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LATE SUMMER REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP

DO ORGANIZATIONS NEED LEADERS? WHY?

It is August, once again. In between teaching strategic planning courses for the Salvation Army, in Winnipeg and St. John's, I spent time with my parents, Win and Eric, in Ontario. This is part of my yearly Ember Days, replenishing my spirit. During these few weeks, I have been puzzling over the issues and paradoxes of leadership.

These reflections (and the quotations from some of the leadership literature) flow from summer reading and invitations to teach courses on management and leadership over the next year. They also come from recent conversations with colleagues about the essential characteristics of successful voluntary organizations. Our experience (also borne out in the literature) is that leadership, particularly that of the Executive Director is, or has been, the key ingredient. Yet, we are not convinced that this is either a full answer, or a sustainable one for the next decade [1].

This newsletter is meant to raise questions about leadership in the voluntary sector for the next 10-15 years. I would welcome your comments.

Peter Block, 1993

In the 1960's and 1970's, we rarely used the term leadership. We talked about managers and managing. Leadership seemed too ill-defined, too much a personality trait and not enough a set of professional skills. You could train managers, how could you train leaders? The 1980's saw the idea of leadership emerge. Every writer defined leadership, every company listed leadership as a training need, a nation looked for leadership and wondered where it had gone.

The attraction of the idea of leadership is that it includes a vision for the future, some transforming quality that we yearn for. Managers get things done, but without heart and passion and spirit. Leaders bring spirit, even integrity, into play. ...

The wish for leadership is in part our wish to rediscover hope, and interestingly enough, to have someone else provide it for us. We hold onto the belief that hope resides in those with power. In response to this need, we create modern folk heroes [2].

WHAT KINDS OF LEADERS OR LEADERSHIP WILL THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR NEED 10-15 YEARS FROM NOW?

What can we say with some confidence about leadership today?

1. Leadership is about knowing the business, inside and out.

This is an essential message in much of the writings of Henry Mintzberg [3], where the focus is constantly on what successful managers actually do, rather than on what theorists or academics think they should do. You cannot parachute into an organization (or a program) and expect to provide leadership, or be accepted. Effective organization (or program) leadership demands knowledge of an organization's history, mission, business, stakeholders, community context, and wider "industry" setting. Gaining this knowledge, at an intuitive level, takes years.

2. Leadership is about time, focus, and passion (heart).

These are the words of Peter Vaill [4]. Time involves both long hours each week, and years. Focus means fully attending to those key (few) priorities that are essential if the organization (or program) is to survive and thrive. Passion is about love for the organization (or program), and its potential. Without these, no leader can hope to bring out the spirit of an organization (or program), and its people. Organizations without spirit will find it harder to attract good people, and will quickly lose their way.

Mary Parker Follett, 1949

What then are the requisites of leadership?

First, a thorough knowledge of your job. ...

[Second] of the greatest importance is the ability to grasp a total situation. The chief mistake in thinking of leadership as resting wholly on personality lies probably in the fact that the executive leader is not a leader of [people] only, but of something we are learning to call the total situation. This includes facts, present and potential, aims and purposes, and [people]. Out of a welter of facts, experience, desires, aims, the leader must find the unifying thread. [She/he] must see a whole, not a mere kaleidoscope of pieces. ...

[Third], the leader, then, is one who can organize the experience of the group [team]. ...

This is preeminently the leadership quality - the ability to organize all the forces there are in an enterprise and make them serve a common purpose.

[Fourth], I have said that the leader must understand the situation, must see it as a whole, must see the inter-relation of the parts. [She/he] must do more than this. [She/he] must see the evolving situation, the developing situation [5].

3. Leadership is about credibility and integrity.

Much of the recent writing on leadership focuses here [6]. Leadership is about building trust with an organization's (or program's) people; creating, communicating, and embodying a vision for the organization (or program); acting consistently; being, and being seen to be, grounded in a clear set of values and beliefs. Leadership is also about taking a stand for what one believes in, and bringing it forth into reality.

4. Leadership is about skills.

At one level, this seems obvious. Leaders have competencies that they rely and build upon. What is not so clear is what are the desirable skills for leaders in the late 1990's.

Books have been written on the diverse skill sets required of leaders [7]. However, many of these skill sets seem more relevant to the organizations of 10-15 years ago than to the kinds of organizations that are now emerging (less hierarchical, more fluid, fewer management layers, more decentralization, less directed from the top down, more self accountability ...). Perhaps it is not so much the skills that need to change as the language we use to discuss them, and the underlying beliefs about persons and organizations that shape how we use them.

As voluntary organizations have become more complex, the leadership skills required have diversified beyond what any one person (leader) can usually offer. Voluntary organizations need: visioning and storytelling, empowering people, building systems, and creating community (external) connections. The challenge is to build leadership teams that, together, contain the diversity of experiences, knowledge, and skills required.

