE mandate, as it celebrates four decades of existence, by promoting the global education of future leaders for peace, conflict transformation and international cooperation and understanding. It also promotes peace through postgraduate education to build peaceful societies within a context of sustainable international peace.

Francisco Rojas Aravena  
Rector

Rodrigo Carazo Campus  
March 2020.



*There is no end.  
There is no beginning.  
There is just the infinite passion of life.*

*Federico Fellini*





## **Introduction**

In recent years, I've been asked to give a number of talks on topics ranging from international commerce to peace and security and from women's rights to leadership. While these opportunities allow me to draw from and share my life experiences, they also provide me with an occasion to reflect and engage in self-analysis. The highlight for me is always the last half hour or so when I hand the microphone over to the audience and listen to their comments and questions. I call this "the time of cross-pollination," or when we have the chance to learn from each other.

During these exchanges, I'm often asked about the seemingly unusual trajectory that my career has taken from starting in executive positions in large, private sector companies (until the early 2000s I was CEO of the third largest company in my country) to international diplomacy with the United Nations and then serving my own country of Argentina as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship.

This book attempts to provide an answer to that recurring question. However, it also would not be accurate to treat those different career stages as unrelated events in my life. I am a staunch believer in the integration between the public and private aspects of life. If I did not include my personal experiences and motivations in this narrative, I would be providing only a partial and unrepresentative view of what has guided and informed my professional decisions.

My family's origin and the place where I was born have had a significant influence on my values and my attitude. Spending my childhood and adolescence in a neighborhood of the city of Rosario, in the Santa Fe province of Argentina, a neighborhood marked by the spirit of immigrants from many different parts of the world, taught me the value of work and perseverance to overcome challenges and move forward in life.

However, I also learned that it is equally important to be able to maintain roots and return to where you came from and be able to look your neighbors in the eye. My father always said that one should act as if everything one does today could be tomorrow's newspaper headline.

I was fortunate with the school my parents chose for me. The Dominican sisters who ran it were extraordinary women of their time. From a religious standpoint rather than a political one, they deeply understood the special period that was

the late sixties and early seventies in terms of its importance for equality and social progress. They strived to be an active part of our community, conscious that they belonged to it, and always offered support and guidance.

They introduced me to a theoretical framework that underpinned my need to blend the public with private, the person and the persona, as I later learned that Jung postulated. But their main lesson was to impress upon me the deep sense of personal growth and fulfillment that derives from devoting yourself to achieve the goals you faithfully believe in.

This book is, in a sense, an account of the contrasting experiences of a woman leader in highly diverse professional arenas, each one with its own goals, culture, opportunities and limitations. But, in another sense, all these experiences are identical in their most fundamental aspect: what leads to success, what reconciles the internal contradictions present in every domain, is, invariably, an overriding passion for the bottom line. What is transferable from one arena to another is passion. The challenge is to identify the bottom line.

Of course, we cannot afford to neglect the recognized management skills that must be adapted to every environment, the sources of information and expertise that one must discover and manage, and the networks of people – in different positions and with differential power and influence – that

are fundamental for the leader to integrate in each arena. Doing so alone, however, does not guarantee success. Success requires the passion that nourishes empathy, fosters flexibility, instills humility after setbacks, and ensures adaptability in reaching the bottom line.

This book neither attempts to be an autobiography, nor it is chronologically organized. Rather, it is an anecdotal analysis of true experiences that I have lived in the course of my career; experiences on which I can now reflect on how different stakeholders (including myself) behaved and analyze the factors that determined our collective success or failure. These experiences illuminate the different facets and meanings that passion assumes in achieving your goals in very different organizations and in diverse circumstances. The crosscutting lesson is that passion for the bottom line is what leads to success.

The events described are not considered from an historical or political standpoint. At the same time, the experiences I highlight are real and are grounded in the actual historical events that took place. It would not be possible, for that reason, to narrate the experiences without factual references to some historical and political events. Given the purpose of this book, however, I do not elaborate on the interests or ideologies that underpin them.

The experiences that I depict also reflect the indispensable role that women play in achieving results in any organization. In our pursuit of

gender equality, we tend to efface the specific characteristics that women bring to decision-making and leadership which merit recognition. My experience confirms that, as women, we possess an impressive level of commitment and ability to stay focused on our goals, which are powerful factors contributing to an organization's success.

Lastly but not least, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the remarkable number of people with whom I had the great fortune to work. I learned immensely from them. I will not name them here for the simple reason that they are far too numerous to name.

I have always worked as part of a team. In teams, people hold different positions according to the stage of their lives and the phase of their career at the moment, as well as according to the priorities and conditions that each situation demands. I would be remiss if I were to name a single achievement that I alone can individually take credit for. What I find instead is many instances in which the passion that I brought to the table coalesced with that of other team members, regardless of their position. At times, this allowed us to collectively achieve our intended result, while in other cases we found in each other the strength to start over. To everyone who supported me along the way in aspiring for the stars, as well as in picking up the pieces to start again, I thank you very much. This narrative is as much yours as it is mine.



## Debut

My parents had a plan. They forged a vision for me from a young age. Its formulation was simple: I would only start working after graduating with a university degree. This was a big step for the family and for each of my parents personally, who had not had the opportunity themselves to attend university. Making the plan real was no small undertaking for a middle-class Argentinian family, but my parents had been very careful and had diligently laid the groundwork to make it possible. As is often the case, however, life had a different vision in store for me. Quite unexpectedly, when I was finishing my first year of college, my father passed away. My mother and I were left in a very difficult emotional situation from which, probably because of my young age, I recovered faster. I also found that the job, which they had wanted me to defer, soon eclipsed my studies in priority.

While continuing my studies, I started teaching high school-level Math at an adult night school.

It was a union school located in one of the train station areas of Rosario. Though my path to this job was unintentional and I was going through a hard time in my personal life, I loved my job from day one. I also found comfort in my extended family. Aunts, uncles and cousins were a permanent source of support, always caring for my wellbeing and always alert for the “teenager who had to make her way at night through the train station’s red-light district.”

A few months later, much to everyone’s relief, I was transferred to a closer school in my neighborhood where I taught Math and Physics. Although the new school was in a much better neighborhood, the school building itself was four long and gloomy blocks from the bus stop. To my surprise and delight, my students, who were mostly my seniors, were as busy in my “protection” as my family. At the end of the class, without saying a word, two or three students would accompany me to the “safe area” of the avenue. Over time, as we got to know each other better, occasionally they even gave me a ride home on their motorcycles.

Meanwhile, as I advanced in my own studies, new opportunities came my way. I was accepted as a part-time apprentice at the electronic laboratory of a small local company and I became an assistant to a Professor in my university.

Time lapsed quickly. In 1978, I graduated as an engineer specialized in electronics. By the



end of the year, I had sent my resume to every company that I imagined might be interested in hiring recently graduated female engineers. The process of finding a job at that time was humbling and taught me as much as the job I eventually landed. It involved two companies. The first one was a multinational corporation – Brown Boveri (BB) – in the field of industrial automation. The Professor I worked with, who was well connected in the company, introduced me and gave me a glowing recommendation to one engineer at BB who invited me to three to four interviews at their headquarters in Buenos Aires. As these trips were at my own expense, I sought to schedule as many other interviews as possible with other firms to optimize my time in Buenos Aires. One of these firms was IBM, with whom I had already taken a pre-employment screening test.

By chance, these two companies called me for an interview on the same day. I was to meet BB's human resources manager in the morning and an IBM sales manager later that afternoon.

The morning of my BB interview, I felt very optimistic. My understanding was that being called for a meeting with the human resources manager meant that I had succeeded in my previous technical interviews. Short of an offer, I expected at least a discussion of the terms of my employment.

I was proved completely wrong. As soon as I sat in his office, the human resources manager

immediately regretted to inform me that BB had decided not to hire women for the time being. Outraged, I confronted him: “are you telling me that during all the interviews I had in BB, for which I had to pay travel expenses, you did not realize that I was a woman and that Susana is a female name?” He remarked that there was nothing more he could do and our meeting abruptly ended.

In this shaken state of mind, I faced my afternoon interview. During my visits to Buenos Aires, I regularly stopped by the Lincoln Library in the city center, which was, then, the easiest place to access books and magazines from the United States. One time, I had read about IBM’s equal opportunity policy in terms of gender and race. I reminded myself of this to boost my spirits. I had also read that you had to be a salesperson first to build a career in the company. IBM considered this experience fundamental in acquiring a deep understanding of the customers and of its core business.

I arrived perfectly on time for my afternoon interview. Without delay, I soon found myself sitting in front of the sales manager of one of the company’s branches. After a brief exchange of greetings, he immediately asked me what function I wanted to fulfill in the company if I was hired. “A salesperson,” I replied without hesitation. After glancing at me in silence for a few seconds, and with the casual manner in which someone would inform

of the working hours of a company, he remarked, “We only have salesmen here. We do not have saleswomen.” Suddenly, my night school students in Rosario came to mind. If I could manage them, I certainly was not going to be intimidated by this man in a suit who shielded himself behind a desk larger than the table I dined at with my husband every evening in our apartment in Rosario. With the force of all the accumulated frustration of that day, I informed him that his answer was unacceptable since I had read that IBM claimed to be an equal opportunity employer. I added, “if all these claims from IBM are just a commercial strategy and the company has no real intention of living by them, then our conversation is over.”

While my response was seething with outrage and defiance, he seemed amused by it. With a friendly smile, he said that he was sharing with me some factual information that by no means implied a denial of the company’s principles. From that moment on, I felt that he had lost interest in the interview. After a few more minutes in which he politely asked me obligatory questions about my university performance and my short work experience, the interview concluded. I left convinced that my IBM career had ended before it had even started.

To my surprise, IBM called me back. In March 1979, I started working at the company’s headquarters in Buenos Aires. Even more surprising,

the sales manager who had initially interviewed me became my first boss and advocate. Several months later, after developing a mutual trust, he confided that his claim during our interview that there were no saleswomen in IBM was not “fully true.” He noted that there were some, albeit not many. He said that his intention was to provoke me in order to assess my reaction. Adding that he found my answer unquestionably abrupt and perhaps a bit harsh, he nonetheless acknowledged, “that was exactly what the situation demanded.” He noted, “I was convinced that you were precisely the type of person I was looking for; someone who would stand by her convictions.”

I realized, in retrospect, that my morning BB interview, which I considered so negative, ended up having a positive influence. This realization taught me that one should never feel discouraged. We can very rarely foresee the impact that events we experience will ultimately have in our lives. Maintaining an optimistic outlook and sense of personal conviction will, more often than not, support us to transform what may initially seem like setbacks into positive gains.

As it turned out, I was not the only person joining the company at that moment with the prospect of a career in sales. I was a member of a group of fifteen other professionals that joined IBM Argentina with me to become what the company called the “class of March 1979.”

Our initial assignment for the first six months was simply to study. We were paid our salary and were entitled to company benefits like every other employee, but our fulltime job was to study from 9 to 6 each day. The training course IBM laid out for us was intensive with demanding exams that we had to pass. We received detailed computer training on IBM systems, its history and principles, as well as on sales and negotiation techniques. Later, we understood that, from the company's perspective, we indeed were working. For the IBM I joined, to work meant to think. That was precisely what we were expected to do. All around us, on walls, desks and in each of the company's publications, there was a brief and pervasive written message that read: THINK.

I couldn't get over my surprise. It aspired towards transformation more than training. As one of the most successful companies in the world in terms of revenue, IBM was investing considerable time and money to instill in us that the real goal of their sales strategy was not to sell IBM's products but to cultivate customers. They would devote many hours and use many different teaching methodologies to convey this seemingly simple concept.

At the beginning of the 1980s, computer technology was rapidly transforming into a vital tool for the operation of most organizations. Airline companies and banks were already depending

heavily on their online information systems. The same transformation was taking place in government and official agencies, as well as in every other business arena. For IBM to cultivate customers meant to gain the customer's trust. This meant ensuring the uninterrupted operation of their computer systems. They considered two basic tactics as essential in order to cultivate and retain a loyal customer base. First, to promise only what they could deliver. Second, to never skimp on the resources necessary to help customers facing any sort of problem with their essential systems regardless of whether the problem was due to a fault in IBM products or to errors attributable to the client such as programming or configuration issues. Every time a problem appeared, IBM systems engineers were sent to work side by side with the client at no additional cost. This way of working became known as "IBM's added value."

Later on, when I started as a salesperson, I saw firsthand the success and impact of this strategy. Customers, when comparing products of similar performance and quality, were generally willing to accept a higher price for IBM products. That implicit acknowledgement of "IBM's added value" more than compensated for the extra cost implicit in "making customers."

All this was underpinned, they taught us, by the company's three basic principles: respect for the individual (employees, contractors or clients); optimization of the shareholder's return; and, a

constant quest for excellence, especially regarding customers. The first of the principles was based on two fundamental policies. The first was the so-called open-door policy, which allowed any employee to talk to anyone in the organization regardless of his or her respective position or level. If an employee approached an executive to file a complaint of any kind against a member of the organization, the executive manager was required to lead a careful investigation of the matter. Depending on the severity of the case, this could involve an investigation team comprised of IBM staff from across the world. This procedure was viewed as an essential tool for the company to stay true to the basic principles of its success. The second policy, a necessary complement to the first, assured that no one who used the open-door policy could be discriminated against for having done so.

After six intensive months of training, we graduated with the internal title of IBM Systems Engineer and were assigned to different areas that IBM called “branches.” Comprising the basic components of the sales and systems engineering structure, these branches were organized according to the customer’s activity. The aim was that IBM representatives who interacted with customers had a certain familiarity with the characteristics of the customer’s business.

I worked as a Systems Engineer for only a short period. A few months later, the same manager who

had told me that there were no saleswomen in the company promoted me as one. IBM's "equal opportunity policy" was inscribed within what is commonly called "affirmative action." I have no doubt that this policy was fundamental to my professional development in the company and preparing me for what was to come in the future.

Carefully training and developing its employees was one of IBM's most powerful tools for business success. Continuous training in the company's new products and systems was mandatory for both salespeople and systems engineers. Training also included learning about and undertaking comparative analysis on competitors' products. The learning process was completed with training in finance and financial tools. The objective was for IBM professionals to be able to understand their client's business situation and provide financial justifications for the installation of new systems that would naturally lead to the acquisition of IBM's products and services.

In what was simultaneously a methodical and open manner, IBM encouraged internal competition among its professionals. The extent to which this competition was healthy for most of the professionals that took part in it was debatable. However, without a doubt, it was very beneficial for IBM since it incentivized all of us to invest maximum effort to achieve our objectives.

The company developed an array of tools to encourage competition. The most obvious



was salary adjustment. In the 1980s, Argentina suffered a high inflation rate and the need for salary adjustments was extremely frequent. Salary increases were allocated using the following system: each manager, who typically had between four to ten people reporting to her, was allocated a fixed amount of money to distribute as a salary increase among her team. It was forbidden to give the same percentage increase to everyone. The manager had to create a scale in which, with an almost monthly frequency, she made very clear to her team whose performance merited recognition.

There were also some more subtle mechanisms. One of them involved the frequent visits by executives from the headquarters in New York. During each visit, the executive would extend a dinner invitation to four or five young professionals (salespeople and systems engineers) in one of the most luxurious restaurants in the city. A local executive always participated. Garnering an invitation to one of these dinners symbolized that one was considered among the “chosen” as a prospective future manager. Receiving an invitation was both encouraging and stressful. The dinner would entail a rigorous interrogation by both the foreign and the local executives. There were no free dinners.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, IBM maintained what was called the full employment policy. This policy represented the company’s commitment to

never fire anyone as a result of business variations. Employees were only dismissed for dishonest behavior or poor performance. Poor performance had to be documented. When an employee was informed that his or her performance was not satisfactory, it was incumbent on the manager to develop with the employee an improvement plan. A period of time, usually a year, was provided for the employee to improve before an objective assessment was carried out. For this reason, notwithstanding exceptional circumstances, dismissals very rarely took place. The full employment policy was put to the test during the Malvinas (Falklands) War between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982. The impossibility of importing equipment and the uncertainty at the time led to an extended period where the company's activities came to a halt, but nevertheless its workforce did not change.

Mindful of this policy, the company was extremely careful in both the selection and training of personnel. Training was an ambiguous process that, while offering opportunities for professional development, also served as an evaluation tool. It also functioned as a way of generating commitment, stimulating competition among employees and, according to some, as a method of "brain-washing." Meanwhile, the company's management development programs in the United States to whole frequently systems engineers with technical specialized with had access were essential for accessing higher management positions.

Managers who demonstrated outstanding performance and high potential were invited to special management programs at the company's headquarters in New York. Typically one to two weeks long in duration, these programs covered management and marketing techniques, presentations by headquarters executives, human resources management, financial management, and lectures by professors from top universities and writers on international politics and economics. Equally valuable, the programs provided an opportunity to meet and network with IBM peers from across the world. At the same time, with dedicated time for exchange and debate in each session, the programs also offered a way for headquarters staff to begin to identify and assess the individuals with the potential to become future executives.

The jewel in the crown, however, was the management acceleration program (MAP). It represented the pinnacle in training for those few managers who were close to the executive level. It also involved being subjected to a final evaluation by headquarters executives before ascending to executive rank. Partaking in this training required transforming to the headquarters in New York for a year to work in close contact with the company's top executives, while attending formal education sessions with professors from the most prestigious institutions in the United States.

