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## Leading in positive

Valentín Fuster

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# “Once you have managed to light the spark, leaders appear of their own accord”



## Valentín Fuster | Cardiologist

We talked to Valentín Fuster, the most influential Spanish cardiologist, head of the National Centre for Cardiovascular Research in Madrid and of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. He works sixteen hours a day, lives between two continents and retains the same enthusiasm for scientific knowledge that he had at twenty. What is his secret? Motivation and commitment to the younger generation.

**You have been awarded honorary doctorates by thirty-four universities, published over 900 scientific articles and have a successful career spanning more than four decades: what advice would you give to the leaders of tomorrow in a society that is so competitive and exacting that it can affect your health?**

What's important here is not what I can say to leaders, but who the leaders of tomorrow should be, how a society can prepare itself to have leaders, that is the most important question.

I have a very personal vision on this point and it is based on the importance of how we approach our young people, in other words, invest in the education of children. We are now working with children from three

to six years of age to help prepare them to understand the importance of health to the quality of their lives. This is a highly important challenge.

On the other hand, what would you say to leaders when they have already become leaders? It is essential for them to be in contact with their team, with the people they work with. I have very little faith in vertical systems in modern societies. I think we should tend towards more horizontal organisations where executives and leaders are in the “firing room”, meaning they need to respond to everyone’s needs and demands. In short, we need to encourage a more horizontal system.

## “I have very little faith in vertical systems in modern societies, we should tend towards more horizontal organisations”

**You have said that to maintain professional passion you need to stimulate the creativity, evolution and self-esteem which are the drivers of motivation, due to the impact that people can have on society. Is it possible to be an example for others without taking into account the impact you have on your surroundings?**

I can give you a specific example. We are currently working on a series of programmes which have a definite social aspect; an impact on society. We take volunteers, young people, who are interested in working. Sometimes it is their parents who approach us because they feel that their children are not on the right path. What I've discovered is from these programmes is that when you can motivate a youngster they become unstoppable.

Therefore, when we talk about the matter of motivation, I think that the key is in young people; we need to discover this unstoppable drive. However, it is a pity in this society that when we talk about adolescents we see them as passive people. I think this is due to the lack of self-esteem in an extremely competitive society. Therefore, the main difficulty lies in finding what really lights the spark in young people.

This would mean making a fundamental change to society consisting of paying more attention to the people coming up. However, we come up against a big obstacle here which is communication, how we communicate on social media. Nowadays, information networks are full of disinformation or fake news, which can ensnare young people and make them behave in a radically different way to what we discussed, in a very negative manner. In fact, communication is a vital element for reaching these young people and motivating them, we should work on how we communicate with them.

**You finished your medical degree in 1965 and have said that, every ten years, you have dedicated yourself to a different scientific area. Is the saying "adapt or die" true? Are you the kind of person who sets himself one challenge after another?**

In fact, I have always had the same objective. I mean that the areas that changed every ten or fifteen years in my line of research had to do with whatever aspect had gone before. For example, I started working with a microscope and ended up using magnetic resonance imaging technology, but all within the same project. So

you are not changing your career or your life every ten years, you are changing your approach to a research matter you want to resolve.

You therefore need a final objective which is really what keeps you motivated. You change technologies and every now and then you become an expert in a discipline you weren't proficient in before but the reason for that is to achieve a final goal.

Another example: I started working with arteries which involve the number one causes of mortality in the world: heart attacks and strokes. Clots form from platelets in the arteries and I started to work on these clots. Then I realised that the problem was actually in artery walls where cholesterol is deposited, and the clots were secondary. So I had to develop a magnetic resonance technology to see the artery walls. Afterwards I understood that this disease really comes from people's behaviour in society. In other words, I could be working on the artery wall but if society is going in the opposite direction in terms of health then that work would be in vain. That was when I changed the focus of my research and concentrated on society.

So you can see everything is connected, one thing is related to another. At the moment, as a doctor and researcher, what interests me is a better society from a health standpoint. We are still working at a basic level but using very modern technology. However, we are aware that what really matters is changing aspects of society and this is intrinsically linked to what we were discussing before about children and youngsters.