Finally, there is a never ending debate about how much these skills are innate, and how much they can be learned.

Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, 1994

Managing is about efficiency. Leading is about effectiveness. Managing is about how. Leading is about what and why. Management is about systems, controls, procedures, policies, and structures. Leadership is about trust - about people. Leadership is about innovating and initiating. Management is about copying, about managing the status quo [8].

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, 1991

When they were at their best, our leaders: (1) challenged the process, (2) inspired a shared vision, (3) enabled others to act, (4) modelled the way, (5) encouraged the heart. ... Honest. Competent. Forward-looking. Inspiring. Taken singularly, these terms may not be altogether surprising descriptions of leadership attributes. But together, these characteristics comprise what communication experts refer to as credibility. ...

If there is a clear distinction between the process of managing and the process of leading, it is in the distinction between getting others to do, and getting others to want to do. Managers, we believe, get other people to do, but leaders get other people to want to do [9].

5. Leadership is about diversity.

The leader must understand that a diverse workforce will embody different perspectives and approaches to work, and must truly value variety of opinion and insight. [10]

For years now, we have been called to make our organizations (and programs) more culturally diverse and responsive, out of arguments for justice, equality, and market relevance. Most have made limited headway; some have made great strides. What we are beginning to see now is that organizations need to embrace diversity of many kinds (age, gender, culture, faith, language, personalities, thinking styles, ...) if they are to have sufficient creativity, skills, and knowledge to respond to the challenges of a changing world.

6. Leadership is about learning.

Much has been written about learning organizations [11]. Formal strategic planning processes have given way to more fluid, interconnected learning, planning, and acting styles, where everyone is expected to be continuously learning about: what stakeholders desire, how the "industry" is changing, and where the external world is shifting. This will not happen unless leaders are also learners, and model learning for all of us.

And, the learning required is not just about our specific jobs or responsibilities. It includes learning about the organization as a whole; and, more deeply, about personal and organizational change and development. Stronger, more mature organizations (and programs) will not emerge without stronger, more mature people.

Empowerment does not work without personal change and growth toward self responsibility and a broader sense of service, and away from a focus only on the job, dependency on others, and strong beliefs in entitlements. Leaders cannot do this for us, but they can model and challenge.

Harrison Owen, 1991

Those who would take special responsibility for the Spirit of an organization have much to consider, although as in the case of griefwork, the task involves being more and doing less. The appropriate role is that of the midwife. Midwives do not conceive the baby, bear the baby, or raise the baby, but their presence during the process is very important. Their job is twofold: first, to know the way; second, to provide companionship on the journey. Occasionally, emergency action is required, but most of the time Mother Nature will take its course [12].

Rory Ralston, 1992

One of the issues around leadership for me is the language - such as the difference between leadership and management. Management is, for me, control, budgeting, planning, hierarchical, limiting. It closes the conversation because it is a function required within an organization to ensure that chaos is not going to take over. Leadership is not about management, it is about opposition to management because it is the transforming activity that is going to move us out of the whole conception of what we are, into a new conception and way of being with one another. So leadership ultimately is subversive in that it is not working from hierarchy, it is building coalition - allowing community to be built so that a common expression of the transforming kind can come into existence.

A leader liberates the boundaries, opens up the conversation continuously ...

Another concept I like is the leader is the person who helps name the knots that bind people together [13]

7. Leadership is about personal awareness.

Leaders cannot stay the course; and, provide presence, visioning, healing, and teaching [14] without being personally grounded. Leaders will not be able to let go of their needs for consistency, control, and predictability [15], and let the people of the organization become fully accountable, if they lack confidence in themselves. Leaders will not be able to embrace diversity if they do not know their own capacities (gifts), and limitations. Leaders must also know where and how their own shadows play out [16].

Leaders, then, need to care for their own personal journeys, and model this for all of us.

These seven statements are some of the lessons that we have learned about leadership over the past 10-15 years. But, they may not be enough.

In challenging us to move away from the cult of leadership, Peter Block [17] writes:

If the era of leadership has passed, then we can put aside the language of coaches and associates, and talk about what bosses can do to honour their responsibilities to the organization and still support strong citizenship.

Here is a starter kit.

- 1. Believe that employees are using their freedom in service of the well being of the institution.*
- 2. Value the act of convening as a primary part of your job.*
- 3. Learn how to design a meeting. Robert's Rules are for order, not for building commitment or rethinking work.*
- 4. Decentralize yourself. Be a focusing lens, define the difficult issues, and then join the group you manage as a powerful equal.*
- 5. Forge partnerships with others at your own level. Lateral relationships are the hardest to manage in the patriarchal world we live in.*

What we are struggling with is the paradox between the need for order and the necessity (for purposes of renewal) of chaos. In a recent conference brochure, I saw this expressed as the "chaordic organization". This is a fine balance. At any one time, one part of our organization may need to be orderly, while another is more chaotic. The challenge being presented now to leaders is how they can seed, fertilize, and grow these kinds of organizations, recognizing that there are natural life patterns and rhythms at work.

