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Leadership Riffs

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Leadership Riffs

Once the domain of cool jazz musicians, riffing can be thought of as a curious exploration of alternate rhythms related to a core theme or principle. Riffing on the topic of leadership is critically important in an increasingly chaotic and turbulent new century, wherein we need innovative practices able to carry us forward. In my perusal of the relevant literature, I was curious about which articles and books went beyond blanket formulas of engaging all organizational members and leveraging human capital. From these various references I have extrapolated what may be presumed as implicit theories. Many of these theories expanded on activities or principles considered essential for a particular notion of leadership without delving into how a leader actually accomplishes such feats. Missing from many was any examination of the deep structure from which any human behavior originates and what needs to transform so that true leadership may be birthed.

With this concern as my lens, certain categories of leadership theory seemed to emerge. I will delineate the groupings as I devised them, summarize my findings for each, and cite some comparisons and contrasts. Against that overall background I will focus on the applicability and usefulness of two theories that I could use with potential clients. Throughout this paper I implicitly weave some of my most important learning regarding leadership. At the end I will more explicitly summarize that learning, both as leader and follower.

Four categories emerged: Embodied Leadership, Historical Models, Reality Models, and Strategic Culture Development. Summaries of the implicit theories are listed and briefly described below with specific examples from my reading.

Embodied Leadership

This theory calls for the leader to build her personal capacity to show up for the organization in ways that will contribute to or drive superior results. The focus is on capabilities embedded within the person of the leader, and as is one's inner world, so is his outer world. Working from the inside-out has become a common theme in much of the leadership literature in the last several years.

In *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee (2001) make a case that great organizational performance is driven by a leader's mood, using the metaphor of electricity coursing through wire within an organization. They admit that at first this may seem an absurd notion, yet further consideration usually reveals for most leaders the common sense of this proposition.

Their work is grounded in physiological brain research, specifically related to the human limbic system. A core function of this system allows humans to be naturally affected both physically and emotionally by the moods of other people in their proximity. The prescription of Goleman et al requires leaders to exercise emotional leadership by managing their inner emotional life, cultivating optimistic moods and productive behaviors, getting in tune with their employees, and continuously calibrating to the actual impact that they provoke within their organizations.

Another approach to creating a positive culture through embodied leadership is beautifully captured by William H. Peace (2001) in *The Hard Work of Being a Soft Manager*. Through moving storytelling he recounts his bruising experiences in managing with openness, intentional vulnerability, and accepting personal responsibility for decisions, especially the tough choices that cause hardship and pain for others, such as layoffs. Deeply listening to employees' feelings

in emotionally volatile situations eventually won him respect of members who at first resented the decisions that he, as leader, felt compelled to make for the good of the entire organization. The candor, humility, and genuine caring with which he approached situations actually led to increased commitment from employees. Balancing the needs of all with hard business realities is the purview of the leader. Not all leaders choose to deliver bad news personally and take the heat. Peace does.

While the earlier portions of *Leadership on the Line*, authored by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002), create a strategic theory, the final chapters of the book reveal a wealth of wisdom applicable for a theory of embodied leadership. A brief description of their strategic approach appears under the last theory category in this paper.

It is only through intense personal development that a leader reaches this peak of embodying what she needs to live. The subtitle of the book, *Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, speaks volumes about the fiery role of true leadership. *Giving the Work Back* reminds leaders to get out of the way and allow the people with the problem to struggle with its resolution. *Hold Steady* asks leaders to develop the capacity to tolerate increasing levels of heat as people attack or revolt against the difficult questions and issues posed. As the leaders' tolerances grow, so does the strength of people in the organization to handle disequilibrium. Good modeling works magic, much like the leader's mood creates a context or container in which people can perform, according to Goleman et al. *Manage Your Hungers* speaks to the personal vulnerability that we humans carry and offers advice about how to avoid derailing ourselves from seeking inappropriate satisfaction of our unmet needs. *Anchor Yourself* invokes grounded strategies that may be simply practical or profoundly spiritual. Maintaining the distinctions between self and role, allies and confidants, complexity and sanctuary, will preserve

essential boundaries to keep us whole. *What's on the Line?* speaks to the highest human desire: to make the world better, and opines that love is the path. Peace might also agree, with his deeply personal caring for the people on his watch. *Sacred Heart* asks leaders to “maintain your innocence and wonder, your doubt and curiosity, and your compassion and love even during your darkest, most difficult moments” (p. 225). Peace and Goleman would likely concur, knowing that in the transformation of inner capacity lies the leader’s true gift to her organization.