**“Executives and leaders must be in the firing room, on the ground, and be seen as absolutely dedicated to what matters”**

**The heart is the organ that pumps blood to the rest of the body's organs: should a leader, as the centre of an organisation, be the one that pumps motivation to those around him or in his charge?**

A leader has to lead by example. It's not about going out and saying a couple of things and everyone following you. A leader is someone who, as I mentioned before, is in the firing room; that person who is on the ground and who others see is absolutely dedicated to what matters, whether that is an industry or any other sphere. But it is vital for a leader to set an example and that is absolutely critical in my opinion. Maybe ten or fifteen years ago that was not important but now our every move is under the microscope: the young, communication systems, everyone is watching us. It is therefore essential to be on the field of play.

**In terms of leadership is there an ideal age or stage in life to take steps towards becoming a leader? From what age do you think we start to see the signs to identify a budding leader?**

I don't think there is a specific age for leadership; I have seen leadership among kids of fifteen. This belief that a leader is a fully trained person of fifty years of age is obsolete. I work with young people, I'm totally dedicated to youngsters and I see leaders at all stages of life. It is true that leadership changes; as young people grow up and progress in society, this leadership manifests itself very differently. But this idea that a leader is a person or forty or fifty who knows everything is a very old-fashioned concept going back at least a couple of centuries.

**A large part of our behaviour as adults, as you have said, is formed when we are between three and six years old. Does leadership need to be taught as a subject in primary school?**

I would say that in fact a subject on how to motivate is what is actually needed. Once you have managed to light the spark, leaders appear of their own accord.

There are people who are born motivated, who become leaders because they have a particular genetic make-up, it is in their DNA, or it may be because of the education they have received. But the key is in motivating, there would be many more leaders if we were capable of uncovering the potential of many of these people, particularly the young.

**In the United States, for example, in the first two years of their university degrees, students can try out subjects in any speciality and then decide what they enjoy and what direction they would like to go in. Is there a lack of vision in Spain to stop young people from being pigeonholed or do you think our educational model works as it is?**

I don't feel qualified to answer that question. I have children and grandchildren and I have experienced a little of both educational models. From my experience, broadly speaking, education up until the age of sixteen or seventeen is better in Spain.

From then on, the system in the United States is more rigid but, at the same time, more flexible. It is a model in which children mature more quickly. So, if you take a sample of one hundred Spanish kids and one hundred American kids of the same age you would say that the Spanish kids were more mature. Now, if we look at young people of twenty-two or twenty-three the opposite is true. This is a very significant difference. If we compare both countries they have very different educational systems but I wouldn't know which was better or worse because they are very different.

“We must work on how we communicate with young people in order to motivate them”

**You have studied thousands of hearts: which do you think are the best aspects for becoming a leader in the future?**

I think we should all exercise leadership in some form within the area in which we are situated, whether it is the family, companies, the neighbourhood, or whatever. I am very sceptical about the model of leadership that dominated in the past; that great leadership.

I would like to see political leadership, in general, that is much more substantial in the twenty-first century, for example. We need leaders in relevant areas but we need them of all ages. If you go to any school you will see that there are four year-olds who already lead the rest; you can see it really clearly there.

**You talk a lot about motivation: what is it that kills motivation in our society today?**

Society itself, negligence, the lack of mentors. Motivation happens because there is someone motivating you. Sometimes there are outside factors but, in general, motivation depends on people. I think that this is where society has a great deficit, it's not paying enough attention to the potential it has.

I'll give you an example. I am the head of the National Centre for Cardiovascular Research in Madrid, which is a government-run centre for cardiovascular disease. One of its most successful programmes has been the programme we undertake in the last two years of secondary school throughout Spain. We choose girls

and boys of fifteen with a creative profile, we give them a grant and they come to the centre with us. After the programme they all want to be researchers. What happened there? The programme motivated them.

I myself didn't know what I wanted to do. I was given an award in the second year of my degree and I went to Universidad Internacional Menendez Pelayo in Santander. There I heard from those who were at that time considered the leaders in the area of the brain. I then decided I had to be a researcher. When I left the university in Santander I was very different from how I was when I went in because they managed to motivate me.

I am convinced that one of the greatest challenges in society today is to uncover people's potential. That is why I am so obsessed with young people because that is the direction we really need to go in.

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