The question is no longer solely: What do we need leaders to do?; but also, What do we need leaders not to do?

WHAT MIGHT ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERS FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR OF 10-15 YEARS FROM NOW?

I have no clear answer to this question; but here are some tentative thoughts.

Imagine, for a moment, that a young person has come to you as an Executive Director, seeking ideas for pursuing their career in management and leadership within the voluntary sector. At this point, she/he is a program coordinator. What might you say?

- 1. There are all sorts of educational programs available where you would have opportunities to learn, and share ideas and experiences with people from diverse organizations.*
- 2. You need to become steeped in the history, both of our own organization and of the sector as a whole.*
- 3. Work experience in private and public sector organizations (perhaps through a secondment) would provide you with very different perspectives on how organizations work.*
- 4. You might consider finding your own mentor, probably outside the organization.*
- 5. Taking on management and leadership tasks, both in other program areas and for the organization as a whole, will help you see and experience a broader picture.*
- 6. Watch movies. Read eclectically. Travel. Dream. Play. And, take care of your own personal journey.*

NOTES

[1] This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the changing context of the voluntary (or community service) sector. A few key points need to suffice.

First, many of our voluntary organizations have become large, complex, and internally diverse. Increasingly, they are more like federations of semi-autonomous units. They are also intricately connected to wider service systems. What glues (or will glue) these organizations together: tight control through rules and regulations, charismatic leadership focused on crafting overall mission and vision statements, or (more likely) connecting people laterally across internal organizational boundaries through joint learning and temporary partnerships? What leadership will be needed to surf the waves of mergers and partnerships?

Second, private corporations (for example: the Royal Bank) are exploring how they will need to change if they are to attract and retain good younger employees. We in the voluntary sector need to do likewise. There are surely implications for management, leadership, accountability, and power. Michael Adams' recent book (**Sex In The Snow: Canadian Social Values At The End Of The Millenium**, Viking, 1997) might be a place to start.

Third, over the next 10-15 years, many of the current Executive Directors in the voluntary sector will retire. Their leadership was forged at a time when the primary focus (story) has been contracting with government. Can we imagine what the voluntary sector might look like in 10-15 years time; and, thus, what kinds of management and leadership we will be looking for? What will our story (as leaders) be then?

[2] Peter Block, **Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self Interest**, Berrett-Koehler, 1993.

[3] For example, **Mintzberg On Management**, Free Press, 1989; "Crafting Strategy", **Harvard Business Review**, July/August, 1987; or "Musings On Management", **Harvard Business Review**, July/August, 1996.

Note the kind of knowledge involved [in knowing the business]: not intellectual knowledge, not analytical reports or abstracted facts and figures (though these can certainly help), but personal knowledge, intimate understanding, equivalent to the craftsman's feel for the clay. Facts are available to everyone; this kind of leadership is not. Wisdom is the word that captures it best (1996).

[4] For example, "The Purposing Of High Performance Systems", **Organizational Dynamics**, August, 1982; and **Managing As A Performing Art**, Jossey-Bass, 1991.

[5] Pauline Graham (ed.), **Mary Parker Follett: Prophet Of Management**, Harvard Business School Press, 1996.

[6] For example, the writings of Warren Bennis: **Why Leaders Can't Lead**, Jossey-Bass, 1989; (with Burt Nanus), **Leaders: The Strategies For Taking Charge**, Harper and Row, 1985, and (with Joan Goldsmith), **Learning To Lead: A Workbook On Becoming A Leader**, Addison-Wesley, 1994.

Or, the writings of James Kouzes and Barry Posner, **The Leadership Challenge**, Jossey-Bass, 1991.

[7] Robert Katz, in "Skills Of An Effective Administrator", **Harvard Business Review**, September/October, 1974, talks of: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills.

R.E. Quinn, S.R. Faerman, M.P. Thompson, and M.R. McGrath in **Becoming A Master Manager**, John Wiley, 1990, talk of: directing, producing, coordinating, monitoring, mentoring, facilitating, innovating, and brokering.

D.A. Whetton and K.S. Cameron in **Developing Managing Skills**, Harper Collins, 1995, talk of: developing self awareness, managing stress, solving problems creatively, communicating supportively, gaining power and influence, motivating others, managing conflict, empowering and delegating, building effective teams, making presentations, and conducting interviews.

