Leaders: A New Approach for a New Era

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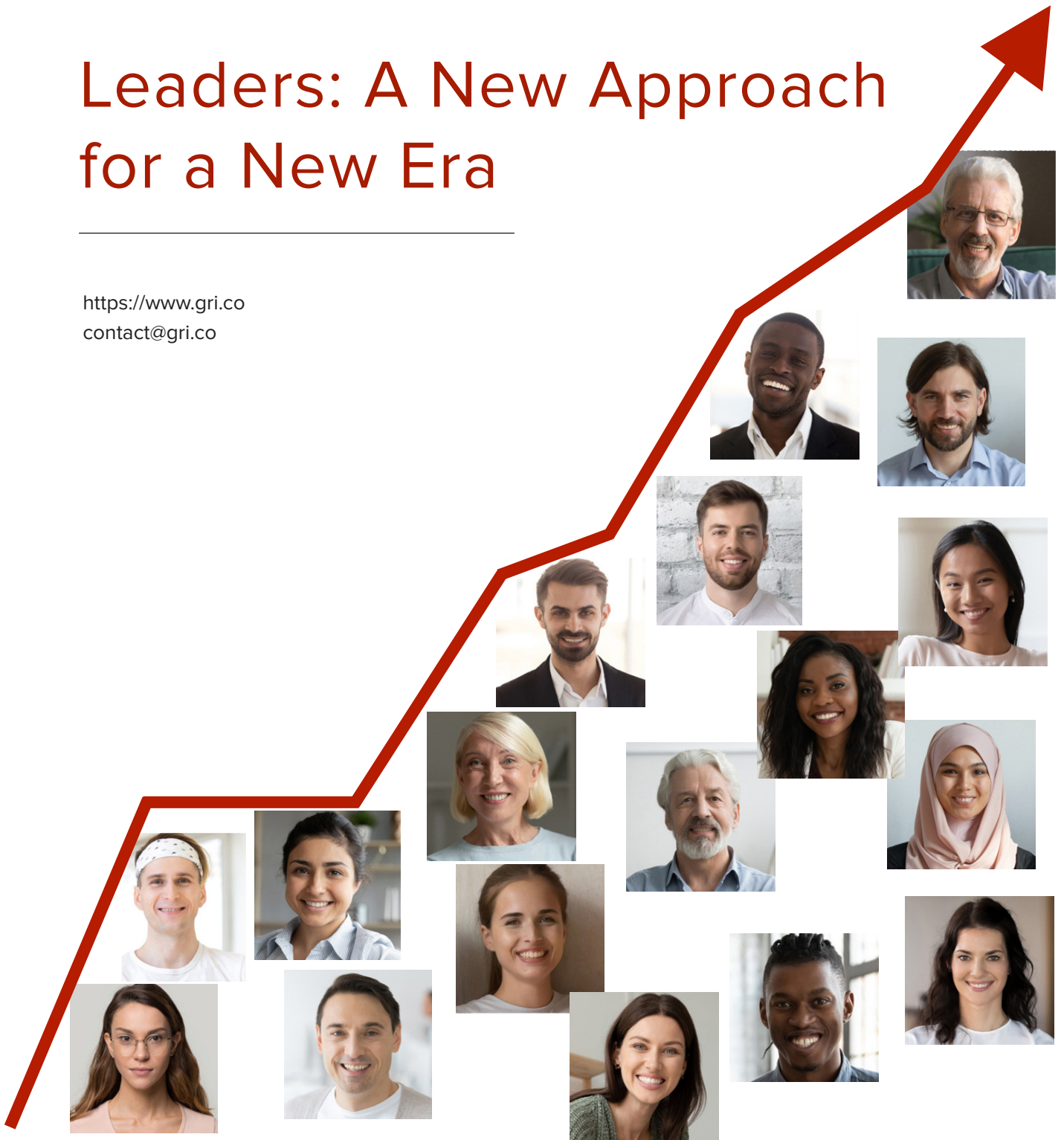
When recently flying between the East and West coast, I was surprised to be greeted by the pilot. Pilots are usually busy with their checklists before the plane takes off. This time not only did the pilot wait for passengers with the flight attendant, but he also walked later beyond first class to the back of the plane and chatted with passengers in a cordial and engaging way. In my 35+ years of flying long distances that was a first.

This atypical situation highlights the skills most in demand for people leaders: mastering a broad range of behaviors depending on the situation and making certain that teams convincingly engage in those behaviors. Some of these behaviors come naturally, and people are comfortable with them. Others are developed by adapting to the needs of the environment—they are the most difficult and take years to learn.

Taking a commercial plane with hundreds of passengers safely up in the air requires three to four years of training at a minimum and 1,500 hours of airtime practicing these skills. Developing effective social skills as a leader also takes years of training and experience. This development progresses on a bumpy road, and these kinds of skills are typically learned at high expense. They may indeed be the most challenging to master, and the most complex to develop.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review, "The C-Suite Skills that Matter Most," highlights that social skills are now considered to be at least as important as competence in finance, marketing, and technology.

Job descriptions that mention social skills have increased by 30% since 2000. During the same period, job descriptions that mention financial expertise and other technical competencies have decreased by 40%.

In another study from Gartner, "Top 5 Priorities for HR Leaders in 2023", leader and manager effectiveness are the top priority for 60% of respondents.

The challenge of developing social skills at a leadership level is universal and takes time, whether you are in command of a plane or a company, working through checklists or in interpersonal interaction.

> Job descriptions mentioning strength in social skills have increased by 30% since 2000. During the same period, job descriptions mentioning strength in managing financial and material resources have decreased by 40%.

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