One of the most profound practitioners and teachers in the realm of embodied leadership is Robert E. Quinn (2004) and his recent *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It* is a richly tender bible of sorts for building this path as one walks on it. Deeply committed to reflecting on the learning present in any situation, Quinn finds a leader emerging within those fundamental states when one is profoundly aware, taking personal responsibility, and in the moment of deep change (p. 28).

Using the metaphor of a ship’s anchor, Quinn invokes the idea that there are times when cutting away the attachment to familiar terrain, effecting truly deep change, is the only action likely to avert death. This is true for sailors caught in a storm who need to ride out the savagery of the weather, and likewise true of individuals and organizations who must allow themselves to move forward within the chaos in order to avoid stagnation, degradation, or death.

Quinn writes of eight personal practices that assist the would-be leader in entering what he refers to as the “fundamental state of leadership”. These practices are: reflective action, authentic engagement, appreciative inquiry, grounded vision, adaptive confidence, detached interdependence, responsible freedom, and tough love. Committing oneself to the path and creating it as it is discovered is the only way through disorienting times that demand change. It is also the path of the embodied leader.

Historical Models

This category is remarkably similar to the early stages of leadership development in the US, when certain prominent, successful people were lionized for their accomplishments. Efforts to model their behavior and beliefs were made in the hope that others, too, may benefit from those winning formulas.

In *What the Titans Can Teach Us*, Richard S. Tedlow (2001) assures the reader that we can all learn from these “giants of industry” without assuming that we need follow in their sometimes nefarious footsteps. Free to choose which characteristics would help drive success in their own business, any leader can gain an appreciation for the wildly courageous and risky entrepreneurial style that was a hallmark of these legends. The lessons to be learned ring like slogans at a rally: “Have the courage to bet on your vision of market potential; shape your vision of the market into a mission for the company and consistent messages for customers, employees, and investors; deliver more than you promise; be dedicated, even to a fault, to your company; and don’t look back” (p. 72). Part of the admonition to not look back flies in the face of current learning theory that asserts reflection is the context for true learning. “Titans don’t look back. When they suffer a failure, they get over it... they don’t ruminate” (p. 78). Apparently leaders who emulate titans in this regard also perceive no value in considering past mistakes as learning opportunities. Such a mind-set makes them candidates for creating the very kind of disasters so arduously analyzed in hindsight and described in the Strategic Culture Development category. Eschewing strategic concerns for a John Wayne approach to business in the 21st century is a mismatch.

As are all good stories, Tedlow’s are inspirational, relevant with gems of ideas, perhaps even motivational, worth something even in this day of technology and complexity. Yet this kind

of modeling theory breaks no new ground in revealing deeper personal or embedded organizational barriers, much less what can be done to remove those blockages. Nor does it create any fundamental framing of a path toward true effective leadership beyond following a template. It relies on a leader's willingness to play the maverick, roguish at times, hell-bent on delivering for the company, often with precious little regard for unintended consequences. It fosters an outside-in approach, rather than building a leader's foundational capacity from the inside-out, as do the embodying leadership theories.

Reality Models

This form of theory concerns itself with significant distinctions of management practice, what approaches need to be taken for high level results, and reframes how a leader thinks and acts within the complexity and turbulent pace of business today.

What Leaders Really Do, by John Kotter (1990), marks lines of distinction between what managers do and what leaders do within the scope of the different realms of responsibility and role. Harnessed together within a complementary relationship, managers and leaders coexist within the system of an organization as its necessary poles. Each is required for an organization to innovate big enough to continuously set for themselves auspicious goals and also to create the stable space in which to do the work of getting there. Some people are able to hold the capacity to do both roles well; others function more appropriately within one sphere. Organizations must embrace and support *both* roles to thrive in turbulent times.

