

GIUSEPPE “BEPPE” SODA

Grounded Leadership for Uncertain Times



Drawing inspiration from Ernesto Illy, a leadership model emerges that reconciles complexity and vision without resorting to reductive simplifications. Grounded in the principles of sensemaking, sensegiving, and symbolic responsibility, with this approach leadership is conceived as the construction of grounded hopes: aspirations anchored in realistic analysis yet capable of giving direction and cohesion. In an environment marked by systemic uncertainty and a deep crisis of trust capital, such leadership offers not only orientation, but also a renewed basis for legitimacy and collective meaning.

LEADERSHIP//TRUST//SENSEMAKING//VISION//SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



GIUSEPPE “BEPPE” SODA

is Full Professor of Organization Theory & Social Network Analysis at Bocconi University in Milan and at SDA Bocconi, which he led as Dean from 2016 to 2022.

“Life is the continuous search for the new and the improbable, the only way to survive”

— ERNESTO ILLY

In July 2025, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion organized by the Ernesto Illy Foundation, one of the initiatives marking the centenary of the entrepreneur’s birth. On that occasion, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, commemorated him for his ethical integrity, sense of responsibility toward the community, and passion for innovation and research. My task was to reflect on the conception of leadership embodied by Ernesto Illy. In this article, I set out to reconstruct his vision and situate it within the present context. I suggest, in particular, that the departure of many contemporary leaders from this conception has, at least in part, contributed to the widespread distrust and pessimism that now weigh upon the future.

Given the historical context in which Illy’s experience unfolded, it is important to clarify that this reflection is not fueled by nostalgia or by a longing for a supposed “golden age” of entrepreneurship. On the contrary, it is intended as an interpretive lens for understanding many of the adverse phenomena we’re seeing today, both within organizations and across society. Let me now anticipate the thesis I’ll argue at the conclusion of this reflection: the model and the set of values that inspired

Ernesto Illy, among others, appear strikingly relevant today. Not because of any presumed ethical or moral superiority, but because they give us the capacity to recognize and address the challenges of our time.

A series of converging signals confirms the depth of the crisis of confidence currently sweeping through advanced democracies. A recent survey conducted by a group of scholars from Sciences Po, published by the *Financial Times* in January 2025, highlighted the widespread prevalence among European citizens of feelings such as mistrust, disillusionment, pessimism, and frustration. Adding to this bleak picture are the findings of the Global Trustworthiness Ranking published by IPSOS (2024), which measures the level of trust in social and professional groups based on the public's perception of their reliability. The most trusted professions (doctors, scientists, and teachers) are associated with technical, verifiable expertise applied to individual or collective well-being. They are considered people who work without self-interest, and these categories are seen as “neutral” or “service-oriented”, grounded in widely shared professional standards.

In stark contrast, figures tasked with providing direction, articulating a vision for the future, and addressing major societal challenges (such as politicians, business leaders, and public managers) record the lowest levels of collective trust. They are often perceived as pursuing short-sighted, opaque, and self-referential agendas. This erosion of trust takes concrete form in the delegitimization of the function of “pointing the way”, and represents a clear symptom of the decline and crisis of the symbolic capital once held by ruling elites.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY

Among the most perceptive insights offered by forecasting models developed in recent decades is the recognition of the structural complexity that increasingly defines our time – complexity that, when confronted with reality, may well be underestimated. Regardless of the perspective we adopt (geopolitical, economic, or social) it's hard to deny it: we are currently navigating a landscape of escalating complexity. This is evident both in the multiple and multifaceted manifestations of volatility and uncertainty, and in the dense web of interconnections and interdependencies among these phenomena (Cravera, 2021).

To render this concept more tangible, consider the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* (2025), which analyzes the primary risk factors shaping contemporary society and the global economy. The list is extensive and, on closer examination, echoes themes and concerns already widely discussed in the media and online public discourse. Yet the most compelling aspect of the report – and simultaneously the most challenging – is not the list itself, nor the probability of these threats materializing, nor even their individual impact. Rather, it is the network of interdependencies linking the various risk factors. Phenomena such as geopolitical instability, the climate crisis, social polarization, and the autonomy of artificial intelligence are considered not in isolation, but as interconnected nodes in a complex system where each element interacts with and influences the others.

Decades ago, the idea that interactions are the key to understanding complexity was anticipated by Herbert Simon, one of the most influential scholars in organizational science, Nobel laureate in economics (1978), and the father of the theory of bounded rationality. In one of his most visionary essays, *The Architecture of Complexity* (1962), published in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Simon wrote:

“I will not venture to propose a formal definition of complex systems. Roughly speaking, by a complex system I mean a system composed of a large number of components interacting with each other in a non-simple way. In such systems, the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts, and this not in a supreme metaphysical sense, but in a pragmatic one considering that the properties of the individual components and the laws governing their interaction are by no means secondary in understanding the properties of the whole system”. (Simon, 1962)

Complexity, therefore, lies not only in the sheer number of factors, but more critically in how they interact. But how should a leader respond to complexity? Should they artificially reduce it, resorting to simplistic shortcuts (as we unfortunately witness in certain leadership circles) or should they embrace it, challenge it, and integrate it into strategic thinking?

THE DANGERS OF SIMPLIFICATION

Karl Weick’s body of research offers a particularly valuable framework for interpreting leadership, especially through two concepts that have become foundational in cognitive research on organizational dynamics: sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking refers to the process by which organizational actors retrospectively attribute meaning to events. In complex contexts, individuals do not act on the basis of objective reality, but on the basis of how they interpret that reality. Complementing this is sensegiving: a leader’s ability to actively shape the meaning-making processes of others. The leader, therefore, operates primarily on the level of interpretation before action, positioning leadership as a cognitive function. In other words, to lead is to structure uncertainty by shaping the interpretive frames through which reality is understood.