I was invited to join this program in 1986. This opportunity was not without serious personal challenges. I had a son, my husband had a job and we were not willing to live apart for a year. It was not a decision that I alone could make. My husband encouraged me to take the offer. His support was not only very generous, but also brave considering the sexist culture prevalent at the time. He took a one-year leave of absence at work and we set off for New York with our child. My husband would get a Master's degree in Administration, while I would be the first woman in IBM Argentina to take part in the MAP. Narrating facts and experiences of my personal and professional life is, in fact, narrating facts and experiences of our (my husband's and mine) personal and professional lives. Without my husband's constant and invaluable support, it would have been impossible for me to avail of this opportunity for professional and personal development. He always supported what represented the best decision "for both" as a mutual opportunity.

In 1987, I returned to Argentina, full of enthusiasm, but also much more attuned to the challenges that all organizations have and of the ups and downs involved in every human endeavor. I valued being part of a company that respected individuals above all and in which I could perform with honesty and integrity for my own good and that of my family, but also towards the wellbeing of employees, clients and shareholders.

Changes taking place in the global environment in the 1980s, which were beginning to shape and influence all across the business sector, including IBM, led to me handing in my resignation. In 1992, I left the company with which I had so identified.

### **The Limits Imposed by External Conditions**

I have discussed here some aspects of my experience working for IBM to highlight the benefits and limitations of some key strategies of large companies. What led to my resignation helps to illuminate the limits that external conditions can impose on one's personal development.

In 1979, as Margaret Thatcher assumed the office of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the key principles that would drive her administration soon became clear: the deregulation of the financial system, the dismantling of union power and the privatization of public companies. This strategy, whose impact at that time was perceived as limited to the United Kingdom, quickly morphed into a global phenomenon with Ronald Reagan's assumption of the Presidency of the United States in January 1981. Like Thatcher, Reagan also emphasized the deregulation of the financial system, but complemented it with important tax reductions.

In a few short years, it became evident that one of the important effects that these measures

– deregulation in particular – would have on the economy was to spark an increase in the relative importance of financial speculation to production activities. The high intrinsic volatility of financial capital meant that it could generate investment or disinvestment much more quickly than productive capital.

Consequently, the business world reacted by adopting two important paradigms: short-termism and the supremacy of the service sector over the goods production sector. The short-term nature of the financial world pressured companies to demonstrate positive business results every three months if they wanted to maintain their market value and attract investments. In addition, the tendency towards services provided latitude to manage with flexibility, creating and closing ventures, given that the necessary capital investments were much smaller.

During my time at the IBM headquarters in New York, it was becoming apparent that these global trends portended terrible news for IBM, a company so heavily engaged in the goods production sector that it was betting on long-term results, full employment and on “making customers.” Divisions emerged within the company with a significant group advocating for the abandonment of the traditional principles and strategies that defined the organization’s corporate identity.

At that time, IBM had also made two major strategic errors that would only be appreciated

later. The first was to underestimate the importance that personal computers would assume in the world and, as a consequence, to project solid growth in the demand for large centralized computers that never occurred. The second, based on these projections, was to build new large production facilities that would meet the supposed growth in demand. As a result, IBM reluctantly entered the personal computer arena, late and half-heartedly, and never achieved the dominant position it previously occupied in the industry. It also found itself with a productive investment that was absolutely unnecessary and impossible to pay off. By the early 1990s, IBM's shares dropped dramatically. In April 1993, for the first time in its history, the company hired an external President and CEO whose career had not been built from within IBM's ranks. The company started to change to the point of becoming virtually unrecognizable.

At the local level, big changes occurred in the top management of the company in the early 1990s. The new management was aligned on leaving behind the traditional principles. Although I supported the necessity for change and adaptation in line with the new world order, I understood that the intrinsic values of the company, particularly regarding individuals and transparency in negotiations, should not be questioned. A need for top management to show short-term results meant that everything could be questioned and nothing

was sacred. In these circumstances, I felt that the company and I no longer recognized each other and that I should look for a place elsewhere. With great regret to see the IBM that had been so important to me and to which I owed so much disappear, in December 1992, I handed in my resignation letter.



## Crisis

Edgar Allan Poe wrote: “Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December; And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.”

In Argentina, of course, being in the Southern hemisphere means that December is a sultry month with long, hot days. However, we Argentines could accurately claim Poe’s statement, “Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December.” For some strange reason, we have become accustomed to this month repeatedly bringing us, to a greater or lesser extent, some kind of national crisis.

Without a doubt, the worst crisis that Argentina endured was in December 2001. At that time, a deplorable social, economic and political situation in the country deteriorated to an unimaginable level. Thirty-nine people were left dead.

In addition to these casualties, the crisis also left behind a disrupted society that seemed to have lost the ability to co-exist and to sustain hope

for a shared future. Sociologists, politicians and historians have a long and difficult task to explain what happened and address the scars left by this crisis. Each of us who lived through that time has also reflected on its meaning and lessons learned from our own perspectives.

From my own analysis of that time, I want to share an aspect that reveals a professional and personal lesson integral to the purpose of this book. From a professional perspective, then, let me start by saying that, at that time, I worked for Telecom Argentina. The company had been in business for 11 years following the wave of privatization of the previous decade.

I joined the company in 1993 as a Regional Director with responsibility for the operations in the northwestern region of the country, an area that comprised eight large provinces. In managing this large area, I felt that I had made a commitment that deprived me of sleep. Although Telecom was a for-profit company, I had accepted the responsibility of providing telecommunications services (including internet and cellular phone services) to that region of the country as an unavoidable public obligation.

This also marked a major professional change. IBM was a company driven by sales to the extent that production plans carefully followed sales forecasts and marketing strategies. What would sell was produced. My professional growth had followed that logic of demand-driven supply. Telecom,

however, was a company guided by operations. The accumulated demand was so significant that the company's development depended much more on its ability to grow its networks and provide quality service and competitive costs than on its sales capacity. To navigate this professional change, I established a twofold personal strategy: the first objective was to transfer to Telecom my conviction, cultivated during my time at IBM, in the need for excellence in customer service; the second objective was to engage in a total immersion in operations to understand and help optimize every detail.

From the first objective emerged, over time, the establishment of call centers with the capacity to meet customers' demands. We eliminated the need for the customer's physical presence and authorized call center operators to resolve claims up to a certain amount of money, without the need for further inquiries. At the time, it was considered a transformative change.

In line with the second objective, I decided that the center of gravity for my work was in each of the cities and towns where we were working to install the new plants and networks rather than in my Buenos Aires office. I began travelling frequently to these provinces confronted firsthand with the challenge of the task upon us, while enjoying seeing the progress that was being made in areas of the country where it was urgently needed.

It was difficult at the beginning. The digging that our work required blocked streets. The neighbors were unhappy about the inconvenience this caused. The mayors pressed us to accelerate the work. The governors, attentive to the complaints filed with them, pressured us to comply with terms that were impossible to satisfy.

I do not regret being present in the provinces to listen to the claims, explain the limitations and try to find mutually acceptable improvements. On the contrary, when I was given the additional responsibility for the Litoral zone and I assumed the management of the operations for the whole territory outside of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, I relished the opportunity to meet valuable contacts with whom I still maintain friendships. It was with those people that I joined in the popular festivities to celebrate the start-up of the new plants in each town and city.

It was at those gatherings that I came to understand that it is not only pretentious, but also imprecise to talk about an “Argentine culture.” There is not one “Argentine culture,” but many Argentine cultures. While the principles of peace, freedom, progress and equality in dignity are common across Argentina, those principles are lived differently in each place with its own traditions, music, cuisine, belief system, and priorities.

We should not seek to unify these divergent cultures, but to respect them. As a nation, we still

have many things to learn and many injustices to redress. These cultures form an immense wealth in the country. I hope that, sooner rather than later, we stop looking outward so much and take advantage of the vast human wisdom and tolerance within.

But I still had myriad, less pleasant challenges ahead of me. At the beginning of the 1990s when Telecom, with a staff of 22,000 in the region, started operating in its geographical area, it took over an operation with a limited network, unable to service thousands of demanding users. In our assessment, to satisfy fixed telephone demand in that territory, as well as cellular telephone and Internet services, we would need a staff of no more than 15,000 people.

Some argued that, in privatization, it was the state's responsibility to establish a fundamental protection framework for those affected by the transformation. We quickly saw that it was a purely theoretical argument since we could expect nothing in this regard to materialize from the state.

We set to work on a plan that involved considerable, albeit unavoidable, investments by the company. The first aspect was to invest in training to promote the new customer service culture and excellence, while also conferring the technological know-how to specialized staff whose skills had become obsolete. Of course, this effort was far from sufficient. A special fund was established to provide compensation at a significantly higher rate

than that prescribed by law to those people who were let go.

At the same time, we set up the “telecentre” network favoring former employees who requested to be owners. Telecentres, an innovation at the time, were small shops where people could access computers with Internet services or make long-distance calls. We also decided to outsource as much as possible the main network’s maintenance so that the people who lost their positions in the company could avail of contracting opportunities in the entities we were outsourcing to. In spite of all these efforts, it was a very painful process that was necessary to endure. In negotiating such ambiguous and difficult cases, I learned that the best strategy was to be loyal to one’s convictions. There is no higher authority, theory or dogma that allows one to cope in such a way as to be at peace with one’s conscience.

From that juncture when I was appointed Director of Operations for the entire company, I sensed that I had to find a way to avoid isolating myself from the people who were part of the company to which I also belonged. After considering several options from sending a weekly update note/memo to holding open meetings in which I could answer employees’ questions, I decided to establish a weekly hour “chat.” While the chat system at that time was a bit rudimentary, it had several advantages, namely that it would be open to every

employee who could participate anonymously regardless of their geographic location via an alias, which encouraged honesty and candor.

Every Wednesday at eight in the morning, I held my open chat session. Normally, there were between four and five hundred participants. There were two basic ground rules: first, all topics were allowed; and, second, if someone noticed that their question had not been answered, I asked them to be persistent in repeating it. While there was no issue I wanted to avoid, with so many participants, it was possible that I could miss something. Most people would get online to “listen,” while only a few asked questions. I maintained this system until my last day in the company, notwithstanding the days I was traveling. The chat helped me to understand different points of view and concerns, detect problems and, at the same time, provided a platform for me to explain my views.

Sometimes, of course, the questions were too specialized. When I was not in a position to answer them, I asked the directors of those specialized areas to organize their own chats in order to answer with full knowledge.

Though I viewed positively this direct method of communication, this practice also led to my first disagreement with most of the members of the board. Many board members viewed that this communication method was not appropriate at the executive level because it could undermine the

authority of middle managers. They also worried that it could pressure other executives who did not feel comfortable answering questions directly to their subordinates and those of lower rank. As I was convinced that the system yielded a number of benefits, I felt that I had nothing to hide and did not see this practice as undermining anyone's authority. Despite criticism, I remained firm in my conviction.

In 2001, I was appointed CEO. I became responsible for leading the company in all areas to achieve the profitability results, market share and sustainability indexes expected by the shareholders; respond satisfactorily to the needs of customers and retain a loyal client base; ensure the ability of employees to implement both short and long-term strategic plans; identify the best alternatives for technological development; establish the company as a valuable player and contributor to the community from the social point of view; and, comply with national legislation in all its aspects.

By the end of 2001, the situation in the country had become extremely complicated, but no one imagined how it would evolve. The company's performance was a source of pride for its employees. In only a decade, the competitive world of communications had been completely transformed.

Our company consistently achieved very high levels of customer satisfaction. Our customers were



provided with services of the highest technology caliber. Telecom was listed on the New York Stock Exchange and financed by international loans under the same conditions as any other company in the world. Financing was fundamental to implement the massive technological transformation that was required following decades of neglected investment in telecommunications in the country.

Since the beginning of my tenure as CEO, I had defined, together with my closest team, a set of crisis plans that covered possible eventualities, such as natural disasters, social conflicts and technological disasters. These plans specified in detail the process for decision-making in cases of emergency, and established who would do what, when, how and where if a critical event occurred. The plans focused on three basic objectives: to protect the well-being of all the people linked to the company; to ensure continuous, timely, accurate and honest communications at all times during the crisis, both within the organization and towards external stakeholders; and to guarantee the continuity of the organization.

However, the December 2001 Argentine crisis had a different plan in mind. Within a decisive period of a couple of weeks, the basic rules of the game on which the company was founded changed forever. During the first days of the crisis, there were two events of fundamental importance for the organization: the sharp devaluation of the peso that,

by law, had remained at a fixed value for ten years; and, the prices of services (like those provided by Telecom) were frozen in pesos. Thus, while the international credit commitments incurred to finance the development of the company remained unchanged in dollars, the company's revenues, measured in dollars, were reduced to one third of their value.

This led the company to the inevitable situation of having to declare bankruptcy. In these same terms, I explained the company's predicament on Wall Street, as well as in my weekly chat forum.

During this time, we worked to implement our crisis plan. Given the seriousness of the situation, I assumed personal responsibility for communications. I kept the weekly chat forum unchanged. More than ever, it played an instrumental role in clearly and directly conveying my vision of the circumstances in which we had found ourselves. At the same time, it was critical for my role at the helm to understand firsthand how the crisis was impacting people throughout the organization. I personally travelled to meet the creditors and visit the New York Stock Exchange to explain our vision and our expectations, and was involved in detail in the external communications with our clients and investors. These were months of intense personal and professional pressure, anguish, and hardship for almost all Argentines without exception.

During early 2002, an internal situation in the organization emerged that, in hindsight, strikes me as inevitable. Divisions emerged between the company's board of directors and the management team that I headed. While the board prioritized protecting the shareholders they represented, my management team was focused on the company's long-term sustainability.

The method of financing helps to explain part of the reason for this divergence. As I anticipated, international credit financed Telecom, without direct investments from major shareholders. This marked a considerable difference from Telefónica de Argentina, which was financed primarily through direct investments from its parent company in Spain. Of course, the terms of Telefonica's debt were much more lenient and its capacity to manage the crisis was greater since its parent company consolidated the debts.

Thus, faced with the same external circumstances, Telefónica de Argentina avoided bankruptcy, while Telecom did not.

My team faced the crisis as a very difficult situation we had to manage, but we never doubted the importance of maintaining continuity of the operations at full quality, the required long-term investments for technological capacity or the full support to the team that we had painstakingly assembled. The board of directors prioritized protecting the capital of the main shareholders.

Their focus was more short-term in nature, as evidenced by frequent changes in shareholder composition.

Within the next few months, it became clear that the board preferred to have a management team “more versed in financial management issues.” I lacked their support for my view of how to manage the crisis. The board made clear its preference for me to step aside. I agreed to leave. I considered it a step forward, not a step aside. For me and for the people on my team, it implied the end of a project to which we had dedicated ourselves with passion. Our conviction, which is still a point of conversation among members of the team many years later, was that we were working to transform a telecommunications company that, prior to privatization, had been considered a paradigm of inefficiency, poor service and technological underdevelopment, into an innovative technological leader known for its creativity and dynamism and which, at the same time, contributed to the development of our country.

Now it was a time to look forward, but with the benefit of hindsight not to forget what we had achieved and the importance of acting faithfully in our convictions and loyally to our commitment to customers, employees and shareholders. It is described best as a step forward because our work should help us to continue growing.

In my personal case, it also offered an opportunity to embrace a fundamental change in my life to assume new challenges in line with longstanding aspirations. I had been attracted to work in the social interest that was in me since I was a student in my native Rosario. Now, equipped with more experience and with an extensive contact network, I had the opportunity to return to that path in better conditions. With this perspective in mind, I began a search for executive positions in the non-profit world that led me to the World Food Program of the United Nations.

### **The Constant of Always Being Yourself in Changing Circumstances**

I see two elements as precipitating factors for a crisis: change and time. We feel that we are in a crisis when our framework of reference changes at very high speed. In such cases, we lose confidence in our ability to predict with any certainty the consequences that our actions will have. We do not know what to do. We are compelled to act, but the information we have to guide our action is no longer relevant because the circumstances have changed and we do not have time to collect new information.

That is why, in good times, it is essential to continuously force yourself to anticipate what could precipitate a crisis. This is the time to collect the information that may be relevant in a crisis. A time of crisis is not a good time for data collection.

It is also essential to establish in great detail the organization and the management system that will be applicable in such a scenario. That is a crisis plan.

It is also important to recognize the limitations inherent to any crisis plan. Even though having a plan will allow us to face the crisis more prepared, it will not guarantee a successful outcome. Therefore, when acting in a crisis situation, two elements, usually presented as contradictory but which are actually complementary, come into play: loyalty and flexibility.

Crises are usually a test of loyalty, starting with loyalty with oneself. These are moments in which it is necessary to keep in mind the deep reasons why you devote your energy and capacity to a bottom line, the driving force that underlies your personal passion. Loyalty to people and the organization emerges from this recognition of personal goals and limitations.

However, loyalty to oneself need not mean inflexibility or dogmatism. When conditions change, one must resort to flexibility to adjust those ways of being or those personal qualities that best suit the new environment.