Management promotes stability, while leadership presses for change; management copes with complexity, while leadership copes with change. Management utilizes the capabilities of planning and budgeting, organizing and staffing, and controlling and problem-solving (p. 86). The details of implementation reside in the arena of management, while leadership functions at a

more global level. Its purview and essential work resides in setting direction, aligning people, and motivating and inspiring (p. 86).

Kotter's theory is reality-based in terms of the pragmatic distinctions of these different functions. This theory also shows up as a semi-strategic high leveraging method that necessarily presupposes a certain degree of inner capacity for embodied leadership. The strategic flavor posits that leaders must frame our their responsibilities with an eye toward the strategic organizational value gained from working the opposite end of the pole from management's purview. Constructively holding the tension between these two poles would undoubtedly draw on inner leadership, best attained through the discipline of personal development so as to embody that capacity for leadership.

Another radical angle to working with, indeed *leveraging*, what already exists appears in Tom Peters' (2001) reframe presented in *Leadership: Sad Facts and Silver Linings*. Constant interruptions make up a leader's life. One may bemoan such disturbances as a bane for productivity or as a galvanizer toward what really matters in a leadership role. Recent research confirms what many executives instinctively know, that the segment of time available for any activity has gotten infinitesimally smaller. In fact, "fully half of their activities were completed in less than nine minutes" (p. 122). Peters' slogan might be expressed by the theme: "Real-World Decision Making: Ragged but Right" (editor, p. 124).

He asserts that what really matters, given the very real time and positional constraints at the top, is "value management... [blended with] strategic foresight... a shrewd sense of timing and the political acumen to build stable, workable coalitions" (p. 127). "Top management is at the apex of the symbolic signaling system, not the product-delivery system.... [and] daily efforts must focus on sending effective and appropriate signals.... (p. 128). A certain degree of

messiness is alright, he maintains. Such temporary states reflect the change in the world and in business, and provide a mirror for what is required to navigate amidst the turmoil.

This theory also possesses a strategic flavor, focusing on what is essential to the role as leader and trusting the rest of the organization to hear the sent signals and to respond appropriately. As do Heifetz and Linsky, and most other authors reviewed in this paper, Peters clearly acknowledges control for the productive processes in the hands of the people with their hands on the helm.

A variation on the theme of needed current approaches within the turbulent pace of business today is Warren Bennis' (1999) provocatively titled article called *The End of Leadership: Exemplary Leadership is Impossible Without Full Inclusion, Initiatives, and Cooperation of Followers*. In brief, it is a testament, with relevant storied examples, to the need for leaders to engage employees in a new partnership with management. This is not news now, although the impulse for the article that appeared in 1999, was Bennis's appearance in a debate in which he was tasked to argue *against* his personal opinion of the question: "All successful organizational change must originate at the top" (p. 71). Before arriving for what he had expected to be a dreary chore, he experienced his own epiphany by shifting 180 degrees and actually standing in the "shoes" he had been assigned to wear. His converted beliefs resulted in this article.

While his underlying engagement principles are shared by many of the authors summarized in this paper, he writes from a theoretical overview and not from a deeper understanding of what it takes to actually walk this talk. He offers no robust frames, methodologies, or steps for getting to strategic or embodied leadership.

Strategic Culture Development

Digging into the inner workings behind high profile disasters such as 9/11 and the Columbia shuttle explosion, two investigative commissions produced analyses that attracted major attention from the business world. Each surfaced problems related to at least one of three aspects: "...imagination, culture, and communication..." Common in both these major failures is the fact that individuals within the organizations had previously sent warning messages up the chain to leaders, all of which were ignored or suppressed within the system. Charges of failed leadership offer lessons that mandate the need for developing better ways of strategic thinking as well as more fluid, non-hierarchical, and less dogmatic organizational cultures, beginning at the top.

In her article *Gospels of Failure*, Jena McGregor (2005) details the mesmerizing results from these investigative reports. In fact, so fascinated have business leaders and others been, that many have met with Jamie Gorelick, one of the 9/11 commissioners, to share lessons in "imagination, leadership, and the persistence of outdated mind-sets" (p. 65). For this article, Jamie was asked what lessons were most relevant to the business world. She replied, "...the role of the leader in tearing down obstacles to the line people doing their job. There were cultural, bureaucratic, and legal turfs – although frequently, the legal obstacles were more perceived than real..." The second lesson relates to "failure of the imagination" (as cited in McGregor, 2001, p. 65). One riveting example concerns the consequences of holding the outdated cold war mind-set, such that pilots, sent up in scrambled jets during the twin tower attacks, believed that it was the *Russians* who were responsible (p. 65).

