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# How terrorism challenges the way we lead

**Jeneva Patterson** describes how a close brush with a terrorist attack threw light on her professional work in helping develop leadership





## March 22, 2016 8:43 am.

Day Two of the Center for Creative Leadership's Leadership Development Program (LDP) had just begun when my Apple watch started buzzing. When I saw that the call was from my husband, who knows my "teaching-means-no-contact-unless-urgent rule", I slipped out of the classroom. His voice revealed bewilderment. His taxi was turning back from Brussels Airport because it was under attack. Moments later a Brussels metro was hit. Cell service stopped; my husband and I lost contact. Brussels was on lock-down.

My faculty colleagues and I knew we weren't going anywhere. At 10:05 we resumed, in awkward yet purposeful ways, to discuss leadership, the topic for which the 20 participants had come to Brussels from around the world two days before.

Day Two of the LDP, when we study and experience group dynamics in action, is one of the most powerful modules of the week. In just a few hours, participants typically generate profound and transformative insights that last a lifetime.

On that day the learning went even deeper, and more quickly, than usual. As well as understanding that well-managed interpersonal relationships are essential for exercising successful leadership, each participant grasped the morning's terror as an expression of interpersonal relationships gone terribly wrong.

We are all, terrorists included, motivated by unseen yet powerful needs for acceptance and inclusion, connection and affiliation and for autonomy over our own lives. Our emotional states propel each of us to satisfy these needs by producing, along a continuum, pro-social, constructive behaviour and anti-social, destructive behaviour. What had motivated the terrorists that morning? Could corroded interpersonal relations have been the cause of such violence against so many innocent men, women and children?

Françoise Schepmans, Mayor of Molenbeek, the Brussels neighbourhood within which the November 2015 Paris attacks were planned, offered a possible rationale for the Brussels Airport terror. Schepmans asserted: "There are people living in the shadow [in Molenbeek] and we have left them living in the shadow. We didn't ask ourselves the right questions!"

Potential questions and answers came to us that morning in the LDP as we studied how the effective management of interpersonal dynamics propels (or not) human behaviour. Social dynamics can be mystifying and difficult to navigate with our families and closest friends let alone our colleagues and wider society.

The expectations we bring to our relationships are based on powerful, often subconscious, needs and impulses. When these needs are not satisfied the consequences can range from insignificant to disastrous. A negative restaurant review. A divorce. A civil war. A geopolitical standoff. A terrorist attack.

When our expectations are met, the possibilities – minor or major – are boundless. A delighted child. A joyous summer holiday. A man on the moon. A cure for polio. A peace treaty that withstands the test of time. Humans cannot function without social dynamics. They provide the foundation of organised living or, as on March 22 and far too many other dates, the partial destruction thereof.

Scott Atran, a cultural anthropologist and the legendary Margaret Mead's assistant, advises organisations like the United Nations and the White House on terrorism. Atran suggests some ISIS fighters' underlying motivations offer insights into not only how to defeat them but also why they become fighters in the first place.

Atran noted in 2016 ("The Psychology of Radicalization: How Terrorist Groups Attract Young Followers, *Hidden Brain*. December 15) that "violent people... members of militant political groups and religious groups, are people, just like everyone else". Atran asserts that youths radicalise not because they are lunatics but because they, too, like much of humanity, derive feelings of joy, accomplishment and intimate communal bonds when they transcend the mundane in pursuit of what are, for them, meaningful goals, be it *jihad* and the self-expression thereof, like blowing up an airport and the civilians inside followed by suicide.

After the Paris attacks, Atran wrote in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* that "current counter-radicalisation approaches lack the mainly positive, empowering appeal and sweep of ISIS's story of the world, and the personalised and intimate approach to individuals across the world".




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Indeed, the *Management of Savagery/Chaos*, the ISIS lifestyle manifesto published in 2004, instructs and guides the terrorist diaspora in day-to-day responsibilities as well as offering social dynamics that include and connect and offer meaning and purpose to its adherents.

The types of questions Mayor Schepmans and all the world's leaders must ask themselves in order to re-root primal motivations behind such attacks are some of those addressed by an alliance between the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP).

This grouping of geopolitical and security expertise with inclusive and innovative leadership development contributes to shedding new light on leadership challenges faced by global and regional leaders. It is an effort to help lead the world away from fragility and towards healthy growth, partly by posing questions and setting our sights on leading peace and security in new ways.

On that March day we –faculty and participants alike – made momentous connections between

our study of the social dynamics inside our classroom and what had just happened a few kilometres away. The 20 participants had come to CCL to learn about leadership and, in turn, to provide even better leadership in their professional roles.

They had come from Angola, Belgium, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK and the US.

These participants and thousands other programme attendees from myriad nation states speak of feelings of transcendence when recounting stories about their best leadership moments in teams that collaborate towards meaningful outcomes. Many of these same attendees, however, tell stories in which they, or entire teams, functions and even government bodies had it all wrong.

After they had experienced the painful emotions associated with stifling teamwork, unappreciated effort, counter-revolutionary



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debacles, unethical government and so on many participants come to our leadership development programmes with a yearning to get their leadership “right”.

They learned that technical skills are far from the most important in their repertoire. They are in the classroom because the unique, unobservable primal motivators produce behaviour that make or break collective, pro-social movement. Our LDP participants recognise and feel the vital connection between interpersonal skills and leadership.

Latticework intimacies, the result of emotionally impactful group learning, are rarely experienced in professional settings. The development and practice of leadership are made up in large part through demonstrations of vulnerability, of the exploration of what humans need to feel accepted and included, to feel safe and valued in order to then move into concerted action towards pursuing meaningful goals.

Such intimacy and “real-talk” are not elusive but they are not common. The GCSP/CCL partnership

recognises how pivotal group-based discussions about leadership can be, because of their emotional valence. They can transform individuals, groups, organisations and countries.

Designing a learning context and process for transformational outcomes takes some forethought, perhaps a personality assessment, decent surroundings, nice lighting and some good coffee and a process by which the interpersonal dimensions of any given group are elucidated such that self-understanding, the understanding of others and empathy can flourish. This is a privilege that should be shared with the widest audience possible. Only a far-reaching availability of learning about social dynamics and their equal potential for destruction or evolution, can prevent further events like those in Brussels and many other places.

Whatever their country of origin, each year hundreds of GCSP/CCL participants instantly take to learning about how human dynamics around leading and groups can impact not only themselves but their own effectiveness in their own professional and community lives.

Finding ways of shining lights, like Mayor Schepmans’ questions, and looking through darkness and into self-and-other awareness helps us help her and other leaders ask the right questions.

Our societies, and the civic institutions upon which flourishing civilization relies, must provide avenues for all citizens to strengthen their interpersonal competencies such that society’s collective social interactions promote evolution as opposed to extinguishing it.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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