Leaving Telecom did not mean questioning this loyalty to myself and my conviction, but quite the opposite. I always thought more about what was achieved together with all the people who supported and shared the project, than about the

project itself that had come to an end. Those of us who had achieved this transformation of Telecom, each at their own level, were in a position to achieve similar things in other fields. Our passion was intact.

And we maintained continuity with who we were. In this situation, I found linkages between the Telecom executive with the girl I was in Rosario and with the woman I am in Buenos Aires or anywhere in the world.

Crisis is a natural and inevitable part of both our personal lives and the lives of societies and organizations. Through relying on experience and the information at hand, it is necessary to prepare in the best possible way for the crises that we can imagine, as well as to ready ourselves for those we cannot. In a crisis, the best strategy is always fidelity with oneself while remaining flexible in adapting to new circumstances.





## **The Bottom Line**

My experience does not align with the recurring notion that people always resist change. I have come to believe that this concept is only valid in specific circumstances. Logically, those who feel that change will affect them negatively, or feel that important aspects of a proposed change are concealed to them, resist change. However, I think that, at least in principle, we all seek change.

We can all imagine ourselves in other roles and in other circumstances. What is more difficult is to muster the courage to translate such a transformation into reality. Of course, it can be a bit frightening, but the satisfaction of inventing and reinventing oneself is also liberating. In other words, we embrace change when we feel it is in our best interest and when we are fully aware of the pros and cons implicit in any potential change.

These reflections on the nature of change crossed my mind as I considered my transition following my departure from Telecom Argentina and reached

out to some headhunter friends. I told them that I was trying to find new challenges (alluding to ‘new ways of being me’) in the non-profit sector. It was in this context that, at the beginning of September 2004, I embarked on a new journey as Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP) at its headquarters in Rome.

The World Food Program, founded in 1961, is the largest humanitarian organization in the world. As part of the United Nations system, WFP’s fundamental purpose is the eradication of hunger on the planet through ensuring food security and healthy nutrition. WFP is financed through voluntary contributions from Member States.

With great enthusiasm, I accepted this new role at WFP, even though the feedback I received from colleagues in the business world was not very encouraging. The general perception of my for-profit colleagues was that, “after being focused on delivering the bottom line and dealing with shareholders’ pressure, work in a nonprofit organization will be monotonous and boring.” This was a possible risk I also considered.

What I learned, however, is that passion to reach one’s goals applies not only to a company’s bottom line. I was also humbled to realize that the ‘quarter’ that I was oriented to as a timeframe was often a luxury that we did not enjoy in the humanitarian world in dealing with emergencies.

The time around year-end celebrations is particularly special in international organizations

such as WFP, where most of officials are foreigners and want to go back to their home country to celebrate with their family. In my case, the Executive Director and the other three Deputy Executive Directors had already, in previous years, stayed in the office on duty in charge of the entire Organization. In December 2004, as the newest member on the team, it was a given that I would be the one assigned. I reminded everyone that I had barely been in WFP for three months. “Do not worry,” they replied, “nothing ever happens during the last weeks of the year.”

2004 proved to be a different year. The day after the Christmas holidays, on Sunday, 26 December, an unusually early call woke me. Alarming news of an earthquake, which was later called the Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake, commonly known as the 2004 Tsunami, began to come in. Following the tremendous magnitude of the earthquake, giant waves hit the shores of the Indian Ocean bringing with them unprecedented destruction. I hurried to the office as quickly as I could. The world was in shock and dismay as the full scale of the disaster began to unfold: the staggering number of victims, the dire circumstances facing survivors, and the devastation that was wreaked in the tsunami’s wake.

The WFP emergency center was fully activated. It operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in ordinary circumstances. And this was far

from ordinary. But this did not amaze me. I had previously overseen 24-7 operations centers. What amazed me was the sheer number of calls received from WFP staff, spending the holidays in their home countries with their families, who offered to deploy immediately wherever it was necessary. Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, the destination did not matter. What mattered was to save lives, support essential food delivery, and assist with the reconstruction.

It was then when I appreciated more than ever the universal value of passion for the bottom line. For my colleagues at WFP, the bottom line was to save lives, and it had to be done now. Quarterly or annual results did not matter. Our beneficiaries did not have the luxury of planning in such long-term timeframes. There was only now. Like many of the reactions that the tsunami generated across the world, they felt sorrow for the victims, but they were focused on the bottom line – on saving lives. This is not to imply that humanitarian work is a purely emotional activity. Like most humanitarian organizations, WFP relies exclusively on voluntary donations to fund its operations. Donors, rightly so, are extremely demanding and scrupulous in wanting to know what has been done with their money.

Therefore, monitoring indicators and proper documentation were integral to all programs. In 2001, WFP was ahead of its time when it implemented the enterprise resource planning

system “ERP.” Although the name emphasizes their planning function, these systems are also excellent in terms of resource control and monitoring.

WFP’s commitment to transparency and accountability was so deeply ingrained in its operations that it became the first United Nations organization to adopt the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS). The IPSAS standards were developed by the IFAC (International Federation of Accountants) for public sector entities (governments, municipalities and public entities in general) in order to serve the public interest by improving the quality and transparency of financial information. At present, despite the fact that the vast majority of governments have declared their intention to adopt IPSAS standards, only half a dozen countries have done so.

In 2008, after investing significant efforts, including in training, to transform itself to bring all of its operations in compliance with these standards, usually in the most inhospitable places in the world, WFP was ready for the external auditors to approve their financial results based on these standards.

Returning to the 2004 tsunami, the logistical challenge at hand was massive with more than ten countries affected. We immediately launched a major operation deploying more than 300 WFP staff to the disaster zone and hired 250 local staff in the affected countries. We leveraged all the resources and means of transportation at our

disposal to send food quickly to the survivors: we redirected airplanes and cargo ships and we used helicopters where roads were destroyed. We secured the cooperation of private companies, which, at that time, was not common practice in the United Nations.

In Sri Lanka, each day, thirty trucks carried between ten and fifteen tons of rice, lentils and sugar to the most affected districts. By 7 January, basic food had been delivered to 750,000 people. In the Maldives, during the first few days, we shipped 112 tons of high-protein biscuits to about 50,000 people. In total, by May, we had shipped 110,000 tons of food, enough to feed more than two million people affected.

But human pain is not understood in these massive figures. It is understood by listening to the stories of those affected. It was moving to hear in the WFP hallways the stories told by those who had returned from helping survivors.

A boy was playing soccer with his friends when they felt tremors and decided to run to their homes to protect themselves with their families. As the child ran away from the beach, he heard a noise similar to an approaching plane. He turned around and as he looked towards the sea, he saw an incomprehensibly large wave approaching. Fear propelled him as he ran. When he regained consciousness, he only remembered that he was on a beach with other survivors, as well as the bodies

of those who had not been so fortunate. Months later, he found his father, the only other survivor in his family. They had no home or means of living. Their focus turned to self-preservation and the immense anguish of not being able to reconcile with their loved ones who had disappeared.

Such stories can give a partial idea of the devastating magnitude of the event. My intention in sharing this is also to convey, within my capabilities, the degree to which I was impacted by being a part of such an unexpected and unfathomable response. For months, each of us worked tirelessly, some directly with those affected, to deliver food, water, medicine and shelter. Others contributed through creating awareness and raising resources, improving logistics and support operations, and enabling and protecting those who were closest to the action. My role was to coordinate and launch the operation and then to sustain the momentum. All of us who participated in this effort were deeply affected by it. I know that this experience still shapes me in thinking of the people that are behind every decision and every institutional action taken. Those who anonymously risk their lives for others. It is a mark that I value very much and always want to preserve.

I asked myself then if the humanitarian passion for saving lives is the real bottom line, the only one that matters. But as I took part in many missions and gained further experience, I understood that

each person's life is marked by a series of events that will determine their way and lead them in the discovery of their personal options. Each person decides, then, to act in a particular area at each stage of his or her life. And that area is where one must discover the real bottom line that justifies and motivates one's passion.

1.2 it is passion that makes you see beyond

In this section, I will highlight some aspects implicit in this experience. Clearly, the main point is that the passion for the bottom line is the key to making things happen in the desired way. But what exactly do I mean by passion in this context?

Let me answer this question with a familiar anecdote that, I think, merits repeating. It is well known that, during the Nazi occupation of Paris, Pablo Picasso, unlike other artists who escaped, decided to remain in the city. He was in an ambiguous situation because, while he already enjoyed immense international fame, Hitler had declared him a "degenerate artist."

The event is mentioned in some of the painter's biographies. During the occupation, a Nazi official decided to visit Picasso's studio to see for himself the work of this man so revered by the artistic world. Among the works he found was the *Guernica*, the monumental canvas in a palette of blacks, whites and grays that would later become the most powerful anti-war and anti-violence symbol of the 20th century. The officer despised



the painting. While still looking at it, he asked Picasso pejoratively: “Did you do this?” Picasso replied: “No, you did.”

The Nazi officer, with his coldness and his lack of passion, was only able to see lines and shapes. He was unable to perceive what Picasso, and many others after him, saw in the painting: the horror involved in the killing of civilians in the small town of Guernica in northern Spain by Nazi airstrikes. Passion is what allows us to transcend in our understanding beyond what we first perceive. This definition that applies to art also applies to life in general. We all know how we can see in our loved ones things that go unnoticed by others.

Exactly the same happens in organizations. Leaders who are passionate about the real bottom line can see beyond what the majority sees. This enables them to be creative to show others the way towards a new outcome or transformation. They are passionate about what they do, just like Picasso. Of course, this begs the question of how this ability to see beyond what is apparent can be achieved. Luckily, Picasso himself provided the answer to this question when he said, “Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.” This is the key to passion (or as Picasso would say, inspiration). Working does not imply only being present or putting in the time. It means struggling to understand.

It takes many hours genuinely listening to people to understand their motivations and their

concerns. It requires that you undertake continuous assessment, adjustment and recalibration. It is necessary to be prepared and to do your own research: do not expect people to explain things you can investigate on your own.

You always have to avoid surprising people. Nobody wants to be the last one to find out what is happening, especially when what is happening can affect one's position. That's why you have to be dedicated, meticulous and inclusive in communications. This demonstrates respect towards others and is also a good management technique. Even the Romans, who knew much about managing large organizations, said "bis dat qui cito dat" ("who gives quickly, gives twice"). Information is one of the most important things one can give. The person who receives it quickly, by far, values it more than anything else.

And, above all: you have to think. Think. More and more, working is thinking. True work, that which bears results for the organization and for oneself, does not consist of spending many hours doing what is traditionally expected but of imagining new ways of doing.

Passion without work and reflection, without thinking, is not real passion but fanaticism. Fanaticism consists of pouring our own frustrations and aspirations into an object to which we assign the ability to give us satisfaction. Intelligent individuals, but with some degree of narcissism,

manage, under certain circumstances, to generate this type of fanaticism around them. (We can waver a guess that the officer who visited Picasso would not be entirely exempt from fanaticism by his leader.)

The “leaders” who work on the basis of these illusions usually end up failing because they inevitably disappoint their followers. Even worse, they also disappoint themselves. Passion, on the other hand, does not disappoint because it is premised on understanding our own reality, the reality of others and that of our environment in all its dimensions. That is why it demands work. Errors and missteps may occur, but as one goes deeper to discover the details, one acquires mastery in their occupational area. One is passionate and becomes increasingly competent, achieving success in what they undertake. One discovers and questions oneself, and is equipped to imagine better ways of accomplishing things. One is equipped with the passion to achieve the bottom line. This is how true leaders work and are developed.



## **Empathy**

Perhaps the most important and yet most invisible part of the job of the Secretary-General of the United Nations is quiet diplomacy, otherwise known as “good offices” in the diplomatic world. This encompasses the discreet steps that the Secretary-General can take to prevent disputes from evolving into conflicts or, when it has been impossible to prevent conflict, steps to end it or, at least, stop its escalation. To advance these diplomatic activities, the Secretary-General usually appoints and leverages Special Envoys of the Secretary-General.

From January 2007 to December 2016, while Mr. Ban Ki-moon was Secretary-General of the UN, he drew on Special Envoys on multiple occasions for very different matters. Among many others, in February 2012, he appointed his predecessor in the UN, Mr. Kofi Annan, as Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States on Syria. Also, for example, in January 2014, he appointed former

Mayor of New York City Mr. Michael Bloomberg as Special Envoy on Cities and Climate Change.

The Secretary-General's decision to appoint a Special Envoy is typically announced publicly. Yet, in my case, as Chief of Staff of the UN Secretary-General, I was asked to fulfill that role in the most absolute secrecy as his Personal Emissary. But before narrating what this role entailed, it is worth recalling the conflict of Eastern Congo that took place from 2012 to 2013 in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

As with almost all of the conflicts that have transpired in Africa during the last decades, for the conflict in North Kivu it is also possible to trace the origin of the conflict to the ways in which those who held power during the decolonization of African countries after the end of World War II – the colonialist countries – handled these processes. They were very complex processes marked by economic interests that completely ignored the needs of the region's populations and that were intertwined with local ethnic conflicts. It is not my purpose here to repeat a story about which there is a litany of literature. I will simply refer to the essential facts to contextualize the situation in North Kivu at the beginning of 2012.

The extensive territory of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), besides having exuberant natural beauty, is extremely rich in natural resources, in particular, gold, diamonds,

copper, coltan, tungsten and other minerals of significant international demand. Since the country's independence from Belgium in 1960, the region has almost continuously been engaged in armed conflicts, including often in wars with neighboring countries. It is therefore not surprising that the Second Congo War, which took place between 1998 and 2003, is sometimes called the Coltan War. Coltan is the mineral from which tantalum is extracted, a fundamental element used to produce basic modern electronic components.

The group that emerged from the rebel administration established in the eastern part of the DRC in 2006 – the National Congress for the Defense of the People (NCDP) – was one of the armed groups with the greatest participation in the previous conflicts in the country. The leader of the NCDP military apparatus was General Sultani Makenga. On March 23, 2009, after continuous fighting since 2006, the NCDP signed a peace treaty with the Government of the DRC through which the NCDP became a political party and its armed wing was integrated into the regular armed forces of the DRC.

However, in early 2012, a group of soldiers belonging to the NCDP rebelled against the government, alleging that it was not fulfilling its commitments under the peace treaty. This group formed a military rebellion, deemed M23 in reference to the date of the treaty, led by General

Makenga. Hostilities between M23 and the armed forces of the DRC began immediately and were concentrated in the province of North Kivu.

By June 2012, less than three months after the inception of the M23 and amidst tremendous concern about what was transpiring in North Kivu, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs. Navi Pillay stated, “The leaders of the M23 are among the worst perpetrators of human rights violations in the DRC, or anywhere in the world. Many have allegations against them of participating in massive violations and responsibility for massacres and for the recruitment and use of children.”

Unfortunately, things were as bad as Navi Pillay and many of us had feared. Throughout North Kivu, there were numerous clashes involving heavy weapons, missiles and rockets between the M23 and the Congolese armed forces. The M23 was taking over cities in its path. There were rumors of regional entanglement involving forces from South Africa, Tanzania, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda, while the different armed groups took advantage of the chaos to assume control over natural resources. The strongest criticism was aimed at Rwanda. Several diplomats privately maintained that President Paul Kagame of Rwanda was responsible for the M23’s considerable military power, whose actions enabled Rwanda, across the border, to exploit the DRC’s vast natural resources.



The horror of what was taking place and the humanitarian toll it was exacting kept us awake at night. The diplomatic world, including the United Nations, considered a number of potential interventions, but the Security Council could not agree on a way to stop the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people. It was in this context that, at the beginning of October 2012, the Ambassador of Rwanda to the United Nations informally suggested to me that, in order to dispel misgivings that persisted about Rwanda's role and obtain first-hand information, I should urgently hold a personal and confidential meeting with President Kagame.

Let me digress momentarily to note that I never waste an opportunity to talk and exchange ideas with other people. I am convinced that we all own part of the truth and that the person who makes the effort to listen to everyone with respect, humility and sincerity has the best chance of acquiring a full picture of the reality to be the most effective in achieving one's purpose. Doing so is part of the work that fuels passion and facilitates achieving results.

One of the most frequent obstacles to reaching this level of respect comes down to what is often called "cultural differences." However, this label obfuscates the racism and chauvinism that often lies beneath. The colonial powers that imposed themselves by force needed a rationale to justify their impositions. Article 73 of the Charter of the

United Nations of 1945 provides a good example of how the situation of the colonies or ex-colonies was viewed. Even today, it bears resonance:

*Members of the United Nations which have or assume responsibilities for the administration of territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government recognize the principle that the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount, and accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories.*

This text reflects a benign paternalism in referring to those who were subjugated by colonial force as “people who have not achieved the fullness of their own government,” while the colonizers project a moral superiority that “they accept as a sacred commission.”

It is surprising and yet consistent how a trivial strategy of denigrating the exploited achieves such massive results. One only needs to see what is transpiring across the world these days against immigrants, including in my own country of Argentina where a large proportion of ordinary people and their leaders scapegoat Latin American immigrants for lack of work opportunities for locals as well as deficiencies in both the health and education systems.

Having met and become acquainted with people from all over the world has allowed me to confirm that, beyond differences of use and style and irrespective of racial or cultural difference, human beings share everything that makes us really human. This includes our principles, our emotional and intellectual capacities and our highest aspirations.