Just as an earthquake sends shockwaves through a physical system, artificial simplification (when employed by certain leaders) triggers systemic reverberations that amplify (rather than mitigate) negative effects. One of the most insidious outcomes of such simplification is the intensification of conflict. In this regard, and with particular reference to the growing polarization of meanings and interpretations of reality, Joel Baum, from the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, has introduced a particularly incisive concept: *epistemic warfare*.

This is not merely a clash of ideologies or interests, but a profound divergence concerning what is recognized as truth, what constitutes knowledge, and how

meaning is constructed and attributed. Take, for instance, the so-called “tariff war”: beyond its technical dimensions, isn’t this a form of epistemic warfare? A conflict that fragments and polarizes the very representation of the role of tariffs, undermining principles that were long considered stable in the international system. Similar dynamics can be observed in public controversies over vaccines or immigration. In epistemic warfare, is there any room for win-win solutions – or even for compromise? As the result of a simplification that trivializes complexity, epistemic warfare may offer superficial reassurance, but when imposed upon genuinely complex systems, it yields only ephemeral clarity and produces rigidity, ultimately deepening divisions and exacerbating conflicts.

KNOWLEDGE, MEANING, AND HOPE

Returning to the example of Ernesto Illy and his self-description as both “a scientist and a businessman,” it becomes evident that this dual identity was not a mere intellectual curiosity, but the expression of a genuine epistemic stance – one capable of embracing complexity. It is no coincidence, then, that Andrea Illy, the company’s current chairman, when remembering his father, emphasizes complexity and knowledge not only as central themes in his thinking, but also as “seeds”. This metaphor is a crucial one: embracing complexity entails not only adopting a more realistic perspective but also cultivating a deeper sense of responsibility toward future generations – sowing today what they may harvest tomorrow. Strategic thinking that truly incorporates complexity is, by its very nature, a seed: diachronic, dynamic, and diametrically opposed to short-termism. By contrast, in contemporary society we are confronted with what I would call the “great temptation”: the possibility of measuring, in an almost instantaneous time span (virtually “real” time) the sentiment stirred by our actions or ideas. Never before have the scale and speed of synchronous feedback on leaders’ choices been so overwhelming. Technology now ensures that every thought and every action can be met with immediate feedback, unprecedented in scope throughout human history. Yet the pursuit of such instant approval gives rise to a pathology particularly damaging in an age of complexity: it contracts the time horizon, privileging the short term, the fleeting moment, over the long term and the patience it requires. Consensus is now available at the click of a button, but precisely because of its immediacy it proves evanescent, unstable by definition. In 2022, in an article published in the economics pages of *Corriere della Sera*, I warned against this risk by examining the trajectory of a well-known and indisputably innovative American entrepreneur – well before his direct plunge into the political arena of electoral campaigning and governance. Sadly, as history has since shown, the sirens of short-term consensus, gained through easy shortcuts, sing everywhere – and the results are now plain for all to see.

The sense of responsibility and ethical tension which leaders like Ernesto Illy appeal to can be distilled into an essential quality: the capacity for sensemaking – that is, the ability to absorb complexity without artificially simplifying it,

yet without being paralyzed by it. This requires a long-term outlook, one that anticipates emerging scenarios and conveys a vision that inspires ambitious goals and meaningful action. In short: to lead is to look far ahead, while embracing complexity.

Alongside this lies the second essential function of leadership: sensegiving. Leadership operates not only within the domain of reality, but also in the realm of possibility. It is not enough to describe how things are; we must also suggest how they could be. Here, the archetype of the scientist-entrepreneur (or scientist-manager) becomes relevant again: the ability to transform complex knowledge of the probable (or the plausible) into a shared sense of the possible. A sensegiving leader does not merely interpret the world with complexity-aware reasoning; they also offer others a narrative framework in which what is achievable appears credible, desirable, and collectively meaningful. Like a painter or poet, the leader draws interpretive boundaries that render the invisible visible and that name what does not yet exist.

In times when the causal relationship between actions and outcomes is opaque, the legitimacy of action depends more and more on the construction of grounded hopes. In this sense, the role of the leader is also (but not only) a purveyor of meaning: in a world where the link between "action → result" is complex and uncertain, great actions are sustained by great hopes. And hope is a powerful engine of cohesion in any social context. In a famous speech delivered at Bocconi University in 2013, Sergio Marchionne quoted an anonymous source with these words: "It is said that human beings can live forty days without food, four days without water, and four minutes without air. But none of us can live four seconds without hope" (Marchionne, 2013). This is the lesson of leaders like Ernesto Illy: leadership is not merely management, nor simply dealing with the present; it is an act of ethical, cognitive, and symbolic responsibility toward the future.



REFERENCES

Cravera, A. (2020). *Allenarsi alla complessità: schemi cognitivi per decidere e agire in un mondo non ordinato*. Egea, Milano.

Herbert, A.S. (1962). "The Architecture of Complexity." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106(6), 467-482.

IPSOS (2024). *Global Trustworthiness Index 2024*. Retrieved from: ipsos.com.

Marchionne, S. (2013). *Intervento all'Università Bocconi*. [Video]. YouTube. youtube.com.

Soda, G. (2022). "Musk, il padre padrone che copia dalla politica." *Corriere della Sera*.

World Economic Forum (2025). *Global Risks Report 2025*. Retrieved from: weforum.org.

Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.