Terry Anderson in **Transforming Leaders: New Skills For An Extraordinary Future**, Human Resource Development Press, 1992, talks of: awareness and self-management skills, interpersonal communication skills, counselling and problem management skills, consulting skills, and versatility skills.

[8] Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, **Learning To Lead: A Workbook On Becoming A Leader**, Addison-Wesley, 1994.

[9] James Kouzes and Barry Posner, **The Leadership Challenge**, Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Their lengthy list of the characteristics of effective leaders is worth noting.

Challenges Current Realities

Breaks new ground
Creates opportunities for change
Encourages and supports good ideas
Tries out new ideas and ways of working
Builds networks
Questions assumptions and the status quo

Inspires Others

Imagines the future
Creates a vision
Communicates that vision
Fosters a commitment to the vision in others
Illustrates the potential benefits of the vision
Works to achieve the vision
Takes risks
Draws out the best in others
Listens carefully
Fosters confidence and trust

Enables Others To Act

Promotes teamwork
Builds consensus
Empowers others
Learns to delegate
Demonstrates respect and sensitivity to others
Acts with courage, honesty, and integrity
Listens carefully
Values constructive criticism
Acquires resources
Praises the ideas and efforts of others

Models The Way

Serves as a role model
Demonstrates commitment
Acts consistently to achieve the vision
Is accountable
Values and seeks out opportunities to learn
Demonstrates persistence
Admits mistakes or errors

Encourages The Heart

Celebrates achievement
Encourages open communication
Values diversity
Encourages risk taking
Motivates others to learn
Expects the best
Recognizes people's limitations and strengths.

[10] David Thomas and Robin Ely, "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm For Managing Diversity", **Harvard Business Review**, September/October, 1996

[11] For example, Peter Senge, **The Fifth Discipline**, Doubleday, 1990.

[12] Harrison Owen, **Riding The Tiger**, Abbott Publishing, 1991.

[13] Part of a conversation on leadership, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Why Are We All Looking For Leaders", **Quarterly Commentary**, Assembly of B.C. Arts Councils, Summer, 1992.

[14] Angeles Arrien, "Walking The Mystical Path With practical feet", in Simpkinson, Simpkinson, and Solari (eds.), **Nourishing The Soul**, Harper and Collins, 1995.

[15] Peter Block (**Stewardship: Choosing Interest Over Self Interest**, Berrett-Koehler, 1993) presents a compelling critique of current leadership thinking, suggesting that it is fundamentally still patriarchal (gentle fathering to authoritarianism), arising out of our felt need for consistency, control, and predictability. He argues that, too often, leadership (and our desire for it) gets in the way of the profound organizational changes we need.

He proposes moving from:

- a focus on money and profits, to participation, quality, and (internal and external) service
- a focus on self interest, to stewardship and vocation
- a need for parenting, to a commitment to relationships and partnerships
- dependency on others (leaders), to inter dependency, and the capacity to choose and say no.

Leaders may need to exist, but only if they add concrete value to the work of the organization and its people; and, not if it is only to direct, control, coordinate, monitor, ... Typically, this concrete value relates to building relationships across organizational boundaries, and taking broader (organization wide) and longer term (3-5 years) perspectives.

[16] Parker Palmer ("Leading From Within: Out Of The Shadows, Into The Light", in Jay Conger (ed.), **Spirit At Work: Discovering The Spirituality In Leadership**, Jossey-Bass, 1994) suggests five shadows that leaders need to struggle through.

[First], inside a lot of leaders is deep insecurity about their own identity, their own worth ... We live in terror of what will happen to us if our institutional identity were ever to disappear. When leaders operate with a deep, unexamined insecurity about their own identity, they create institutional settings that deprive other people of their identity ...

The second shadow of leadership that is inside a lot of us ... is the perception that the universe is essentially hostile to human interests and that life is fundamentally a battleground ...

The third shadow in leaders I call "functional atheism" - the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me. It is the unconscious, unexamined conviction within us that if anything decent is going to happen here, I am the one who needs to make it happen. ...

The fourth shadow among leaders is fear. There are many kinds of fear, but I am thinking especially of our fear of the natural chaos of life. Many leaders have a deep devotion to eliminating all remnants of chaos from the world. They want to order and organize things so thoroughly that the nasty stuff will never bubble up around us - such nasty stuff as dissent, innovation, challenge, change ...

[The fifth shadow] that leaders can project onto others involves the denial of death. We live in a culture that simply does not want to talk about things dying. Leaders everywhere demand that they themselves, and the people who work for them, artificially maintain things that are no longer alive, maybe never have been ... There is fear in this denial of death, the fear of negative evaluation, the fear of public failure.

[17] Peter Block, "Leadership, Citizenship, And The Fiction Of Change", **Leader To Leader**, September, 1996.