With these convictions in mind and following consultation with the Secretary-General, I volunteered to meet with President Kagame in a completely confidential manner. The situation was so dire that every small possibility to effect change deserved to be explored so it did not take much effort to compel him of the value.

With the purpose of making what unfolded next easier to understand, let me digress and explain one of the most fortunate things that have happened to me in my professional life. In May 2008, I left my position in the World Food Program in Rome to take charge, as Under-Secretary-General (USG), of the United Nations Department of Field Support, based in New York.

Mindful that I came into this position without previous experience in peace operations, I was immediately assigned a young professional, whom I had never met before, to accompany me and be my close collaborator during my assignment. It turned out that this young professional (who always preferred to avoid public recognition and for that reason I will call her “my collaborator”)

is, without a doubt, one of the two or three most intelligent, creative and dedicated (passionate) people I have ever met. To these qualities, she adds an absolute discretion and an unparalleled personal integrity and loyalty to her commitments. Indeed, such people exist. From the day we first met, she accompanied me in all my responsibilities until I left the United Nations.

Many of the achievements that I have accomplished in the UN would not have been possible without her collaboration. I take the liberty to introduce her here since she is a key player in the story that follows below, as well as those narrated in subsequent chapters.

Once I had the approval of the Secretary-General to officiate as his Personal Emissary before President Kagame, I met with my collaborator to discuss the best way forward. Besides the Secretary-General, she and I were the only ones who knew that this meeting was taking place. We learned that President Kagame would be in Dubai participating in the World Energy Forum on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. With an impression that Dubai was the perfect place to ensure discretion of the task at hand, my collaborator and I boarded a plane for Dubai.

It was agreed that the meeting would be held at the hotel where President Kagame was staying on October 23<sup>rd</sup> at nine o'clock at night. We found out earlier that day that October 23<sup>rd</sup> was the President's birthday. We agreed that I should give him a gift.

I entered the waiting room and my collaborator immediately went to find an appropriate present, a very difficult task to do at night and with very little time.

She bought a box of chocolates in the hotel. I never learned how she managed to convince the President's secret service agents, standing outside the waiting room, that it was imperative that they permit a stranger, carrying a suspicious gift-wrapped box, entry without opening the package. Soon thereafter, I went in to see President Kagame holding a beautiful box of chocolates. As it had been agreed, the President received me alone. I wished him a happy birthday and gave him his gift together with a kiss on his cheek, explaining that this was our culture in Argentina, exactly as my mother had taught me to do. I believe that, in spite of his surprise and cultural barriers, the President understood that the frankness of this gesture favored an intense and direct dialogue.

It was an extensive meeting in which President Kagame emphatically denied involvement in the DRC conflict. Moreover, he stated that his country was embarking on a path to peace and that violence in the neighboring DRC only meant future problems for Rwanda. Rwanda, more than anyone, he explained, wanted peace in the DRC, and was willing to collaborate to achieve it. That was all.

Was the meeting worth the effort? Did hearing what we had expected to hear merit the journey from

New York to Dubai for one night before returning the following day? My answer is an emphatic yes. On the one hand, we managed to convey to President Kagame our absolute willingness and enduring commitment to find an urgent solution to this problem. We met in a “neutral,” informal environment, which allowed for a personal approach that supports credibility.

I understand that these elements are not conclusive, but I am sure that they contributed to achieving results. Although later on I will discuss in more detail the concept of empathy, I want to underline that empathy leads, in both its cognitive and emotional aspects, to an understanding of the other. This holistic understanding is fundamental to be able to imagine and to sense the consequences and decisions that one makes and to thus be able to decide upon the most favorable course of action to achieve the objectives proposed. In my case, without a doubt, the meeting in Dubai represented an important step in this direction.

Of course, I never expected that the meeting would be sufficient to stop the conflict in North Kivu. It was just one piece of the puzzle. In fact, the reality was that the situation on the ground in eastern DRC continued to deteriorate. The report issued by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on November 12, 2012 began by stating, “Since the beginning of 2012, the outbreak of conflict and

violence in North Kivu and South Kivu has led to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Violence has been marked by rapes, killings and looting [...] Reports indicate that there are 250,000 new displaced people in North Kivu.” On November 20, 2012, the M23 took Goma, the capital of North Kivu, a city of one million inhabitants and the most strategically important city in eastern DRC.

In Goma, both the armed forces of the DRC and its police showed little resistance. A large number of its troops either fled, abandoning their weapons or defected to join the M23. On the other hand, the mandate of the UN peacekeeping forces present in Goma was limited to civilian protection. Without a specific mandate to give them the authority and resources to do so, they could not prevent the M23 from entering the city as long as there were no attacks on civilians.

The M23 shut down the airport and other entryways into the city in order to wield control over Goma. With the population isolated and unprotected, the M23, based in Goma, decided to continue its deployment south and west. The M23 intended to continue recruiting militia in its advance until reaching Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, with a population of more than nine million people.

Early on November 21<sup>st</sup>, the Secretary-General, the Deputy Secretary-General and I met to discuss possible courses of action. We knew that Presidents

Kabila, from the DRC, Kagame, from Rwanda, and Museveni, from Uganda, planned to meet urgently and secretly in Kampala, but we did not know when the meeting would take place. I asked my collaborator to discreetly find out. She looked at me seriously without uttering a word. At that moment, another person from my team came into my office, and my collaborator, before leaving, did not miss the opportunity to comment, “some people believe I am Mata Hari,” but nevertheless an hour later she returned with the desired information.

That same night, I set out for Kampala. The next day, I met individually with each of the three Presidents. I understood that the course of action that was being considered entailed deploying a large number of troops from the DRC to Goma to recover the city. In fact, the mobilization had already begun. It became clear to me that we were facing a situation that could portend an unprecedented level of violence and destruction and which would result in unspeakable suffering for the population, especially for children and women, in the wake of the operation.

At that point, with all channels of communication with Goma broken, amidst reports indicating that the population was being subjected to all kinds of harassment and with predictions of an escalating military confrontation ahead, I perceived that the only possible recourse to avoid disaster was to speak with General Makenga. It was necessary to



understand his point of view and to ascertain if there was a point at which his objectives and those of the other players could coincide to stop the impending horror, if only temporarily. I realized that the only move at that moment was to establish a relationship based on empathy, something that nobody had tried or perhaps even imagined and that very few were able to attempt given the circumstances.

I called the Secretary-General to explain the situation and offered to personally go to Goma to meet with General Makenga. From my point of view, if we wanted to avoid the impending disaster, we had no alternative. The desired bottom line was very clear: to avoid a massacre and the destruction and misery that it would imply. Of course, it would be a secret meeting.

The Secretary-General asked me a lot of questions to assess the risks involved. We found answers to some, but during our conversation we also both became convinced that – notwithstanding the risks – there was no other option. He authorized the meeting on the condition I made every effort to mitigate the risk level.

We launched two parallel lines of action. My collaborator began to investigate and try to put together a plan for how to get to Goma, a besieged city, with the airport and port shutdown and in the hands of the rebels. Meanwhile, I communicated again very discreetly with the three Presidents to explain the plan and to make sure I had an informal

“safe conduct” from them that I could rely on. Both President Kagame and President Museveni explained that they had no contact whatsoever with the rebels and, therefore, could not do anything to help me in this regard.

However, unofficially, both agreed, as a gesture of personal friendship, to find someone who was in a position to announce my visit to General Makenga and obtain his agreement. The two were successful.

The conversation with President Kabila was more complex. He was extremely aware of the political implications of any action. While preferring a peaceful solution, he felt he was politically exposed. The idea that this meeting could be leveraged to confer public and official recognition of the leader of the rebels at the highest level of the United Nations was untenable for the President. Finally, after a lengthy conversation and when he was sufficiently convinced that the meeting would be kept secret, he gave his approval. Alongside my collaborator, I began to plan my trip to Goma.

I find it hard to identify the right adjectives to express what life in Goma is like because life there is perhaps different from everything one has experienced. Located on Lake Kivu, the city seems to be closely guarded by the imposing figure of the Nyiragongo volcano, 3,400 meters high and less than twenty kilometers away. Approaching the city, one is under the impression that it is a privileged

place of unique beauty. And it is. On the coast there are some magnificent houses that suggest well-being and comfort.

However, the Nyiragongo is treacherous. Far from guarding and protecting, it attacks and destroys. Upon entering the city, one can see streets still covered and blackened by the lava that decimated it in January 2002. The villagers fled as they could, but they estimate that this outpouring of the Nyiragongo's wrath left about a hundred people dead and destroyed the homes of some 400,000 inhabitants of the city and its environs.

Despite the imminent danger of subsequent eruptions and the poverty and disease that plagues the population, people return. When the eruption ceases, the residents, Congolese, but also Rwandans, who invaded the city en masse in 1994 in the wake of the Rwandan genocide and still remain there, return to walk the destroyed streets in pursuit of survival. If life in the city is brutal, they return because it is much worse to move away from it where armed bandits ruthlessly fight with guerrilla groups and international mercenaries and smugglers exploit the country's immense mineral wealth, coltan in particular. The protection that security forces offer in those areas is virtually non-existent.

As soon as the lava cools, they return to the city and try to find shelters to spend the nights, which are particularly dangerous. Without distinction

of age or sex, they carry everything they find and that they can, perhaps, sell. Some carry their loads on their shoulders or on their heads. A few own a “chukudu,” a kind of bicycle with a wooden frame and also wooden wheels, without pedals or a mechanism of traction other than feet on the ground to propel it forward, and with a stick crossed in the front like a handlebar. Even such a rudimentary vehicle allows them to transport larger loads and, possibly, obtain better benefits.

That was the city I was going to. I was going to confer with one of the world’s most dangerous guerrilla leaders accused of terrible human rights violations. As expected, the logistics to get to Goma were complicated.

Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, is the headquarters of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC. Given the size of the country and the magnitude of the conflict, MONUSCO is a very large mission, with an estimated 19,000 troops between the military and police. To fulfill its mission, it had about thirteen aircraft and 34 helicopters at its disposal distributed throughout the region. The original plan was to fly one of the small planes. However, it was not possible to arrange a secure landing at Goma airport.

With my collaborator’s support, it was agreed that a plane would take me to Bukavu, at the southern

end of Lake Kivu, the capital of the province of South Kivu where there is a MONUSCO military peacekeeping base. From there, we would cross the lake to the north by helicopter to reach Goma. We would land on a private house heliport on the lake. Other soldiers from MONUSCO would be waiting for me in that house and take me to the hotel where the meeting would take place.

Things did not proceed exactly according to these carefully laid out plans. Due to an error I never managed to clarify, instead of landing at the house, we landed at the airport that was shut down and controlled by the rebels. When I realized where we were, I must confess I felt scared, and ordered that we immediately take off and go to the house, not knowing if, in those circumstances, taking off was safer than staying there, or if taking off was an invitation for the rebels to fire at us. Thankfully, luck was on our side that day. A few minutes later, we landed in the garden of a beautiful house by the lake.

We immediately went from the house to the hotel where I would meet with General Makenga. To my surprise, after waiting for a couple of minutes, the General entered the room dressed in a gray business suit. It was evident that this was far from his usual attire. To this day, I still wonder if that suit belonged to him. But, just by entering the room in this way, he conveyed a very clear point. His attire said: I value your presence and I

am willing to seek a solution to the point that, to make things easier for you, I have decided to dress like your normal interlocutors. It turned out that the General, regardless of any other considerations, was an expert in empathy.

Not having yet sat down, his first words were, “You have risked a lot coming here.” To which I replied, “both you and I know this is not the case. I took all possible precautions.” “I do not mean that,” he said, of course, “but I think your meeting with me does not make you look good,” in obvious reference to the unanimous resolution adopted by the Security Council on November 20<sup>th</sup>, strongly condemning M23 and, in particular, its leaders who faced a high risk of persecution by the International Criminal Court.

“It is not a risk for me either,” I replied, “because within that scenario, my job is to protect people and look for ways to prevent more suffering for the population.”

Unexpectedly, he took this response as a springboard to begin talking about the people close to him. Instead of discussing the issues that brought me there, he spent about forty minutes explaining the suffering that his mother, his children, his family and his people in general living in the eastern part of the DRC had endured. He spoke of what, from his point of view, was a cruel and unfair situation, of the paradoxes of starving in a rich land and the lack of interest of the central government toward its people in the provinces. What he conveyed was

personal and from the perspective of his family. With that argument, he justified his actions saying that it was the only way to defend his family. I patiently listened to what seemed at first a diversion from my mission because I understood that his arguments offered me a different way of approaching the topic of the conflict.

Having never lived in the east of the DRC and never carefully studied the Congolese society, I was not in a position to assess if his perspective was valid or not. But I could argue that, defending his family, could never justify inflicting injustice and suffering upon thousands of other families. That line of argument allowed me to maintain the urgent need to stop the conflict.

His position was that the constitution of the DRC established mechanisms to share natural resources between Kinshasa and the east of the country and that these mechanisms were not respected. He argued that conflict was the only way to draw attention to the issue. It was a long conversation that lasted almost four hours. Despite having interpreters, we both made the effort to communicate in French, minimizing the use of intermediaries.

During the conversation, I paid close attention to his argument. However, I would return again and again to two basic points: firstly, the abuse committed by his people was inadmissible and, secondly, the need to establish an immediate ceasefire to lead to a negotiation.

Deep in conversation, at one point he mentioned that he could not control what his people were doing, an argument that I neither accepted then nor accept now. But later he said that he would be willing to freeze the situation, as well as leave Goma, if I guaranteed that President Kabila would give his word to halt the advance of his troops. I explained that, without representing President Kabila at that time, I would do my best to convey his message.

We separated and I immediately called President Kabila who committed his word of honor, which I was able to confirm to General Makenga. From that moment, there was a “de facto” cessation of hostilities and negotiations began. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, the M23 withdrew from Goma.

I returned to New York satisfied with the result obtained. But one of the conditions of passion for the bottom line is not to lower your guard after an achievement. This result marked only the beginning. Now we had to keep working to find a lasting solution. It is almost impossible to achieve spectacular achievements from one day to the next. That is why the passion for the result requires continuous work. You have to keep getting incrementally closer to your target and you cannot lose focus. Later, I will explain how we continued. I wanted to share this initial part of the story to illustrate the importance of empathy, of approaching reality both cognitively and empathetically.



While continuously working, it is also good, from time to time, to reward yourself. The night after returning to New York, I went out to celebrate together with my collaborator and a couple of very close friends. As usual, we had dinner at the Buenos Aires Restaurant on 6th Street in Manhattan. Ismael, the owner, has always given me the opportunity to feel at home and enjoy my country in a corner of Manhattan. It was good to give myself the opportunity to “go back to my roots” after a experiencing such an extreme situation.

### **Eempathy as a Process**

The word empathy, in the particular sense in which it is used today, is a new word. It was not used in this sense until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a common word with the ancient Greeks, but then it fell into disuse. The Greek word was “*empátheia*.” In the beginning it meant passion. Probably that’s why it is a word that I like so much.

Since it’s new, there’s still a bit of confusion about what it means, so I think it does not hurt to explain a little more in detail what I mean by empathy. The first thing I want to point out is that empathy, in my opinion, implies the acceptance that human beings never act in a purely intellectual, reasoned or cognitive way, but that we carry, consciously or unconsciously, a heavy affective or emotional load that conditions our behaviors and our decisions.

A person who acts empathetically does not run away from feelings, either his own or those of others. For that reason, to act empathetically, the first thing we need is to know ourselves. Yes, the old saying, “know thyself” that some Greek had written on the facade of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Only by looking into our own feelings can we capture the feelings of others and, perhaps, understand how they affect them. This is, of course, a great device to achieve one’s goals. Only by understanding the motivations of others and ourselves can we reach an agreement that will allow us to move forward together. That is what negotiations entail, both in the diplomatic and business world, as in any other. This is how long-lasting agreements and loyalties are achieved (a quality that companies today want to instill in their clients). Truth prevails over arrogance and deception in negotiations.

The second aspect that I highlight is that, in my opinion, empathy requires honesty. You cannot simulate empathy or feign understanding for others. Simulated empathy can be spotted miles away.

Finally, I believe that empathy is not a state that one achieves but a process in which one engages continuously. One can learn to develop an empathetic attitude by paying continuous and honest attention to people. But for how long? The great Argentine golfer Roberto de Vicenzo, who won eight PGA Tour and nine European championships, was once asked how much training

was necessary to play golf well. He responded that when training he would get close to a tree and, while hitting golf balls, he would continuously talk to it. Then, he added, when the tree answers back, I will know I have trained enough.



## **Organizational Cultures**

I deliberated whether to include the following experience in this book. Even though this book is neither about history nor politics, both subjects appear in this chapter with certain preponderance and have also been frequently in the media spotlight.

The facts that I cover below serve the singular purpose of illustrating how organizational culture determines people's behavior. In doing so, it tends to expand or limit their range of options. For this reason, I believe it is necessary, as an introduction, to concisely present some concepts related to what, in organizational development literature, is usually referred to as an organizational culture.

While there is not a universally accepted definition of an organizational culture per se, most scholars agree that in each organization there exists a series of basic beliefs or presuppositions that define the way in which its members understand the organization in the society in which they operate and their respective place within the organization.

