The Algorithmic Leader: On Future Leadership & Collaboration

Important decisions have been made by human leaders for decades. Bolstered by advice, insights and knowledge from books - priests, advisors and generals, the monarchs and politicians of old, decided what was the eventual course of action. In the age of capitalism, CEO's of privately held companies act similarly. They are the final link in a chain of important decisions and actions from many actors culminating in one. With their intelligence, experience and insight, leaders aim to sail the course of their companies, countries or movements into better seas.

Leaders such as CEO's use a fair amount of data - like quarterly reports - but more importantly, they hire an army of consultants, accountants and subordinates to make sure they don't develop tunnel vision. A leader with tunnel vision - one that does not exactly know why it is steering a course - but does so anyway based on limited information, knows he is bound to hit the rocks eventually.

Through trying to understand the role that artificial intelligence (A.I) plays and will play in the future, I've come to a startling realisation. Slowly, this human role of leadership, the leaders that we hold accountable for the success and failure of the company, is making way for an algorithmic way of leadership, based on data, and less on trust in the capabilities of the human leader and his advisors.

I believe that in the coming decades, A.I could replace much deliberation and decision-making in the collaborative process. We will simply feed the collected data points to the intelligent system and wait for it to churn out the best course of action, overriding the leader. The blind algorithm becomes the leader, true collaboration dies, and results and efficiency are all that matters. However, as we do not understand how the algorithm reaches its conclusions, we are facing a similar awkward situation at sea. If there is no collective collaborative process of the trusted subordinates that culminates in the final decision of the human leader, we sail blindfolded.

Is this desirable? I don't think any human can say that, unless they are too afraid of their own judgements, intuition and prowess. Already, many A.I researchers warn that they do not understand why their A.I systems reach the conclusions that they make, and that there is no way to find out in hindsight. This *black box* idea, where we know the input but do not understand how the input leads to the output, is becoming ever more prevalent.

So, it could be conceivable, given the great upward march of the third A.I movement that we find ourselves in, that an algorithmic decision maker will calculate and predict the next courses of action to be taken at the highest level of management. Given enough data about the internal structure of the company, the other competing companies and the market, it could, like the A.I that beat the world champion of Go with extremely unorthodox moves, make moves and decisions that trump anything a human leader could do - but without comprehension.

The cold data churning of the algorithmic leader would eliminate the trust and collaboration that dictate the decision-making process within our current organisations. Through this process that lacks human intervention, it could also lead to exploitation, a phenomenon that a human leader always worries about. The archetypal human leader is the one responsible when things go bad, and has to publicly hone up to his mistakes, whereas there is no one to point to when the algorithmic leader hits the rocks or maliciously exploits its employees, the market, or the world with its chilling decisions.

This seems like a path we should not venture on, but we should also ask ourselves whether it is possible for this archaic human leadership role to continue to exist, given the amount of complexity that characterises modern society. However, for now, if we wish to keep exerting control over our destiny, we best delay the coming of the unholy alliance between leadership and algorithm until we figure out how to combine best of both worlds – or there might not be a way back.