

Toward a Personal Philosophy of Leadership
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*We shall not cease from exploration
And at the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
~T.S. eliot*

We have been exploring the meaning of leadership since the beginning of recorded history, and we have been studying it as a scientific discipline for over half a century. Our explorations have encouraged us to capture and control leadership, to reduce it to component parts that will fit into mechanistic organizations. We focus on 'what it is' and 'how to do it', on images like hierarchy, leader and follower. Perhaps it is time to explore new ways of recognizing, interacting with, and demonstrating leadership.

Shifting from a mechanistic view of organizations may help us to see that leadership is by nature an aspect of organization. Wherever we find humans in organization, we find leadership. It is a natural phenomenon to tap into instead of a set of constructs to be learned or used as tools. This view helps us to consider leadership through a relational lens. Wheatley encourages us to see that leadership is not about what people 'do to' each other, it arises from tacit agreements about how we will 'be' together.

This shift in perspective brings a variety of opportunities that are linked to achieving a fundamental shift that Senge refers to as metanoia, a generative learning that dramatically affects an individual's worldview. Weaving together complementary individual views can create a collective shift toward generative learning communities where leadership flourishes. Veltrop describes a generative learning community as a purposeful community committed to evolving themselves, their teams, and their organizations in ways that best serve the common good. They find, attract, aid, and champion those who are going for breakthroughs in both business results and capacity building.

More broadly, generative communities help create sense from the multiple layers of interdependent systems that we encounter in this era of transformational change. A systems perspective offers insight that the outcomes of transformational change are unknown during their emergence. Shipka encourages us to see change not as trading old for new, but as sifting everywhere for essence, in the ancient and the emerging, facing into the dark and basking into the light...simultaneously living in the moment and considering seven generations to come, always being aware of the framework of the larger whole.

Wheatley, writes that in a systems-seeking co-evolving world there is no such thing as a hero. The fallacy of the organizational hero, the tall man with a deep voice, is revealed by the Shifting the Burden Archetype. There is a perceived need for leadership (symptom) which can be met by developing leadership capabilities throughout the organization (fundamental solution) not just by relying on a hero leader (symptomatic solution). In organizations that authentically value learning and leadership the burden is lifted, we accept responsibility for developing leadership capacity more broadly. Leadership in learning communities is shared, it moves freely as needed among group members.

A systems approach values independence and individual accountability in the context of interdependence. A commitment to self-knowledge, shared meaning and common purpose enables individuals to work interdependently with others. Combining ever-increasing self-insight with a systems view allows us to see wholeness which embraces diversity, and open up to pursuing various images of the common good. The new science reminds us that interdependence exists within every living system, every relationship, every organization. Just as there are no heroes, there are no outsiders. No one system dictates conditions to another; all participate in creating the conditions of their interdependence.

Spears proposes that as we enter the 21st century, traditional mechanistic approaches to leadership yield to newer models based on teams. He notes that we have become comfortable with the intricacies of teams, and believe that they will act as a guide to the future. This assumption is challenged by a wider view. Niremburg identifies self-managed teams as a prelude to community, and Senge describes the emergence of organizations and societies that can lead themselves.

Interdependence in community infers service. The original definition of community was to serve together. Senge believes that learning organizations are build by communities of servant leaders, and that this is the way to address the paradox of collective and hierarchical leadership co-existing in single organizations. Greenleaf understood this when he wrote that what is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant leaders to show the way.

In complex layers of human systems we add the challenge of paradox to the intricacies of interdependence. We are called to create dynamic equilibrium between holding on and letting go of beliefs, allowing what we know to take second place to what we can learn, and replacing simplistic answers with penetrating questions. We can learn to embrace creative tension in order to be more innovative. We can learn to be 'masters of paradox', turning the horns of dilemmas into virtuous, not vicious circles. As the ultimate challenge to mechanistic thinking, paradox is the 'artesian well' of meaning we need so badly in our modern world. To engage paradox and shift our energy to generative learning is a leap in evolution, it is to allow all perspectives dignity and worth.

It is through the lens of community that leadership comes into focus. Community is the homeplace of leadership. Rather than trying to find ways to conquer and control, we need to invite leadership in, introduce it to our friends and colleagues, and listen to the stories it has to tell us. We will hear tales that are rich and generative, stories of the unlimited potential that shows up when individuals come together in authentic relationships within communities. Stories that will help us remember how to serve together, so we will arrive where we started, and regain our memory of the community nature of the self—the memory of wholes.

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