These beliefs are extremely useful to the organization because they “automate” how their members respond to daily challenges; they become akin to an organization’s instincts or reflexes. Therefore, one of the leader’s fundamental responsibilities (some authors state that it is the fundamental responsibility) is to deeply understand the prevailing culture in her organization to be able, together with her team, to inspire and encourage the right adjustments to the inevitable changes that will unfold.

There are cultural elements that are determined by the organization’s type of activity, but the most important are those that differentiate one organization from another even within the same trade. For example, the cultural characteristics that prevail in a university or hospital are very different, and universities share some cultural tenets as hospitals do. However, it is the fundamental task of the leaders of a university, a hospital or any other organization to know how to define and develop the distinctive components of their own organization to make them more adaptive to their activity and more successful relative to other organizations in the same field.

Several organizational behavior specialists have observed that, in certain circumstances, cultural characteristics become entrenched within organizations that are incompatible with their environment and the era. This situation usually

occurs in organizations in which those in leadership positions do not share the same point of view. This is why it appears more frequently in organizations whose officials are not chosen because of how they identify with the objectives of the organization or for their expertise, but whose selection is guided by external considerations, such as political motivations or constraints or, in the case of intergovernmental organizations, for reasons that concern the government supporting that official.

When this happens, it is very difficult to modify the organization's cultural patterns because such a transformation requires the leadership team's continuous and coordinated dedication. And this is exactly what is missing in these circumstances. To an experienced observer and management practitioner, it is obvious when an organization suffers from this problem. One of the clearest symptoms of an organization with a culture ill suited to the objectives it pursues is the systematic rejection by its members of situations that require new approaches. Everything that has "never been done before" is considered suspicious and creativity is synonymous with a risk that should be avoided at all costs.

A little over a year after having taken over the position of Chef de Cabinet of the Secretary-General of the UN, I faced a challenge, with real human costs, in which the ability of the Organization to move beyond its standard modus operandi was put

to the test. I am going to narrate this experience because it reveals useful lessons on leadership.

To understand the context, we must return to the period between 2010 and 2013, when, in North Africa and the Middle East, a series of more or less violent conflicts took place, which came to be called the “Arab Spring.” The name reflects the point of view of those who considered it as a “domino effect” of popular democratic uprisings in the Arab world against the oppression of authoritarian governments. Calling it a “Spring” reflects the concept of a “blooming” of popular freedoms. There are, however, those who argue that, in reality, as much as they were genuine popular uprisings, many were also instigated by actors seeking geopolitical and economic benefits from the overthrow or weakening of the existing regimes.

By early 2011, the wave of protests and uprisings reached Syria. This led to a confrontation, on the one hand, between armed groups seeking to overthrow the government, and on the other, the Syrian Armed Forces seeking to reinforce the government. These confrontations escalated quickly into the Syrian civil war, which continues to this day. Amidst tremendous suffering for the population, an amalgam of armed groups, some of which are proxies supported by foreign governments, operate in the country, while the lack of security is also exploited by terrorist groups.



On the night of August 21, 2013, this civil war, which had already precipitated a tremendous humanitarian crisis that still continues, reached an extreme point when the Syrian army attacked, using chemical weapons, the areas of Damascus that were in the hands of the rebels. This attack led to the cruel deaths of approximately 1,500 civilians, of which an estimated 400 were children.

The decision by the Syrian government to utilize these weapons, proscribed under international law, against its own people altered the course of the civil war. The use of chemical weapons also ran the risk that these weapons could fall into the hands of terrorist groups – some already clearly identified as such by the United Nations, as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and Al-Qaeda – that had a foothold on Syrian soil. Syria had one of the largest – the largest by some estimates – arsenals of chemical weapons in the world.

Naturally, these events set off every alarm. The most powerful and influential countries in the region were immediately seized, analyzing how to react and what action to take. In the United Nations, the commotion was staggering. It is precisely this reaction I want to analyze here from the point of view of the influence of the organizational culture. But first, it is necessary to mention the differences that exist between what I informally call “the three United Nations,” which are often confused by the citizens of the world who are not particularly

involved in international politics, as well as by the media's coverage of the UN. This is not surprising since the United Nations is one of the most complex and unwieldy bureaucratic organizations in the world.

The Charter of the United Nations, signed on June 26, 1945, stipulates that the Organization will consist of six main organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat. The Trusteeship Council, which dealt with issues related to decolonization, ceased to operate in 1994.

Subsequently, over the years and in response to short-term international needs, the General Assembly decided to create numerous affiliated organizations, called programs, funds and specialized agencies, each with its own advocates among Member States, their objectives and their budgets. These bodies, which were not conceived of in the original creation of the United Nations, include organizations that are highly relevant and operational today, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The World Food Program (WFP), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The main defining characteristic of programs, funds and specialized agencies is that, while they

all have specialized objectives, for example, supporting development, protecting children, fighting hunger or providing assistance to refugees, and coordinate their actions with other UN agencies, they retain independence to meet their specific mandates. Another very important feature is that the officials of these organizations are United Nations employees; they are not beholden to their countries of origin and operate as international civil servants and as professionals specialized in the areas of activity of each organization.

Thus, programs, funds and specialized agencies constitute a set of affiliated organizations that share similar characteristics. Together, they comprise what I consider “one of the United Nations.” The organizational culture of the organizations that make up “this United Nations” is an operational and professional culture oriented towards action. A good example of what this culture means can be found in the WFP experience that I narrated in the chapter “The bottom line.” It is a culture that privileges quick and creative decisions, in which, often, urgency is imposed over bureaucratic formalities in order to yield actionable results.

Going back to the basis of the original Charter, we can identify what I call “the first United Nations,” which currently comprises the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the International Court of Justice. These intergovernmental organs set

normative standards, make political decisions, and decide on administrative issues. They are constituted by diplomats appointed by the Member States of the United Nations.

These diplomats are not United Nations employees but represent the interests and positions of their respective countries. Naturally, the culture that prevails here, the “first United Nations,” is the diplomatic culture. It is a culture that privileges the development of personal relationships. Without this, no exchange or positive understanding for peace in the world can be achieved.

In this culture, paying close attention to formalities is fundamental. On many occasions, simple facts that would bear no importance at all in other settings become fundamental to transmit messages in the diplomatic arena. This includes the order of speakers in a meeting; the seating placement of the representatives of each country in a meeting room; the type of words with which an agreement or a disagreement is expressed; and the way gratitude is expressed or silenced. This careful choreography is an impersonal, albeit very useful and potent, way to transmit messages of power and alignment. While these are messages that everyone implicitly understands, because of the way in which they are transmitted, they protect personal relationships in a climate of discretion and apparent cordiality.

This culture allows diplomats, even in the most controversial situations, to act as representatives,

attributing the decisions, impersonally, to the country they represent as delegates. Personal relationships are thus preserved. It is, therefore, a culture that also values qualities such as perseverance and patience, which are fundamental to sustaining the long-term objectives of the countries they represent.

Finally, what I call the “third United Nations” is the Secretariat. The Charter of the United Nations prescribes very little about the Secretariat. It simply says that it will consist of “Secretary-General and such staff as the Organization may require.” It also specifies that, “He shall be the highest administrative officer of the Organization,” and also gives him or her (so far, only “him” has been applicable) the ability to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”

It ends by establishing the characteristics that personnel of the Secretariat should possess. Appointed by the Secretary-General, they should possess “the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity,” they “shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization,” and they should represent “as wide a geographical basis as possible.”

Over the years, the Secretariat, initially conceived of as the mere administrative facilitator of

the deliberations of the diplomatic representatives of the Member States, has swelled to more than 40,000 employees.

The reason for this vertiginous growth lies in the substantive change that the Secretariat has assumed over the years. The Secretariat has gone from being the facilitator of processes for 193 Member States to the manager and implementer of its decisions. The Secretary-General has an increasingly important diplomatic role to play through his good offices deployed throughout the world. For these reasons, at present, the Secretariat has eight Departments and eighteen Offices in New York. In addition, there are three offices in Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna, and five Regional Commissions in Bangkok, Beirut, Addis Ababa, Geneva and Santiago de Chile, plus several dozen smaller offices belonging to different representatives, envoys and advisers to the Secretary-General in various places in the world.

This complex situation presents a serious challenge for the Secretariat. It is very difficult for the leadership not only to manage its culture, but also, simply, to decide what that culture should resemble. Given the high number and breadth of its diverse operational goals, should it have an operational culture in the style of programs, funds and specialized agencies? Or, since its main mandate is to serve the diplomats of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the International Court of

Justice, should it have a diplomatic culture related to them? In fact, diplomats presented and supported by Member States occupy the highest-level posts of the Secretariat, those of Under-Secretary-General (around 50) and those of Assistant Secretary-General (around 120).

The chemical weapons attack of August 2013 impacted all “three United Nations.” The center of the “first United Nations” was established in the Security Council. It quickly became clear that it would be impossible to reach an agreement. While United States, France and the United Kingdom proposed military action against Syria, the other two permanent members of the Council, Russia and China, were willing to exercise their veto power to block any resolution in that regard. In other words, the Council had reached a situation of paralysis. This inaction served to reinforce the de facto status quo through validating, or at least minimizing, the grave actions of the Syrian government. However, from an organizational culture point of view, given an analysis of how facts developed in the Council, there was nothing surprising about it.

The Council was functioning exactly as designed and in total agreement with its culture, taking a position faithful to the long-term objectives of each of its members and without being influenced by the urgency or pressure of a novel action.

Meanwhile, also faithful to their respective cultures, the programs, funds and specialized

agencies with humanitarian responsibility reinforced their deployments and interventions in Syria. UNICEF continued its programs, immunizing children against the outbreak of measles due to the precariousness of health systems or coordinating water distribution in trucks when violence destroyed the aqueducts.

WFP took extreme measures to maintain its food distribution, launching supplies from the air in places where it was impossible to access, while, at the same time, maximizing its influence to obtain specific cease-fire agreements that would allow the distribution of food to those most in need. In all the other UN agencies dedicated to humanitarian aid, the same passion for action was evident.

One cannot witness these events that transpired without astonishment. While some human beings find “reasons” that justify resorting to violence, killing innocents and causing suffering, others risk their lives to relieve the victims of the former. As Chef de Cabinet in the Secretariat, I felt the need to act, although I was aware that in these circumstances, none of the options available to the Secretariat – peace missions, special political missions or any form of envoys of the Secretary-General – were suited to the situation.

While engaging in long brain-storming sessions with my team on possible actions, rumors were heard, both within the United States and in other Western countries, that bombings



aimed at destroying Syria's chemical weapons capacity were to be carried out without delay. The information circulating at that time estimated that there were approximately 45 Syrian facilities in which chemical weapons were produced or stored. We estimated that attacking all or many of those points would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. However, at the same time, it was evident that, with such a profusion of chemical weapons and with the presence of terrorist groups, the possibility that some of those weapons fell into their hands was too high and untenable a risk to take.

It was then that, in the Secretariat, we received advice from some Member States that, when faced with the imminence of possible bombings, we should immediately withdraw all our personnel from Syria. This meant dismantling the humanitarian aid network that was helping to sustain thousands of people and enable them to survive. Furthermore, the withdrawal of our personnel in these circumstances could be construed as the United Nations' public acceptance of or acquiescence to the bombing.

Mindful that the maintenance of peace and prevention of violence are top priorities in the culture of the Secretariat, as Chef de Cabinet, I decided to recommend to the Secretary-General that, while we would ensure readiness to evacuate staff with the maximum urgency and in line with the duty of care to our personnel in case the worst scenario

unfolded, we had to preserve the official and public position of neither withdrawing those officials who carried out critical humanitarian activities nor the team that was finalizing the investigation into the possible use of chemical weapons. That also meant we needed to buy time to facilitate talks between members of the Security Council.

My recommendation put Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in a difficult situation. Those who advocated immediate military action applied great pressure on him. Mr. Ban Ki-moon is a highly experienced diplomat who, in his measured and affable style, was in the best position to assess the multiple consequences of a decision like the one I was proposing.

Beneath his tendency to be open to dialogue and to seek solutions without confrontation, Ban Ki-moon has a strong will and is unwilling to negotiate his principles. Most people, probably because of superficiality or ignorance of his culture, have confused his willingness to listen for a propensity to be influenced or a lack of conviction. Nothing is further from the truth. Faced with the proposal not to withdraw important officials from humanitarian activities from Syria, which also meant putting the United Nations in direct opposition to the bombing, he decided to support this course of action and firmly maintained that position.

On the morning of August 24, President Obama announced from the White House that

he had decided that the United States should act against Syria but would do so only after obtaining Congressional approval. Although the sword of Damocles was still hanging, in practice, this announcement implied an opportunity to give space and time for negotiations to yield possible solutions.

As a result of President Obama's declaration, conversations began to develop between the United States and Russia, focusing on finding ways to eliminate Syria's chemical arsenal without resorting to a military attack. On September 9, US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters that the bombings could only be avoided if Syria handed over absolutely all its chemical weapons within a week, but added, "Syria isn't about to do it, and it can't be done."

However, in an effort that surprised many, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov immediately declared that Russia had suggested to Syria the abandonment of its chemical weapons production and the destruction of its entire arsenal, and that its suggestion had been positively welcomed by Syria.

The negotiations hastened. On September 14, the United States and Russia signed the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons. The Framework instructed the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations to ensure that Syria complied with

the standards established in the Chemical Weapons Convention. Accordingly, Syria agreed to destroy both the chemical weapons it possessed and its production centers within a fixed period by the first half of 2014.

Implementing the task entrusted by the Framework proved to be a great challenge. On the one hand, the UN observers in Syria warned us that the Syrian government did not have the technical capacity to comply with the agreed destruction plan. On the other, while the OPCW had qualified personnel, it had neither the resources nor the training necessary to work in Syria's volatile civil war environment. With my team, we conceived a plan that would allow us to reach the bottom line we sought.

We knew there were no precedents to rely upon and we were aware of the urgency of the situation. UN and OPCW teams worked together trying to overcome the mutual distrust between two organizations of very different cultures that had never before been so interrelated in their operational activities. Some people objected that "it has never been done before," but many gave the necessary support to find the right path.

Ultimately, we proposed the creation of what was called the "OPCW and UN Joint Mission to Eliminate the Chemical Weapons Program of the Syrian Arab Republic." The entire mission had to be designed from scratch. A thorough security

strategy was designed to ensure the wellbeing of all the members of this mixed mission, especially the civilians who were not United Nations personnel and who had to work in civil war conditions.

Even though many were experts in their respective field, they did not know the culture and language of the place where they now had to operate. We designed procedures to ensure the confidentiality of the information handled by both organizations that, while working together, would continue to maintain their independent responsibilities and regulations; a budget to finance the operation was drawn up; a methodology for managing information and communications of two organizations with their own culture and methods was established; staff were identified; and in-country logistics were planned.

On October 7, 2013, the Secretary-General sent a letter proposing the creation of the Mission to the Security Council. The Council approved it four days later and work immediately commenced.

The elimination of chemical weapons represented a herculean effort with OPCW's leadership in which many countries collaborated. All the material being destroyed had to be transported outside the country. The last shipment was made on June 23, 2014, representing 97.8% of what was declared by the Syrian government. On September 30, the mission was completed. A detail that is not always recognized is that this

mission was led by a woman, against the judgment of many at the time of her appointment, who not only knew how to balance under pressure between the operative and the political, but who also remained firm in her commitment to comply with the responsibility to close the mission in a timely manner as the Secretary-General had promised. It was a true unusual hallmark in the culture of the deployment of new missions.

Recent events seem to show that the removal of chemical weapons was not fully complete. It is possible that the Syrian government did not declare all its capacity. Even so, what was achieved was very significant. It prevented, among other things, the prospect that terrorist groups could take hold of chemical weapons during a period in which Syrian territory changed hands multiple times.

But, above all, while a significant proportion of chemical weapons in Syria were eliminated, a potential humanitarian catastrophe of major proportions was also prevented through peaceful means. It is also noteworthy that, by adhering to the Convention on the Elimination of Chemical Weapons, the Syrian government has assumed a commitment that, if proven to be unfulfilled, provides clear ways of assigning accountability.

### **Organizational Cultures and Personal Principles**

As Professor Edgar Schein of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) highlighted in

the 1990s, it is possible to distinguish different levels in the values of the organizational culture. Schein spoke of a superficial level, which he called “artifacts,” as the visible aspects of culture, such as the acceptable attire or the type of office and décor.

Then, he deemed an intermediate level as “exposed values.” These comprise what the organization has publicly claimed as values. Typically, these values include statements such as “our most important asset is the people,” “we have a policy of total equality between men and women,” etc. And then there is the third level, that of the underlying basic assumptions. Schein says that the latter are the elementary values that are almost universally unconsciously shared by the members of the organization.

My experience reinforces this model. What is clear is that, in order for the organization to function well, there must be coherence between the three levels, and, most of all, between the organization’s values and its operational reality. Regarding the Secretary-General’s decision not to remove the personnel that exercised essential functions from Syria, there was absolute coherence between the values of the third and second level, and also between the values and the decision that was being taken. That is why it was a decision supported at all the levels of the Organization that also reaffirmed the Secretary-General’s leadership in sustaining the principles that the UN defends.

