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# It's not about the leaders: It's about the practice of leadership

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What's wrong with our leaders? With no measurable change in the vital statistic compiled by the Gallup organization for over a decade that some 70 percent of our employees are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work, why haven't they done more? Haven't they provided their employees sufficient security, lucrative benefits such as time-off, more opportunities to work from home? Haven't they taken care of them effectively? Well, maybe it's not about the leaders anymore. Employees aren't necessarily looking to be taken care of. Most of them, given the chance and the time to get their confidence back, wish to participate in the enterprise through their own collective practices. When engaged in this way, the practice of leadership becomes less about what's residing in the hearts and minds of named leaders and more about how to facilitate the dedicated activities of those doing the work.

## THE INDIVIDUALISTIC APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

In spite of a misconception that employee engagement requires leader largess, we continue to hope that our individual leaders will lead us to the promised land of well-being and productivity. There are elements of the American psyche that predispose us to this individualistic mentality. First, our culture sustains an ethic of individual achievement against the odds. Cross-cultural studies have consistently pegged Americans as being self-reliant even at the expense of one's in-group. However, this singular devotion to the self, as captured in the unique American expression, "rugged individualism," can have negative consequences as foreseen by famed French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, and more recently by the authors of the now classic social commentary on American life, *Habits of the Heart*. What Durkheim saw was that any overemphasis on what he called "egoistic" individualism would paradoxically lead to a decline in moral

individualism, meaning a collectively shared respect for the individual and his or her personal dignity.

Second, many of us prefer the security of someone looking out for us. This tradition has a long history in Western thought that Keith Grint refers to in his Durkheimian reference to the "sacred." Monarchs have consistently legitimated their rule and even their mystique through their connection with God. For this right, they are accorded a degree of distance and reverence in exchange for followers' obedience.

Third, there is a certain glamour or even romanticism in basking in the spotlight and enjoying the credit that accompanies the designation as top-dog regardless of the contribution of others. At times, charismatic leaders beget the social inference process that sustains their reverence in the eyes of followers. In other instances, in the words of James Meindl, followers promote a "social contagion" of the charisma of the leader whose stature is not necessarily bolstered at the podium as much as it is among the "carriers" in the crowd. These carriers drum up a veneration oftentimes prior to the celebrity's ultimate entrance.

## Follower Dependence

Continuing to rely on our top leaders, many of us are content to reside in a state of followership. If you think of yourself as a follower, what does it mean, however? Does it mean that you are content to be dependent on others and that you have chosen a state of, call it, "learned helplessness?" And while in this state, do the leaders need to know more than their followers? Are leaders needed to provide continual motivation, without which, followers would remain listless until an order is conveyed? What does this say about independent contributions that "followers" can make to the company? Consider, for example, Whole Foods' well-known "tap room" – an in-store beer and wine bar that lets customers sample foods while tasting local wines and beers by the glass.

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According to Katie Hope, business reporter for BBC's CEO Guru series, it turns out that the idea had been hatched by an employee for a store that adopted it as an attraction and promotion. Whole Foods' decentralized structure allowed the idea to bubble up to a point where it has now been rolled out to more than 100 stores. Whole Foods Chief Executive, John Mackey, who, by the way, shares his role with co-CEO Walter Robb, commented that their leadership model is unusual because most chief executives "are afraid of handing their staff this level of responsibility mainly because they fear they will lose control."

## Loss of Control

Any fear about releasing followers to exert autonomy, even in their sphere of influence, is usually associated with abdication of the control function of leadership. But in the contemporary organization, controlling all aspects of the operation is an illusion and over the years, a number of prominent executives, such as Herb Kelleher when he was CEO of Southwest Airlines, have suggested that doing so can even be detrimental to a company's growth. But how far do you go in allowing others to run their own operation, even if not as successfully as you may think is required? Here's what former CEO of the Hanover Insurance Company, Bill O'Brien, said when asked how to endure errors from staff who were simultaneously being exposed to more democratic practices:

... what kept me up at night? It was when I had to deal with poor performance. I said to myself, "If I'm going to do this, I'd rather take a little more time and do it too late than do it too early because I have a human being's life here." Finally, you get signals that tell you you've waited too long. Some of your direct reports are coming to you, trying to drop hints that ... there are missed deadlines — a whole host of things. I erred by being too late. I was late partially by design because I wanted to minimize the fear. For the most part, the fear in corporations today is very debilitating so I wanted to keep us at a very low level of fear. I would rather have a lot of other people say, "It's about time O'Brien woke up!" than having people say, "Where is O'Brien going to strike next?"

What this example demonstrates is how damaging it may be to take back control once it has been released as a mutual endeavor with employees. As we continue to question issues of leadership and control, let's move on now to consider the foundation for a new way of thinking about leadership — not as a set of traits among particularly gifted individuals, but as a set of collective practices among those engaged together in realizing their choices.

## THE PRACTICE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

Initially, we will need to accept that the practice of leadership cannot be separated from its context. After all, doesn't leadership occur when we interact with others in our own environment rather than when leaders create visions for us? This revelation about leadership occurs as we begin to challenge even basic things like reality. Is reality "out there" ready to be viewed or do we create it as we engage with others? If things like leadership and reality are mobile, we

can change them. Consider for a moment one of the components of our created reality, that being the rules that we come up with to govern our behavior. In the medical world, one such rule has been that nurses do not perform particular medical procedures, such as a prostate examination, because they are reserved to the primary care physician. However, the shortage of attending physicians may require the nurses to do so in order to sustain the care of the patient. In this case an exigency required a change in a once enshrined practice.

## Leadership-as-Practice

The practice approach to leadership has been formally developed through a movement called leadership-as-practice or L-A-P. Its underlying belief is that leadership occurs as a practice rather than reside in the traits or behaviors of individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome. It is, accordingly, less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.

When you observe leadership-as-practice, it may seem at times disorganized. Things may be proceeding normally without much disturbance, but then something may interrupt or subvert the flow of activity. A member of the group may disagree with the current approach because it conflicts with his or her preferences, role identity, or even self-concept. This may lead to a new round of activity to reframe the issue. As you can see, at times, the agenda appears to move ahead; at other times, it may be stymied by lack of agreement. Similarly, the participation of those involved may be fair and equitable or it may reflect advantage to those who hold more sway or resources. So, the activity may end up as a collaboration or a dispute. It may be unified or it may be contentious. Leadership in this instance refers to explicit efforts to build and maintain the community, which at times may require accommodation to nurture relations or confrontation to bring out disagreements.

## Leadership Practice and the "Koosh" Ball

In an account of leadership practices in a medium-sized IT company, Brigid Carroll, a leadership scholar at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, gives the example of an unusual team meeting. Physically, the team is structured as a pod within a 100-person open space room. Although members face each other, they typically work individually or may spontaneously consult with one another. In this meeting everyone assembles once one of the members named Dan takes out a koosh ball from his desk and at the same time intently moves some post-it notes on a board. This leads to some spontaneous banter as people point to the post-it notes. Dan then informs people where the work stands. Thereafter, he throws the koosh ball to someone else who recounts what she is working on. The process is repeated, but one of the older guys upon catching the koosh ball becomes very animated as he tells about his attempt to solve a glitch in the system. After he finishes, Dan joins in again saying, "So, there are two ways being suggested to move on this thing." He looks at the older guy, who nods and leaps in, gesticulating

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