



THINK SMARTER § LEAD BETTER



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. & Creative Maladjustment

"Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted."

As we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. King, the world often turns to the iconic and inspiring words of Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech. Yes, this historical speech delivered to hundreds of thousands of people at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, was a game-changing call to action for a nation in crisis.

For me, the lesser-known speech that he delivered to a small crowd at Western Michigan University just a few months later on December 16, 1963, holds the words that most profoundly impact how leaders need to think and lead today.

Dr. King began his prescient comments that night by noting that:

"Now whenever anything new comes into history, it brings with it new responsibilities and new challenges. I would like to mention some of the challenges that we face in the world and in our nation as a result of this emerging new age of social justice. I would like to start on the world scale by saying more than ever before that men and women are challenged to develop a world perspective... The world in which we live is geographically one. Now we are challenged to make it one in terms of brotherhood. Now it is true that the geographical oneness of this age has come into being to a large extent through man's scientific ingenuity."

Then, he talked about the key ingredient of leadership – maladjustment – that he believes will be required in this new age of needing a "world perspective":

"Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word "maladjusted"... Certainly, we all want to avoid the maladjusted life. In order to have real adjustment within our personalities, we all want the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurosis, schizophrenic personalities."



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But I say to you, my friends...there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...In other words, I'm about convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment—men and women who will be as maladjusted...Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation would not survive half-slave and half-free. As maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery would scratch across the pages of history words lifted to cosmic proportions, "We know these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator certain unalienable rights" that among these are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"...Through such maladjustment, I believe that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice."

The power of maladjustment...the choice to not adjust to what is wrong or broken even if it invites others to call you crazy. For me, this is the enduring legacy of Dr. King – his ability to take a crazy reality and refuse to adjust to that reality because he knew that a better reality was possible.

As I reflect on how much our nation has progressed and how much we still have left to do, the leadership lesson from Dr. King that I carry with me always is that it is not crazy to be maladjusted. It is actually crazy to adjust when you know that what you are adjusting to does not live up to the best of who you are.

It is the maladjusted who lead. It is the maladjusted who change the world.