Unfortunately, we live in times in which speaking of sustaining principles seems almost pretentious or naive as if one wanted to elevate qualities above reality. Talking about principles is also complicated. While they are dismissed by some as superfluous, principles have also been employed in order to justify atrocities. However, in my experience, I always found more people living according to their principles and who, if necessary, are willing to accept the consequences of doing so than those who are not.

There are many ways in which individuals handle the tension that can occur between the organization's culture to which they belong and their personal principles. As an example, I am going to narrate a small anecdote that impressed me at the time and that illustrates the subject very well. As we know, the 193 Member States of the United Nations have their Permanent Missions to the United Nations (like an embassy in a foreign country) in New York. The United Nations functions basically through commissions and committees that regularly meet throughout the year.

Commissions and committees are where countries define and defend their positions and fight for the establishment of norms in relation to different issues. Currently, the UN General Assembly has six main commissions that deal with issues of disarmament and international security; economic and financial matters; social, humanitarian and



cultural issues; special policy and decolonization; administrative and budgetary matters; and legal matters. It also has around thirty committees. All Permanent Missions have a team that supports the ambassador by studying in detail the issues that are discussed. They also participate in commissions and committees to support the position of their respective countries. Some embassies consist of less than ten members, while others have hundreds, depending on the capacity each country has to finance those structures. Of course, the ability to have influence on international affairs also has to do with the size of the Permanent Mission they hold. The countries that are permanent members of the Security Council, the so-called P5 (China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Russia), usually have the largest Permanent Missions.

The ambassadors run the Permanent Mission's daily actions and determine the positions their representatives will take on each matter. However, when the issues are of particular importance, they consult with their ministries of foreign affairs in their capital. Representatives of the Secretariat of the UN are also present and exert some influence, especially informal, in the deliberations of the different bodies. The ambassadors usually discuss the topics of interest not only with the other ambassadors but also with the officials of the Secretariat. In that context, as Chef de Cabinet, I

received the visits of at least one or two ambassadors on a daily basis. The meetings were cordial or, at least, within the rules implicit in the diplomatic culture.

However, one morning during a week in which a serious discussion about the financing of the peacekeeping troops was taking place, I was surprised by the visit of the ambassador of one of the P5s, with whom I had a cordial relationship. The ambassador came to my office accompanied by his deputy. After shaking my hand and saying a customary “thank you for receiving me,” without taking a seat, he took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and promptly read it expressing the position of his country regarding the financing of the peacekeeping troops.

When he finished reading the note, he thanked me for the time dedicated to him, said goodbye and left. This ambassador used this unorthodox method to send two messages. The first one, required by his role as ambassador, consisted in faithfully expressing his country’s position, which he did by reading it literally and in the presence of his deputy as a witness. The second message was implicit in his unusual and almost abrupt behavior. The message said, I am not here as a person; I am here in my function as the ambassador. He told me in that way that he, as an individual who had his principles, did not agree with the position conveyed by his country in the message, but that he was fulfilling his duty as ambassador in delivering the message.

And, at least for those of us who are not philosophers, principles are simple matters that are much closer to feelings than to reflections (Schein would say they are “unconscious”). If asked, it might be difficult to list or prioritize them, but we know very well when our principles are attacked or questioned. It is also easy to distinguish principles from prejudice or fanaticism. When a person is a victim of their fanaticism or their prejudices, they experience feelings of hatred towards those who are different, towards those who are not like them, and typically justify imposition, violence and censorship. Fanaticism and prejudice are often also justifications for selfishness, for a “me first” attitude, because they prevent us from seeing the natural role that we all have to fulfill ourselves as members of a group. We live in confused times in which it seems that a large propaganda machine is dedicated to transform us from citizens into consumers. Citizens are individuals aware of the importance of the fulfillment with and of others, of the group, as a condition for personal fulfillment. Consumers are individuals unable to overcome a level of personal development so basic that they associate the satisfaction of their unconscious, childish and selfish desires with the possession of the objects to which the desires are temporarily attached.

But principles lead us to possess feelings that are diametrically opposed. Holding on to your

principles is always associated with giving up personal benefits or, at least personal comfort. Therefore, the person who acts by principles does not seek to attack or impose but pursues a superior group benefit. This person does not pursue the limelight because the result of actions based on principles is a joint result. As leaders, we must keep in mind that this is what the majority always expects from us.

To complete this chapter, I want to add a comment about the role of leaders regarding organizational culture. There is no theory that unequivocally determines the role that the leader should assume in each circumstance. The leader must train for navigating the ambiguity that exists in each situation. Training consists, simply and, at the same time, complexly, in thinking carefully about each experience you have to live, finding and reading material on that subject, and, if possible, honestly exchanging ideas with your trusted team. It requires mental openness and the ability to concentrate on learning, without taking as personal attacks the errors that others may have committed. This is how a repertoire of personal experiences develops, allowing one to refer to it to make decisions in the subsequent situations that arise.

There are circumstances in which an organization whose culture is not inclined to action must be pushed to act. An example of this is the case of the Secretariat facing the Syrian chemical

weapons crisis. The Secretariat culturally tends towards analysis and towards the preparation of detailed and well-supported reports that are presented to the different commissions of the General Assembly or the Security Council so that they can make the corresponding decisions that will then be implemented by the missions or departments.

The Secretariat will then carry out the management and follow-up of the implementation and, in due course, will return to the Assembly or the Council with the corresponding updates. However, the chemical weapons crisis required the Secretariat to get involved in the operation in a novel way. The transformation of a traditionally analytical culture into an operational one requires the leader's detailed and continuous involvement throughout the operation.

There are also circumstances of the opposite case: of an organization inclined to take urgent action but which the leaders bring to a standstill in order to allow space for negotiations that can significantly improve the situation to take place. The ability of good leaders is to distinguish the circumstances that call for urgent action from those that require a period of reflection and consideration, and to know how to work with the organization to adjust its culture to each of those cases.



## **The Unfinished is Nothing**

When I was sixteen, I had the wonderful opportunity to be part of a student exchange program where I spent a year living with a family and studying in a public school in Vandalia, a small town in Missouri, in the United States. As it turned out, this was an experience that, in many ways, had a major influence on the development of my professional career.

It was always clear to me that Vandalia was not exactly New York City. The phrase from Frank Sinatra “if I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere” did not apply to Vandalia. But I nevertheless felt pride in successfully adapting to a different culture, with a different language, so far from my family and in a place vastly different from my native Rosario. After doing so, I felt there would be no challenge I could not face.

Self-confidence leads, above all, to not wasting energy in pretending to be someone else before others. This allows you to face issues with energy

and spontaneity, rather than pretense. This was fundamental in my professional development. Additionally, for the first time in my life I had the chance to make African American friends with whom I shared many commonalities, I became sensitized to the importance of equality in diversity. I grew accustomed to looking beyond appearances and to rejecting prejudices. I am convinced that this approach was vital to my career everywhere I worked from the trade union school in Rosario to the Foreign Ministry in Argentina.

However, what I want to recall is a small anecdote that happened in my hometown of Rosario ahead of my imminent departure to the United States. It started three or four months before embarking on a flight of the old Braniff airline that no longer exists.

What does continue to exist, although the owners are no longer the same, is the Ross bookshop in Rosario where this experience took place. Although I had very good English teachers in high school, complemented by my studies at the British Council in Rosario, and I could speak rather fluently in English, when I was accepted in the exchange program, I felt the need to become more confident in my ability to communicate from the first day I arrived to the US. I wanted to ensure that I could rapidly integrate from the very first moment I arrived in Missouri, or at least that language would not be an obstacle to my integration. To put



my anxiety into context, I was very young and had never left Argentina before. As my natural response to challenges is action given my optimistic outlook, I immediately decided to do something about it.

I went to Ross bookstore and sought the advice of the salesman. I told him about my upcoming trip and asked him for suggestions of books that I could read to practice colloquial English.

He started by recommending *The Catcher in the Rye*. But the best thing he did for me was to propose a challenge that consisted of the following. In a briefcase he kept a large number of loose-leaf papers on which, in perfect handwriting, he copied phrases from the books he read. The challenge entailed giving me, every week, some of the sheets of paper and I would have to bring back the translation of all the English phrases written down. When I returned those translations, he would give me additional sheets. We did it three or four times. Later when I returned from the United States, I searched for my friend on two or three occasions to thank him, but I never saw him again.

Of the several phrases I translated during those weeks, there was one from Amiel's *Journal* by Henri-Frederic Amiel that was particularly resonant: "The unfinished is nothing." For me, those four words became my "tenacity mantra." These are still the words I turn to when, at times, I am seized by weakness, by the temptation to accept "urgent meetings" to escape from tackling what is

important but difficult, and when I am more eager to listen to those who say “we did a great job” instead of listening to the little voice inside that reminds of everything we still can and must do.

This was the idea behind the report that I presented to the Secretary-General upon my return from the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that was detailed in an earlier chapter. We were aware of the value of having avoided a major armed confrontation, but we knew that the “de facto” cessation of hostilities that had been achieved did not resolve the profound conflict that was at the root of the violence. If the situation was left that way, it was going to become a classic example that “the unfinished is nothing.”

Knowing that he could count on my enthusiasm for a challenge, the Secretary-General asked me to assume responsibility for reaching some form of compromise between the parties that would lead to a stronger, more sustainable agreement than the one we had previously reached. My team and I had the tenacity needed for the task at hand.

We were doing everything we could to design a framework agreement that would be the envisaged road map towards a more sustainable peace in the DRC. That was the bottom line to achieve. We had the passion to strive for it.

Designing the framework agreement was far from a simple matter. After my meeting with General Makenga, it had become clear to me that

there was no possibility of avoiding the armed conflict for a long period of time if the eastern part of DRC did not begin to have a greater share in reaping the benefits of the area's abundant natural resources. Peace and economic improvement always go hand in hand and never get too far by themselves. However, I also knew that the M23, as an illegal paramilitary organization that was guilty of atrocious human rights abuses, could not be part of any formal negotiation or agreement that was ultimately brokered.

Our own experience and that of many of our colleagues had confirmed that, as important as it is to include women in positions of decision-making in human affairs in general, it is still much more fundamental and necessary to include them in peace processes. Unfortunately, progress in this regard is dramatically slow and, women's place is neither as recognized nor accepted as it should be in general, especially in peace processes.

In cases of conflict, in which state institutions that must guarantee, at least, a modicum of justice, education, health and life protection, are extremely weakened – and in many cases are non-existent – it is women who often suffer the most.

As a result, it is usually women who, with greater conviction and knowledge of the root causes, usually bring to the discussion table the issues related to the basic functioning of the state, which ultimately are the only possible route to

development and peace. In the DRC, despite a very disadvantageous situation in which, too often, not only are women subjected to sexual abuse as a technique of war, but they are also deprived of basic rights (the DRC is among the ten countries with the highest maternal mortality rates), women organized to defend themselves and their communities.

Congolese women, with an illiteracy rate of nearly 38% compared to 22% for men, have managed to establish numerous organizations for the defense of their rights. Although the conditions are very adverse, in June 2006, for example, a coalition of women's rights groups compelled the government to enact a law that includes mandatory sentencing for rape, including the military officers who authorize it, and the criminalization of marital rape and child marriage. Although there is still a long way to go before this law is fully applied, the passage of the law is a noteworthy example of what women's organizations can achieve. With my team, we became convinced that the role of women should be guaranteed in any framework agreement put forward.

Hence, in December of 2012, our immediate objective was to develop a framework agreement that was comprehensive. In contrast with the prevailing view at the time that what was needed was only a peace agreement we knew that it needed to include economic and social development aspects. In addition, we had to envision who

would be the signatories who would accept to ratify this agreement so that, in a region with so many international participants, it would have the buy-in to give it a chance to be effective. We also had our self-imposed goal of including women's organizations.

As we moved forward in the consultations and necessary contacts to prepare the document, we concluded that we should take into account two additional aspects: first, in no way should the agreement reflect a paternalistic approach towards the DRC or any other African country or organization. It is sad to see so many attempts for peace fail in Africa because of the frequent tendency of powerful actors to impose their views based on their experiences that do not apply or conform to the local conditions. In other words, if obligations were to be established for the DRC, they also had to be established for all the other international participants, and commitments and responsibilities had to be defined for them. Second, the agreement itself should contain a clear monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure that commitments would be fulfilled over the years.

Our challenge was to reconcile all the divergent interests and points of view that these ideas generated in the multiple sectors that influenced the DRC. With thanks to the unparalleled tenacity not only of my team but also many others who contributed their leadership, patience and wisdom,

on February 24, 2013, in the city of Addis Ababa, the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region was signed.

As an indication of the complexity of this short document, there were eleven signatories who were the Presidents of eleven countries in the region (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Republic of Angola, Republic of Burundi, Republic of Congo, Republic of Rwanda, Republic of South Africa, Republic of South Sudan, Republic of Uganda, Republic of Zambia, Republic of Tanzania), in addition to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, the President of the Southern African Development Community and the President of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region.

Getting fifteen countries and organizations with influence in the DRC to sign and accept the agreement was no easy undertaking and itself constituted a great achievement. It is noteworthy that, among the document's fifteen signatories, only one was a woman. So, it will come as no surprise to say that, despite best intentions, we did not manage to include any women's rights association as part of the agreement. However, with tenacity, a woman was designated as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region in Africa. The mandate of the Special Envoy specifically linked

security with development through focusing on two key areas: the empowerment of women and regional economic integration.

On the other hand, taking into account the requirements of the eastern part of the DRC, the commitments assumed by the DRC government in the agreement included progress in decentralization and economic development, including basic services, and financial reforms. The agreement specified commitments for the countries of the region and for the international community. It also established a supervision mechanism that includes the eleven countries plus the four institutions, and specified the support of the European Union, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The Security Council of the United Nations, in its resolution issued on March 28, 2013, “welcomed” the signing of the framework agreement. Albeit careful not to depart from the strict framework of peace and security in its resolutions, the Council authorized the United Nations Mission in the DRC to “lend its good offices” to “facilitate the beginning of a sustainable socio-economic recovery.” I believe it is the most direct expression of support for development possible from the Council.

On February 27, 2018, the eleven plus four, together with experts, representatives of civil society and international partners, met in Addis Ababa to mark the fifth anniversary of the signing

of the agreement to evaluate the progress made. They issued a joint press release entitled, Five years on, the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC and the region remains central to achieving lasting peace.

### **Tenacity and the Fundamental Contributions of Women**

Today, many years after it was written, Henri-Frederic Amiel's phrase continues to fascinate me because I never stop finding interpretations, some ambiguous and others even contradictory, as is so often the case with aphorisms. Despite these multiple possible interpretations, I think that what it evoked when I first read it still comprises one of my personal and professional fundamental values. "The unfinished is nothing" to me implies that when a person assumes a goal, a desired bottom line, he or she must continue with that responsibility until it is achieved or, sometimes, until reaching the deep conviction that, despite having made all reasonable attempts, circumstances have made it impossible.

What is not valid, because "it is nothing," is to abandon a goal when only partial success has been achieved and take the easy way out. Such short-term strategies do not represent true leadership. Tenacity focuses on the objective, favors creativity and relies on teamwork.

Of course, tenacity is based on passion. But tenacity is a concept that has value in and of itself. Tenacity implies perseverance and, in that sense,



calls for sustaining the long-term effort in order to achieve your goal. But it also implies firmness. Tenacity, a mix of perseverance and firmness, entails staying on the path of achieving the goal despite circumstantial obstacles. Tenacity differs from stubbornness in that tenacity always seeks a noble purpose, which allows maintaining an open mind to understand the point of view of others and negotiate a possible positive outcome.

I acknowledge that our success was not as inclusive of the gender perspective as desired. It is not news to say that the majority of organizations discriminate against women. Beyond espousing commitments to equality, reality shows that moving towards genuine gender parity is no easy task. This results in two main scenarios: one in which men are favored in the selection for positions of responsibility and the other where decisions are made without considering women's points of view.

The examples of men being favored for positions of responsibility are countless. It is, therefore, interesting to analyze the reasons behind this behavior. In addition to the myriad important studies carried out by sociologists, psychologists and behavioral and organizational experts, I will attempt to contribute my view based on my varied and long personal experience in organizations. I believe that fear is a key factor. Those who make decisions are usually, in general and for historical reasons, mostly men. In the decision processes

that they carry out and that ultimately result in the selection of other men, there is often a hidden fear that, if they select a woman and that woman fails – as can happen with anyone – they will be criticized for not have chosen a man. Choosing a man confers them certain “protection” against the risk of failure. Additionally, I have seen that many men have a fear of dealing with women in positions of power. They fear that, in daily situations and, especially in conflict, they must behave differently than they do with a man, which is their normative behavior. They feel that selecting a woman implies they must learn a new way of working, which they prefer to avoid.

The second aspect is a consequence of the first. In many situations, men in positions of power “seek” women’s advice or establish, within organizations, mechanisms for women’s viewpoints to be considered. But, of course, consultation is not equivalent to decision making. Instead, this is, more often than not, a mechanism for protecting the image of powerful men and protecting the normative, than of including women in decision making.

Beyond discussing motives and the correct combination of nature and nurture, the reality is that women and men have different life experiences, are immersed in different biological processes, and tend to perceive and value differential aspects of reality differently. Depriving organizations of

the benefit of operating with a complete human vision and limiting their inputs exclusively to the male side is not only unfair to women, but also represents a serious detriment to organizations and, consequently, to society as a whole.



