Visionaries With the Courage to Change the World

Over centuries, these people have shared some important attributes: courage, daring, confidence and a stubborn devotion to an idea.

By Kerry Hannon

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Call them what you will: change makers, innovators, thought leaders, visionaries.

In ways large and small, they fight. They disrupt. They take risks. They push boundaries to change the way we see the world, or live in it. Some create new enterprises, while others develop their groundbreaking ideas within an existing one.

From Archimedes to Zeppelin, the accomplishments of great visionaries over the centuries have filled history books. More currently, from Jeff Bezos of Amazon to Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Elon Musk of SpaceX and Tesla Motors, they are the objects of endless media fascination — and increasingly intense public scrutiny.

Although centuries stretch between them, experts who have studied the nature of innovators across all areas of expertise largely agree that they have important attributes in common, from innovative thinking to an ability to build trust among those who follow them to utter confidence and a stubborn devotion to their dream.

Despite the shared characteristics with their predecessors, however, today’s innovators face their own set of challenges. The world around them is changing
at warp speed and they need to be able to move with it.

To be a change maker has always required intensity. “People who have great intensity, often set aside other things,” said Alice Eagly, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University and co-author of “Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders.” “Relatively few people make the kind of choices that propel them to rise in most fields, where they give themselves extensively to the work.”

And then there’s courage. “When people talk about innovators and leaders, you usually get words like vision and charisma,” said Simon Sinek, author of “Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t.”

“The one characteristic that I’m very comfortable saying that all remarkable leaders in big business, small business, not-for-profit, military, government and the arts, have to have is courage,” Mr. Sinek said.

“These people are driven by some cause that compels them to find the courage and take certain risks and work damn hard at it,” he said. “Sometimes the choice is lonely, which is another reason it takes courage. You have to have the courage to do the right thing. Elon Musk is the perfect example of someone with tremendous courage and conviction. He invested nearly everything he had in SpaceX and Tesla.”
Elon Musk has made a name for himself by pushing boundaries with SpaceX.
Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

At his aeronautics company SpaceX, for instance, Mr. Musk directs the development and manufacturing of advanced rockets and spacecraft with the aim of creating a self-sustaining city on Mars. “I want to contribute as much as possible to humanity becoming a multiplanet species,” Mr. Musk said in a recent article in The New York Times.

“He has a devotion to a vision that very few people do,” Mr. Sinek said.

Unlike the ground their predecessors trod, “there’s more uncertainty, more ambiguity for these visionaries,” said Sanyin Siang, executive director of the Fuqua/Coach K. Center on Leadership & Ethics at Duke University, co-founded by the Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski, who this season achieved the most wins by a basketball coach in N.C.A.A. history.

“Things aren’t linear anymore. We are living in an ecosystem world. It is more complex.”

As the context of leadership has changed, so must our definitions and expectations of leaders. “In an environment of constant change, rapid technological advances, social and demographic diversity, leaders can no longer rely on the toolbox of the past,” said Nanette M. Blandin, a leadership scholar.
and president of the Nexus Institute, based in Washington.

“The mechanical model of organizations in the past has produced hierarchies, static positions and rigid organizational charts, and has produced leaders who, however charismatic they may be, rule from the top and rule unequivocally. They control and direct and others follow. That model doesn’t really work anymore.”

The emerging game-changers appreciate that creating fundamental change is a process, a marathon, not a sprint, and they are comfortable operating at the edge of chaos and ambiguity. They also have an ability to ask questions, rather than feeling they must know the answers and to think in nonlinear and nonbinary ways, according to Ms. Blandin. These attributes stand in stark contrast to the attributes typically associated with strong leaders in the past.

They must also be tough enough to bear up under intense public scrutiny on social media and to withstand or adhere to an underlying peer pressure for social do-gooderism.

Travis Kalanick, 41, founder of the ride-share app, Uber, introduced a pioneering concept, but was unable to navigate a sequence of scandals surrounding a macho company culture and allegations of sexual harassment that presumably stemmed from his leadership style, forcing him to resign.

And time will tell how well Mr. Zuckerberg, 34, who founded Facebook in his college dorm room, will withstand the hot seat that has resulted from revelations that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica gathered data of millions of the social network’s users and might have influenced the 2016 election. It has brought the question of Mr. Zuckerberg’s societal stewardship front and center.

Acting as a guardian for not only people but also the planet is a concern that’s inextricably woven into the fabric of this new generation of leaders. It’s
nonnegotiable. “They are deeply aware of the context in which their organization is operating, and it is beyond the marketplace — politics, globally, society. It’s a long game and one where doing good is good business,” Ms. Siang said.

In the past, leaders had to think almost exclusively about what was good for their organization. “Today, they also have to bear the responsibility of societal stewardship.” Ms. Siang said. “The society has ramifications for what is happening in our organization, and our organization has ramifications for what is happening in society. There is this interdependence.”

The duty associated with leading in a new direction now is “that obligation to inspire people to do something that’s right,” said Sandra J. Peart, dean of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond in Virginia. “There’s a social obligation for those taking on positions of leadership.”

Today’s up-and-coming visionaries openly “have a sense of purpose built around doing well by doing good,” said Jason Jennings, a leadership expert and author of eight books including “The Reinventors: How Extraordinary Companies Pursue Radical Continuous Change.”

The new front-runners are an amalgamation of yin and yang. “They have an interesting mix of humility and confidence,” said Daniel Pink, author of “When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing.” “They are humble, but not too humble. Confident, but not too confident. The very best strike that balance between humility and confidence. They understand that they don’t have all the answers, but they are confident enough to take risks and assert themselves.”

Those who become successful leaders today also must deliver a sense of “psychological safety” to those who follow them, Mr. Pink said. They create an environment “where people are safe to express themselves, to take risks, safe to be who they really are — whether it’s a business, museum, dance troupe, whether it’s a high school newspaper. That quality gives people the freedom to
Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of “Hamilton,” re-envisioned the Broadway musical to tell a slice of American history via his passion for rapid-fire hip-hop lyrics, a language that bridges generations. It took Mr. Miranda seven years after reading Ron Chernow’s biography “Alexander Hamilton” to bring his masterpiece to Broadway. And for a year, Mr. Miranda starred in his creation.

For today’s influencers, what’s different is that, like Mr. Miranda, “you have to continually show motivation yourself,” Ms. Siang said. “Your followers have to see it in you on a day-to-day basis. You have to demonstrate an emotional investment.”

In fact, they might take a page from the playbook of Mr. Krzyzewski, 71. “Next play” is his mantra.

“Whether it is a success, or a failure, it is next play,” Ms. Siang said. “What Coach K. means by that is, don’t rest on your laurels, but also don’t be dragged down by your failures. Learn from both of them. Keep going forward, keep
learning.”

Sounds like the perfect prep for the next swell of change makers poised to mastermind a world that is moving like greased lightning.