

Leadership and Systemic Change:  
Making a New Paradigm As We Go

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Concepts and practices of leadership are profoundly embedded within a systemic context. Leaders influence people and also the systems – whether a group, community, organization or society – in which both leader and followers interact. In turn, the underlying assumptions and deep structures of those systems shape leaders and our understanding of what leadership is in practice, and even what it could be. Industrialization surely provided a rationale and means to thoroughly mold and constrain our thinking about leadership for generations, especially in relation to concepts of authority and hierarchy. Of course, scholars and practitioners have been influenced by and have reflected upon the effect of the industrial paradigm. Rost (1993) observes that throughout the industrial era, good leadership was synonymous with good management. Smith (1996) bluntly states: “Leading meant making decisions and providing direction; following meant obeying. Organizations were machines.... People—whether leaders or followers – were cogs” (pp. 200-201).

As the industrial age wanes, however, the imperatives of the time fade and other possibilities in our organizations and lives emerge – or perhaps re-emerge. Of particular interest to this inquiry, a more flexible, participatory and constructivist approach to leadership is being articulated and amplified in the literature. As with any system, these countering intellectual arguments were present from the beginning but were not readily noticed by most scholars and practitioners alike. Even as Fredrick Taylor’s scientific management informed and shaped the structures and practices of organizations, however, Mary Parker-Follett spoke of leadership as relationship and collaboration. Effective

leadership involved “leading with” rather than “leading over,” a compelling notion to this day (Graham, P, ed., 1995). The idea is simple, really: both leaders and followers are in a relationship, with leading and following intimately connected. Yet it took a number of decades for the concept to begin to be more thoroughly explored, perhaps most notably by Burns (1978), Hollander (1984), and Rost (1993), but increasingly by many other scholars and practitioners.

Our very language makes a transition to a new paradigm difficult. A number of authors are trying to reshape the inquiry by expanding or redefining roles and concepts that have been deeply embedded with the experiences and expectations of the past. Kelley (1988) writes “in praise of followers” and Chaleff (2003) speaks of the “courageous follower.” Raelin (2003) argues for the possibility and efficacy of “leaderful” organizations. All three authors emphasize the tremendous influence followers have on leaders, and more importantly, the outright acts of leadership that characterize a more fluid and mutual relationship in which following and leading is something everyone does in an organization at various times and ways.

Heifetz (1994, 2002) reframes the dialogue in another fashion, characterizing leadership as something that is “exercised.” In this light, leadership becomes an action, not a position, and it need not be equated with authority or constrained by an emphasis on control. Heifetz (1994, 2002) also distinguishes between “technical” and “adaptive challenges.” Technical challenges involve known problems with already available or at least foreseeable solutions. Adaptive challenges involve problems without known solutions, or worse, the problem is neither identified nor a solution sought. Adaptive challenges require a constructivist, participatory approach involving a variety of

perspectives and stakeholders because no one person has enough knowledge to either adequately identify the challenge or recommend a solution.

The upshot of such a flexible, reciprocally empowering relationship is not a total loss of distinction and role definition. In fact, Burns (2003) argues that it enhances leadership because: “Leadership electrifies the system as followers become leaders and vice versa” (2003, p. 185). Burns continues: “... [We] see the whole process as a system in which the function of leadership is palpable and central but the actors move in and out of leader and follower roles.... [W]e are no longer seeing individual leaders, rather we see leadership as the basic process of social change, of causation....” (2003, p. 185).

Thus, leadership in a postindustrial context requires less of the controlling and hierarchical impulses that are consistent with the machine metaphor and instead reflects the possibility that the central actions of our lives and organizations can be shared, co-created and constructed. Heifetz (1999) argues: In fact, the best leadership does not generate followers – it generates other leaders. It generates people who are willing to take responsibility” (p. 20).

Scholars of systems theory also reinforce the significance of shared purpose and of taking personal and collective responsibility in our organizations. Senge (1996) suggests that increasingly organizational and societal sustainability requires a genuine commitment from everyone. Senge explains: “Hierarchical authority, as it has been used traditionally in Western management, tends to evoke compliance, not foster commitment. The more strongly hierarchical power is wielded, the more compliance results. Yet there is no substitute for commitment in bringing about deep change. No one can force another

person to learn if the learning involves deep changes in beliefs and attitudes and fundamental new ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 1996, pp. 43-44).

Thinking systemically inherently requires considering everything in terms of relationships and inter-connections. Wheatley (1999) explains: “Nothing exists independent of its relationships, whether looking at subatomic particles or human affairs. Certainly relationships are a growing theme in today’s leadership thinking. For many years, the prevailing maxim of management stated: ‘Management is getting work done through others.’ The important thing was the work; the ‘others’ were distractions that needed to be managed into conformity and predictability. But now, most of us have had to acknowledge that we are human, with our own insistent needs and gifts” (1999, pp. 163-165).

If this is truly the postindustrial age, the paradigmatic shift is already upon us. We have the opportunity to not only reframe leadership, but to re-imagine and recreate our societies and our very reality. And as Kuhn (1962) so clearly explained over a half-century ago, when we were still fully in the grip of the industrial age, the old paradigm will not really disappear until a new one is available and embraced. Freire (1990) paraphrased the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado by observing: “...[W]e make the road by walking” (p. 6). It is a new road that is being created through these and countless other conversations about the new possibilities of leadership in our time. While there is still metaphorical grass under our feet, before we have again paved over a well-trodden path, this is truly the time for leadership to create more leaders in a world that works for all of us.

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