## Chaos

One December morning in 2014, like so many other mornings, my collaborator, who I introduced earlier in Chapter 4, approached New York's JFK airport immigration checkpoint upon returning from Africa where she was on a United Nations mission. Normally, this is a routine procedure that does not deserve any special mention, but that particular morning was anything but ordinary. Following the instructions on the new posters in the immigration room, my collaborator declared, as she had done so upon returning from her last trip a mere three weeks earlier, that during her journey she visited Sierra Leone, Guinea or Liberia. On this occasion, however, instead of inviting her into a special room, as they had been doing for all arrivals from those countries, the inspector informs her that she is free to leave without undergoing any other verification procedure.

While still in the taxi en route from the airport to her house, my collaborator receives a call on her

cell phone from the special health service center that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently installed at the airport. They explain that, due to an error by the immigration inspector who assisted her, she left without complying with the prevention regimen that applies to arrivals from the West African countries she visited. They order her to go immediately to her home and not leave until the health personnel already on their way arrive to examine her.

My collaborator –a person who does not accept orders without questioning – arrives at her apartment on the eighth floor of a Brooklyn building, still wondering if the CDC is authorized in fact to give her orders, when she hears knocking at her door. This strikes her as strange because the normal procedure in the building where she lives is that visitors must first announce themselves at the reception area in the lobby. From there, reception staff calls the apartment requesting the corresponding entry authorization.

No one is authorized to enter the building without complying with this requirement, much less to directly access an apartment. Intrigued, she opens the door, and finds three people dressed “like astronauts,” covered from head to toe in a special outfit designed to deal with Ebola patients. This is a specially designed type of “personal protective equipment” (PPE) that includes masks that look similar to those worn by astronauts. The PPE covers

and protects one hundred percent of the person. One of the visitors is a police officer, while the other two are health specialists. They immediately enter the apartment – “they break into the apartment” is how my collaborator recalls it – and they proceed to follow the established sanitary procedure.

The procedure is very simple and could have been carried out quietly in any airport’s immigration area. The person’s temperature is taken and their general state of being is assessed, while a series of questions are asked to determine their behavior while they were in the Ebola-affected countries to establish the possibility of contagion. Once it is verified that the person is well and that during his or her visit they have carefully complied with the established precautions, the person is given a cell phone with a number to call every morning and night for twenty-one days to inform of their body temperature.

All of us who visited the affected countries during the epidemic had to comply with this procedure. In the case of my collaborator, however, due to the inspector’s error, the reaction of the health personnel was perhaps somewhat exaggerated. Of course, the “disruption of the astronauts” quickly became known throughout the building. While the Ebola outbreak was active in West Africa, my collaborators’ neighbors, very elegantly, always found a reason to avoid sharing the elevator with her.

I share this anecdote because I think it encapsulates well the sense of panic that was prevalent in the world in those days. On September 23, 2014, the Washington Post published an article entitled, “CDC: Ebola could infect 1.4 million in Liberia and Sierra Leone by end of January.” Coming from the CDC, such a catastrophic estimate was taken seriously.

When the Washington Post published that article, the peak of the crisis had not yet been reached and it was not clear how to stop it. Despite the fact that the early cases of Ebola had been detected in Guinea towards the end of December 2013, it was first recognized that it could be a major epidemic towards the end of March 2014 when the Ministries of Health of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone confirmed the presence of the disease in their territories. As the cases began to grow at an alarming rate, on August 8, 2014, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Ebola as a public health emergency of international importance. A few days later, a high-level official was appointed to coordinate with the United Nations regarding issues related to Ebola.

Until that time, international actors from governments to NGOs had been responding to the crisis individually. It was in this context that, on August 29, the Presidents of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone sent a joint letter to the UN Secretary-General requesting that the Organization assume overall coordination for the response effort to the



Ebola emergency. By that time, identified cases of Ebola were averaging around three thousand per month. The Secretary-General immediately announced the establishment of a global coalition of Ebola responders and requested me to lead the search for the best way to approach the issue. Despite the coordination efforts, the international community, faced with an extremely complex and unprecedented situation, was immersed in chaos.

Everyone involved felt an inexorable urge to work to improve the overall response. Every minute meant lives. The affected countries and the various response partners, including a number of UN agencies, present on the ground were doing heroic work without pause and at great risk. Many governments and institutions increased their donations, but overall leadership to optimize and direct the response was missing.

Following urgent consultation efforts carried out with the leadership across the UN and with the Member States, on September 17, 2014, the Secretary-General sent two identical letters to the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council announcing his decision to establish the first emergency health mission, together with the World Health Organization, in the history of the United Nations and assuming full responsibility for the response to the epidemic.

The letters, which were immediately ratified by both the General Assembly and the Security

Council, in line with the urgency of the moment, had a strong operative tone, detailing the six principles that would guide the mission and the twelve fundamental measures that would be applied. I want to emphasize that the first of the principles was “strengthen government leadership.” The decision to include this principle at the top of the list corresponded with the recognition that nobody knew the realities of the countries in which the fight against the epidemic would be carried out better than their own governments. Above all, it also reflected recognition and respect for the sovereignty and culture of each nation. From the outset, we wanted to avoid the sense of paternalism that a massive influx of people and resources coming from more powerful countries could impose.

The rapid inception of the mission, which was called the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), was an important step, but the ground deployment and operation proved to be a more protracted challenge. Many of the traditional humanitarian aid groups that are present in earthquakes, floods, and other natural and manmade disasters were in a state of paralysis because of their fear of contagion.

While a number of countries closed their airports to air traffic arriving from West Africa, emergency flights had not been established to evacuate doctors or other international personnel who might have contracted the disease and wanted to be transferred

to their home countries for care. This led to a notable shortage of specialists willing to move to the most affected areas. By October 14, there had been about 7,000 new cases of infection. Some organizations were present from the beginning in the field and had played a critical role in making the situation known and mobilizing resources. What was needed most were doctors willing to work in the field. In this regard, the work carried out by the medical and humanitarian organizations Doctors Without Borders and the International Red Cross is particularly noteworthy. The Government of Cuba worked with the WHO to train around 400 volunteer doctors and nurses who quickly deployed to the most affected countries, but as an October 19, 2014 editorial in the New York Times noted (“Cuba’s Impressive Role on Ebola”) its action did not have many emulators.

As the response was organized and the international community began to respond more efficiently, new cases began to decrease. The work was organized into four main lines. First, the provision of medical care and attention to those affected. This was a tremendous challenge because the epidemic was spread over a very extensive territory, across several countries and in places that were difficult to access; medical staff were scarce; and adequate medical facilities were very limited.

Second, the identification of all those affected and their contacts to prevent new infections.

Considering that the Ebola virus is transmitted between humans by simple contact with the blood, tissue, secretions or fluids of the affected person, it was necessary to establish databases that would identify all the people with whom each patient had come into contact with in the days before contagion to be able to isolate them and take the precautionary measures to prevent further transmission.

Third, the facilitation of dignified burials that were also safe for those mourning the death of loved ones. The funeral rites that prevail in most of the affected countries include the washing of bodies before being buried, which, in the case of Ebola, is at its highest level of contagion upon death and becomes a potent source of contagion.

Fourth, to support the transfer of knowledge and mobilization of communities in the most affected countries in order to encourage the adoption of preventive behaviors to avert contagion.

These four main lines of work, and the many secondary tasks necessary to carry them forward, were only successful because of the participation, heroic in many cases, of thousands of citizens from the most affected countries. Without partners from the affected countries who knew intimately the language, the territory and the customs and who earned the respect of both international collaborators and their own fellow citizens, nothing would have been achieved. Over many months, these people trained and put their personal lives on

hold (or at great risk) to perform these tasks for the common good. I admire their passion for achieving such a worthy bottom line and in such adverse circumstances.

In November 2015, as a result of these intensive efforts, new cases, which were registered every thirty days, began to decrease for the first time. On May 9, 2015, Liberia was declared free of Ebola; Sierra Leone and Guinea followed in November and December, respectively.

Unfortunately, according to the data recorded, the epidemic left 11,310 fatal victims. Worse yet, the conditions of health, dignified housing and sanitation necessary to prevent the epidemic from recurring have not improved as would have been logical after such a harrowing experience. The positive outcome is that the joint action of the international community and the empowerment of the multilateral organizations enabled creative solutions for the common good.

### **Creativity Also Fuels Passion**

In the following comments, I would like to highlight the value of creativity for leadership. Without creativity and imagination, passion for results cannot be sustained. It does not matter if it is about carrying out a personal entrepreneurial venture, designing a corporate commercial strategy, or imagining an organizational structure for the eradication of the Ebola epidemic. It is always necessary to find ways to do what has never been

done before.

Creativity does not exist in a vacuum only evident to some privileged individuals. Creativity consists fundamentally in the reordering of what exists. It is group work. The solution is always hidden in the chaos and is generated by the urgency to achieve the results, in the chaos of the team's passion for achieving the desired bottom line. It is only necessary to reorder the chaos in a way that is appropriate to the present circumstance. I understand that this concept differs from the romantic vision of the genius inspired by the muses, but it is precisely from the artist that the basic principles that lead to creative ideas arise.

In my experience, the first principle for creativity is managing chaos. This simply means not accepting "there is no alternative" and rejecting "there is nothing we can do." Managing chaos, in this sense, means not accepting the immutability of circumstances and immediately mobilizing all those involved in the conviction that we have to find a way to achieve what we desire. No one can remain calm and stationary until we find a way to achieve our goal.

The second basic principle is that of research. We must understand all the elements at our disposal, all the tools, all the possible resources, and, also, all the possible limiting factors. In this last one, we must be very firm in not believing in the "comfortable experts" who hope that their word

exempts them from investigating. Many times, I have found myself in situations in which they have told me “that cannot be done in this organization because there is a regulation that forbids it,” only to discover later that it was “an interpretation of the regulation.” Investigating means going to the sources and questioning what is normative.

The third basic principle is to create an environment without censorship in which you are encouraged to imagine solutions that include combinations, alternatives or associations that have never been tried before. From the modifications that are being pursued is where creative ideas with the greatest possibility of success will arise.

Finally, I will identify the fourth principle as the nexus between humility and the willingness to acknowledge those who are experiencing the crisis firsthand. In the Ebola crisis, this included those closest to reality and to whom it was essential to listen. It all started by learning from the affected populations and communities, and then all those in the concentric circles of proximity to the crisis. The principle of humility directly leads to the ability to quickly adapt and modify plans according to this firsthand insight from the ground.

The Ebola crisis was a striking example of the need to be flexible and change. The Ebola crisis, unlike other humanitarian crises such as an earthquake, tsunami or famine, was essentially mobile, reinventing itself as its contagious

epicenters changed geographical location. In such a situation, a static approach based on large care centers would not be effective, while more mobile, bespoke facilities were required. Humility allows you to have the necessary perspective to put aside a predetermined plan, turn and adjust.

In summary, passion dies with boredom. We must change continuously. Changing, finding new ways of doing and imagining meaningful ways of being, is the only way to maintain passion alive. How do we know in what direction to change? The answer is creativity, in its four aspects:

1. Allow chaos. Use the tension that arise from having no fixed path to follow.
2. Research. There are infinite possibilities.
3. Let your imagination lead the way.
4. Listen and be humble.

In this way, leaders have the courage to spearhead change towards a new envisaged direction.



## Equations

Perhaps the greatest benefit of careful planning is that it makes one aware of the change that is taking place when, as is often the case in life, opportunities knock on a different door than the one expected. By this, I do not mean that it is not necessary to plan both in your professional and private lives. Rather, I want to emphasize that, no matter how careful or meticulous our planning, there are always unforeseen and unconsidered aspects, in particular the behaviors and reactions of other people, which will surprise us. Therefore, from my experience, the most valuable tool is not a good plan but rather an open mind to embrace opportunities that we had not previously considered and exercise the flexibility to adapt to new circumstances.

In my case, I recognize in myself aspects that have remained constant throughout my life, in particular my passion for life and for those principles that give meaning to it. Besides these cardinal points that guide me and bring order to my

life, I am willing to consider other options, which often entail changes from what I had planned. I understand that, seen from the outside, the changes sometimes seem contradictory. Those who look at us from the outside often find it very comfortable to label us in the hope that we will always act and behave according to our assigned label. It is for this reason that, when I accepted the post of Foreign Minister of Argentina, I was not surprised that many of those who know me asked, “why did you accept?” Later, when I stepped down, many of those who know me less asked, “why did you resign?”

Throughout this book, before commenting on certain facts or experiences, I have taken the necessary time to present the background and to establish the framework in which such events took place. I will do the same now before returning to the questions mentioned above. I believe that decision-making in life is not at all similar to the much-used image of putting everything on the “scale.” For me (and excuse me for my somewhat “mathematical” metaphor given my engineering background), making decisions is like a complex system of equations, with their constants, their variables and their unknowns. Sometimes we find a way to solve the system; other times, there are too many unknowns, and we work by successive approximations with the guidance of our cardinal points to anchor us. To understand facts or

decisions, it is necessary to know the history, expectations, and conditioning factors as well. Therefore, to introduce the necessary background to answer those very personal questions – why did I accept and why did I resign – I need to first share a few personal details.

I was born in Argentina in 1954, in a working-class neighborhood of Rosario, called El Saladillo. My father, Aníbal, was a merchant seaman employed on ships carrying goods along the Paraná River. My mother, Inés, was a housewife. Together they had settled in Rosario, pursuing job opportunities for my father, and “docked” at El Saladillo which, at that time, was a great example of the benefits of immigration.

In El Saladillo, Galicians from Spain, Italians, Jews, Turks, Poles, Czechoslovaks, Greeks, Lithuanians, Russians and even some Japanese lived together with respect. While there were undoubtedly some misunderstandings, I remember that, as a principle, the differences between these communities were appreciated. Life was simple and an important part of it happened on the sidewalks where the elders took their chairs to sit and talk in their varied accents and tongues, while supervising the children who played there. I was proud to live in a neighborhood known as “the neighborhood of a hundred languages.”

I grew up happily immersed in the culture of that neighborhood until my adolescence. It was a

culture of hard work and effort, ruled by the siren of the Swift meat processing plant announcing when men were off work. With that nightly siren, the population of Rosario Avenue would suddenly swell with men bustling about, most with their hands in their pockets and looking down at the floor. After having spent the best hours of their day slaughtering animals or locked in the cold rooms, they seemed to be fleeing from something rather than returning to their homes. Meanwhile, at the same siren's whistle, the kitchens teemed with women putting the finishing touches on the food they had been able to prepare in the midst of taking care of the children, cleaning the house, sewing clothes and working miracles with what little money there was.

There was always animated conversation around the dinner table. This included ample discussion about the future. As an adult, I have spent many hours reconstructing those dinner conversations. I realize now that, although my parents were still very young at the time, for them, the future they dreamed about belonged almost exclusively to me. What we shared was the present, which was framed in an implicit compact: their role was to provide me with the best possible education; mine was to make the most of it. That was the way life was understood and lived. Conversations at the kitchen table, when they were not about family or neighbors, always reinforced the terms of the mutual agreement that would lead us to a better future.

For my parents, the only sensible bet for immigrants and their children was a good education. As children of Spanish immigrants, there was no doubt that good education meant the local nuns' school. So I attended the Santísimo Rosario School in my borough, of the Dominican Sisters, while, in the evenings I took piano, painting and language lessons from the teachers available in the neighborhood.

These basic cultural elements in my household followed the culture of the whole neighborhood. What was very peculiar to my parents, who were advanced for their time, was that they were absolutely convinced by what today we call "gender equality," and understood gender equality in very simple terms: there is nothing that one cannot be or do because she is a woman. Their faith and conviction was demonstrated by my one-year trip from El Saladillo, Rosario to Vandalia, Missouri when I was only sixteen years old.

That was the faith that I inherited from my parents. I treasure this faith now as a key element of my personal culture. And I strive to link it with the words of one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, Miguel de Unamuno, who wrote that "faith is not to believe what one cannot see, but to create what one cannot not see." That is the deepest reason for my passion, for the wonderful effort of creating what does not yet exist, but that I believe can exist because it is worth existing.

Guided by that same faith, I later attended the University of Rosario where I was not only the only woman in my class to graduate in electronic engineering, but also where I was a student leader seeking social improvements in which I still believe. My approach was premised on the idea that, through individual effort, one can influence others, whereas in working together there is a greater chance to make things better for one's community. This faith guided my steps through the experiences detailed in previous chapters.

With that personal background in mind, at the end of November 2015, when the then presidential candidate for Argentina called me at my office in the United Nations to offer me the opportunity to be the Chancellor of my country if he were elected in the second round of the presidential elections on November 22, it was not about weighing things on the scale. I had to solve a complex system of equations with many possible results. The variables included the possibility of returning to live with my husband, son and mother who were living in Madrid, while I spent most of my time in New York. They also included my intention to be a candidate for the position of Secretary-General of the United Nations; the possibility that now was open to me to become an influential player in improving the conditions of my home country; and, finally, the project that I kept delaying – setting up an organization dedicated to the implementation of sustainable development projects.

Of course, as soon as I recovered from the state of shock that this unexpected proposal induced, I felt very flattered to have been considered for the position. My reply to the candidate was that, in order to give him an answer, I needed to do some research first. Second, I said that I wanted to personally meet with him to understand his vision and so that he could evaluate if I was indeed the right person for the position. I immediately informed the Secretary-General, who was very encouraging. On November 21, I flew to Buenos Aires to meet with candidate Mauricio Macri, who would be elected President the following day.

During my research, I found that the President's party's declaration of principles so familiar they could have been written in my old Rosario neighborhood. It espoused "to promote economic development, the strengthening of democracy and the republican system, the independence of justice, the quality of education, social solidarity, and personal happiness of Argentina's residents."

This was also reinforced by the three public policies outlined in his electoral platform: Social Inclusion, Economic Development and Institutional Strengthening. I know from personal experience how difficult it is to achieve these goals amidst the inevitable complexities and conflicts of interest that are part and parcel of every political activity. Nevertheless, I took on the challenge with the same passion with which I have accepted achieving

results throughout my career. The solution to this complex equation determined that I accepted the challenge.

In addition, President Macri, as is the case in almost every country in the world, deemed that my candidacy for Secretary-General of the United Nations was of national interest, and gave me his support. He considered that it would be positive for me to be nominated while I was performing as Chancellor. At that time, most of the ambassadors of the member countries of the Security Council had stated that a woman with in-depth knowledge of the United Nations, with managerial experience in high positions in private companies and with experience in the diplomatic world would be the ideal Secretary-General.

When deliberations for the next Secretary-General finally took place within the Security Council in late 2016, a man was elected. To date, all nine Secretary-Generals in the history of the United Nations have been men.

As I have stated throughout the book, I do not intend to carry out political analyses, so I will not go into the details of why and how the Security Council reached that decision. Nor is this the place for me to evaluate my performance as Chancellor. I will only narrate a typical experience to illustrate the world in which I operated during the eighteen months I served in President Macri's administration.

There is possibly no more complex and sensitive an issue in Argentina's foreign policy than the topic



of the Islas Malvinas. It is an issue that generates emotional reactions that make it difficult to find solutions. That is why I knew from my first day as Chancellor that whatever I tried to do around this agenda was bound to be an important and formidable challenge. However, being consistent with my deepest convictions, I decided to try to resolve a humanitarian issue that had been pending since 1982: the case of those Argentines who were buried as “Argentine soldier known but to God.” We owed it to those who had lost their lives and, especially, to their relatives who had never healed from their emotional wounds.

The previous government had started the process but it was never completed. Even knowing the complexity of undertaking this task in the public service, I perceived this effort as guided by humanitarian imperatives. Therefore, I decided to resume the task with the objective of giving a final burial with full honors to those 121 Argentines. We had several situations to deal with: getting back in touch with the relatives of the fallen to make sure they were willing to give their authorization; contacting the United Kingdom; and working with the International Red Cross to determine what procedure to follow in case we got the green light from the relatives to proceed.

I know well that in life everything is about politics. Fundamentally, politics is the discussion of the distribution of power and wealth, two unavoidable aspects in any field. Even those who

say they are not interested in politics assume, in that same position, a definite political position of validation of the existing order and acceptance of the share of wealth and power they enjoy, whatever it may be. That is why political debate is healthy and always necessary. “The personal is political” as we heard so often during the seventies. However, I am also aware that sometimes the manipulations and positioning of certain groups does not comply with the basic tenets of politics in the best sense of the word.

That’s why I was not surprised when, as soon as we started contacting relatives, reactions from different sectors emerged. There was a campaign of misinformation that suggested that the objective was to move the remains from the Malvinas Islands to the continent in order to “empty” Darwin cemetery.

We committed ourselves to disseminating information among the relatives to reconfirm their positions regarding this process and explain that only they could decide, if agreed, to change the resting place of their loved ones. I also wanted to provide assurances that we would not proceed with the recognition of the remains without their explicit authorization and that it would be carried out within a procedure of maximum respect for those who lay as unknown soldiers.

To ensure that the process would be strictly carried out in this way it was necessary to include the Red Cross. The dialogue with them was frank

and direct. Thanks to my time at the United Nations, I had an excellent relationship with Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), whom I respect and admire. Our relationship helped to quickly define the parameters that the Argentine Government considered relevant for undertaking such a delicate task. We defined the “red lines” that could not be crossed if we wanted to carry out the project, especially concerning the relatives’ inalienable rights.

With this objective in mind and within this framework, on May 12, 2016, I met with my counterpart from the United Kingdom, Philip Hammond. It was the first meeting of this nature in over fourteen years. The agenda covered several topics of bilateral interest, but our priority was the process of recognizing the Argentine soldiers. During that first meeting, we reached a modest but important first agreement: we agreed to continue working in order to find a mutually satisfactory solution.

Since the referendum that defined for the United Kingdom the status of the Islas Malvinas, its inhabitants assumed the legal right to approve or reject any process that involves the islands. On our part, we made it clear that Argentina would only have the United Kingdom, through its Foreign Ministry, as its interlocutor.

From there on, the effort was immense. In addition to the complexities of negotiating in such difficult conditions, there were also malicious

attacks to the point that a minor but well-known political figure in Argentina told reporters that my husband was a secret agent of the United Kingdom. Fortunately, the team working on this was greatly motivated by the passion to achieve the goal for the wellbeing of the relatives of the soldiers buried in our islands.

On September 13, 2016, we signed a joint declaration, defined as a “road map,” which listed all the issues that needed to be discussed and resolved, over time, through the reinstatement of the High-Level Political Consultations suspended procedure, agreed in 2002. Throughout our work, it was imperative to preserve the Safeguard Clause of all our rights on Islas Malvinas, in force since October 19, 1989.

The objective of the joint declaration was to promptly launch the process of recognizing fallen soldiers. For that, we had to consider a broader list of issues that, eventually, would be the subject of discussion and negotiation. Our immediate objective was to close the tripartite agreement with the ICRC, leaving the other points to be discussed at future negotiations.

The reaction from broad sectors of Argentina’s political life, including part of the ruling party, regarding the declaration was of unusual hardness. They said that we had signed an “Agreement,” and that it was not valid until approved by the Senate. It was said that any progress in matters related to

foreign policy would have to be approved first by Congress.

Vice-Chancellor Foradori patiently and at length explained what the spirit and significance of the declaration was. It signified a first step towards the beginning of solid conversations and did not imply any commitment beyond the goodwill to replace a continuous confrontation model with one of open dialogue. It was clear to all of us that the Argentine sovereignty over the Islas Malvinas was not in question, having been protected by the clause in force since the beginning of democracy under the administration of President Alfonsín.

Despite the adverse domestic political climate, we continued negotiations with the ICRC and with the United Kingdom. In December 2016, an agreement and protocol that covered all the requirements and guarantees that Argentina intended was concluded. It included the participation of Argentine experts in forensic medicine to ensure compliance with the procedures. We managed to launch a process that had been delayed for more than thirty-four years.

In December 2017, the ICRC delivered the identities. On March 26, 2018, a ceremony with the relatives of the 90 soldiers identified was held in Darwin Cemetery. A plaque identifying them with names and dates was placed on their tombs, which, to this day, remains in Islas Malvinas.

Having previously left the Chancellery in June of 2017, that event in March 2018 was a

very emotional and happy day for me like many Argentines. For me, however, it confirmed that, beyond the complications, the emotions, and manipulations, we had achieved the bottom line, faithful to the Nation's and our own personal principles. We had paid off a huge debt of justice that had been pending for far too long.

This experience is a paradigmatic example of how I saw the workings of the State and of the political class in general during my time in the Foreign Ministry. It has, however, some characteristics that make it particular. First, the group directly affected by the result of this effort – the relatives of the fallen soldiers – was relatively small, which facilitated the direct dialogue with them. We were able to personally meet with them and explain the situation. In most political situations, this is not the case, and one has to rely on the media to convey messages. I was also lucky to find diligent people within the Ministry who passionately committed themselves to achieve this justice. These were people who, regardless of their ideology or political leanings, did not hesitate to fully support a project they found of humanitarian value.

By the end of 2016, it became clear to me that the variables of the complex system of equations that had led me to accept the post of Chancellor, which included both family and professional considerations, had shifted. I realized that the circumstances required to achieve those goals

of social inclusion, economic development and institutional strengthening, for which I had accepted the Chancellery, limited my ability to seriously contribute.

In April, I discussed this with President Macri. We agreed that I would remain in my position until the middle of 2017, and that, in addition, I would continue as minister until after the 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) of the World Trade Organization that took place in Buenos Aires between December 10 and 13, 2017, of which I was president.

### **Contradictions**

Perhaps nothing exemplifies better my training as an engineer than the fact that, in the chapter in which I addressed more personal issues, I do so through the use of mathematical metaphors. Having planned on becoming an engineer since childhood, I believe in remaining loyal to the plans for such aspirations. The other plans, the plans related to “having things,” whatever they might be, are the plans you must always be willing to change. You can make plans to acquire certain possessions or to achieve certain positions, but you have to keep in mind their relative importance and their volatility and be willing to see them come and go. Every time something goes, something new that comes along.

Since this has turned into a very personal chapter, I am going to quote again Miguel de Unamuno, one of my most “personal” writers. He

best captures what I wanted to say, so I will quote him verbatim, “Among all the intimate rights that we have to conquer, not so much related to laws but to habits, the inalienable right to contradict myself, to be new every day, is not the least precious. Without ceasing to be always the same, to affirm my different aspects working so that my life integrates them.”

Like rights, to contradict oneself also brings along obligations that, in this case, are not simple. That’s why there are so many people who do not want that right and cling to their “ideas.” Who has not heard someone say, “I’ve always been true to my ideas, I’ve never changed?” Among the obligations that carry the right to contradict ourselves, three prove most difficult. The first is to always be attentive. There is no room for comfort; it is not possible to settle on what has been achieved. We must constantly keep questioning both our circumstances and ourselves. The variables of the equations usually change in value. The second obligation is to assume one’s own fallibility. Many times, the need to change is due to not having analyzed situations well or not having taken into account some aspects. And the third, the most important, is being loyal to one’s principles, remaining the “same forever.” These are the hallmarks of the true leader.



## Epilogue

Throughout this book, I have narrated events as I have lived them. I have abstained from commenting on the political or personal motivations of the people I have had the opportunity to deal with. In many cases I could have done so, given that I had the chance to interact with them directly. However, politics is not the purpose of this book. Rather, I seek to share my experiences and lessons learned to encourage those who feel a similar passion for the bottom line. I have tried to present a wide range of cases in order to increase the readers' chances of discovering aspects of their own experiences that perhaps they were not taking into account or not attributing enough merit to.

In this sense, this book can be most aptly thought of as a collection of "case studies," similar to what is presented in universities around the world, except that these cases are not only business situations, but include a range of personal and professional anecdotes.

I started this book by talking about the “bottom line,” or the final result. At this point, it is clear that, from my point of view, the most important task we have in life is to understand how to find, at all times, the bottom line to which we will dedicate ourselves with passion. That’s what living in the moment means. When he was only in his young 90s, the poet Stanley Kunitz, who lived to be one hundred years old, published a new collection of poems. In one of them, entitled “Touch me,” he wrote these lines:

What makes the engine go?  
Desire, desire, desire.  
The longing for the dance  
Stirs in the buried life.

The desire, the passion for the dance of life, is what makes our engine run. Our challenge is to know how to distinguish, at all times, the music that best suits the pace and rhythm of our dance.

Of course, the best dance is one that is shared. That is why I focus on the need to listen to others and the importance of empathy. I must insist on this point because frequently we confuse passion with fanaticism. Fanaticism becomes sterile because its only end is self-gratification. It is, therefore, incapable of generating long-term benefits. Passion arises from the objective that comes from listening and empathizing with others. No one can do everything alone. And to do things with others,

you have to work so that others share the value of the final result. Passion feeds on studying and understanding oneself and others and on cultivating honesty with results. It is not a final state that is reached but a daily process of dedication and effort.

The habit of focusing on this effort, loyalty to passion and the final result is what allows us to successfully steer our way out of crises. Crises will inevitably come because the circumstances inevitably change. The leader must be aware to anticipate the crisis and work on preparing the adequate resources to face it. Yet, he or she must also know that it is impossible to foresee all the possibilities and that the card up their sleeve is always their steadfast loyalty and passion for the bottom line.

The culture of organizations conditions the way in which leaders behave. It is the leader's fundamental responsibility to understand the culture of the organization in which he or she works, both in its visible and publicly exposed and unconscious aspects. From there, his or her task is to work with the team to define the most appropriate culture and its systematic implementation. It is not difficult to analyze and decide the determining cultural components of an organization. Once the final result that will be pursued becomes clear, it is also not so difficult to decide which culture should be promoted. The real challenge is to involve the entire team in the task.

It is even more difficult to understand how much effort it is worth dedicating according to one's principles. Sometimes, one must recognize that a change is needed. There are organizational cultures, for example, in which deceit and deception are deeply embedded. People may share the conviction that lying and deception are inevitable strategies for success. One may find oneself, for different circumstances, temporarily engaged with groups like that. In those cases, the real leader needs the wisdom and courage to leave and search out new directions.

That is why I highlight principles. Acting in accordance with principles is not a utopian endeavour. It is the way in which the immense majority of people behave. That is why the constant effort to evaluate and learn from the experiences of regular people is the leader's duty. The leader must constantly listen to their team because the team will be more aligned with principles than a few individuals. This is not a specific activity but an attitude, a way of life. Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize winning economist, once said, "There is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits." A large group could have never endorsed this concept, which has caused immense suffering all over the world. A large group would undoubtedly have recognized their social responsibilities to the environment, the consumers

and the communities in which businesses operate and from where they acquire the resources to conduct their operations. That is why tenacity in constantly listening is a basic condition to stay honest in the pursuit of the bottom line.

Culture, principles and tenacity have led me to talk about women. I want to make some additional comments about the development of the systematic culture of women's subjugation. Some would have us believe in the following sequence of events: (1) from certain concepts about women's capabilities, some men concluded that they were inferior and decided to marginalize them from many aspects of life; (2) many men took advantage of the established situation and the abuse to women extended. However, reality reveals the truth differently. From a biological reality that yields men who are bigger and stronger than women, they have dominated women from the beginning, made them work and often subjected them to abuse. The "justifications" came later on. So, I am not talking about some men with misplaced ideas that were disadvantageous to women. I am talking about the historical and systematic violation of women's human rights based on physical differences. There is nothing rational about the subjugation of women.

In other words, when I talk about women's condition, I am talking about principles; I am talking about historically trampled rights based on physical brutality. While discussing whether

women have the right to decide about their own bodies, it seems that those who abuse it in various ways – from the most brutal forms such as rape or trafficking to even the most “subtle” such as unequal payment and obstacles to access decision-making positions – continue to enjoy forms of privilege and protection.

For these reasons, the tenacity in the struggle to establish women’s human rights in the culture, in the law and to exercise it, must be an underlying characteristic in the daily actions of women and men alike, and in particular, of leaders, both women and men. Achieving this goal, like any other, requires imagination, that is, the ability to reign over chaos by imposing an order that facilitates achieving the final result we seek.

These pages in which I have narrated my professional life experiences, which are inextricably intertwined with my personal life, aim to convey what I believe is integral to achieving the results that one seeks. The interconnectedness of personal and professional life is fundamental because both have to be enlightened with the same passion. Fortunately, surrendering consciously and carefully to one’s own passion is how one reaches the results sought in every dimension of life.



**Susana Malcorra** was born in Rosario and holds a degree as a civil engineer from the National University of Rosario. She worked in the private sector for 25 years, holding directorial positions at IBM and serving as CEO of TELECOM Argentina. She then spent twelve years within the United Nations, holding the position of Chief of Staff of the Secretary-General when she retired. In 2015, she became the first woman Chancellor in Argentine history. She is currently the Dean of the IE School of Global Affairs. She is married, has one child, and resides in Madrid. *In Pursuit of What Matters: Passion for the Bottom Line* is her first published book.

There are various types of leadership. Positive leadership generates emulation. This type of leadership exemplifies a series of skills, qualities and aptitudes that make it possible to achieve objectives within a company, an institution, and society in general. Effective leadership inspires and promotes creativity and innovation. The generation of trust within a society depends on leadership. Decision-making processes and their results are conditioned by the quality of leadership, from the communal to the international level.

Being able to share experiences, learn from different decision-making processes and practices and understand what made them possible, is essential. This is **Susana Malcorra's** greatest contribution through her book, *In Pursuit of What Matters: Passion for the Bottom Line. Female Leadership in the Face of Big Decisions*.

**Susana Malcorra's** experience in public/private work and her key role in leading important developments as Chief Operating Officer of the World Food Programme and as Chief of Staff to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, made it possible for her to accumulate a series of experiences that can be passed on to others through lessons learned. It is also important to highlight the great leadership she demonstrated in her support of peacekeeping forces (DFS). These experiences teach essential aspects of leadership that are vital to those interested in conflict resolution and transformation, diplomacy, prevention and negotiation. The book points out three very relevant aspects, among many others: a passion for the task at hand, empathy to undertake consensus-building, and perseverance and tenacity for effective achievement. All of this within a context in which the low representation of women in decision-making positions is evident. The role of women is fundamental to transforming leadership. This will ensure greater cooperation and sustainable peace at the global level.