Lessons drawn from the Columbia explosion point to the siloed, hierarchical nature of its culture amidst a politicized environment. While top management wrote off the accident as within

the bounds of normal risk, lower level engineers asked for better photos to evaluate any damage that might have been caused by a piece of foam that hit the shuttle's wing just after lift-off. Despite repeated requests, they were refused. Regarding effective communication and employee input, Yale professor Gary Brewer says, "In such cultures... the ability to listen to dissent requires the shock of heavy cannon" (as cited in McGregor, 2001, p. 66).

Who is more responsible for organizational culture than its leaders? Having the strategic sense to step back and reflect on the embedded learning opportunities within "failures" requires a leader able to take the kind of heat that William H. Peace spoke about. It also presupposes a strong foundation that permits a leader to reveal his own curiosity, have the ability to see a multitude of perspectives, and to allow himself to be vulnerable in the pursuit of truth-seeking. Strategic culture development depends on embodied leadership.

Another example of such strategic culture shifts is represented when Heifetz and Linsky (2002) define two different types of challenges. *Technical* challenges can be resolved through the use of current knowledge and skills and are handled by the authorities or experts. *Adaptive* challenges, however, require people to learn new ways of thinking about and working the problem. The realm of responsibility for this kind of challenge lies with the actual people who have the problem (p. 14).

Leaders do not directly solve adaptive problems, however their role in holding the container is critical. The authors assert that a primary leadership role in dealing with adaptive challenges is to constantly assess people's tolerance for disequilibrium and adjust the heat to produce the most productive environment within which the necessary work can proceed. This essential function "is to work with differences, passions, and conflicts in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy" (p. 102).

The authors' strategy can be summed up in four options useful to anyone leading change, authorized or not. They advocate for these "leaders" to: 1) create a holding environment; 2) control the heat; 3) set the pace; and 4) show them the future (p. 102). They assert that at times leaders may need to back off the adaptive work, turn down the heat, and work the issues as technical problems, at least until the system can restabilize to some degree, regain equilibrium, and become again ready for more transformational or adaptive work.

As noted before, the theories of Heifetz and Linsky imply both embodied leadership as well as the development of astutely strategic cultures that have the capacity for the kind of transformational work demanded in this century. As such, they share certain principles with those other theories within these categories.

Preferred applicable and useful theories

As is readily apparent from personal comments woven throughout this paper, my inclinations and experience prompt me to use embodied leadership and strategic culture change types of interventions with potential clients. I am rarely one to employ only one or two theories, but rather seek to blend resonant principles, theories, and methodologies into a holographic form that serves the client and allows me to draw from my own strengths and wisdom, while learning new ways to work with others.

Goleman's focus on emotional intelligence, Peace's searing experiences of being real with people, Heifetz and Linsky's advocating the fires of personal transformation, and Quinn's apt metaphor of creating the path while walking it, speak to the state of the world and what is needed to bring it back to health. Business is not exempt from this audacious mission. Indeed, for business to be profitable, to be sustainable, to be places where people want to work and succeed, it must recognize its fundamental role in this mission. Leading from the inside out is the only

way of creating cultures of excellence and modeling for others an authentic path that may inspire them to create their own.

Approaching a client from the perspective of assisting with developing a strategic culture that reflects on past experience for the embedded lessons and leverages off this new learning to keep reinventing itself, seems a useful offer. What is missing from some groups and organizations is the capacity to analyze in such a way as to stop doing what creates dysfunction and to practice new ways of *thinking* that frame situations very differently and allow for more productive behavior. Relinquishing old unsuitable habits requires vast amounts of courage and commitment. It must be done to foster growth, personally and organizationally.

These kinds of interventions speak to me as necessary methodologies for the times in which we live. They also appeal to me because of my background experience in reframing, mediation, and transformational inner work. I am a big risk-taker and know how to hold my fear while adventuring into new terrain. I can help people work through their own fears and hesitation in traveling these inner and outer journeys. I have walked them myself and have helped others over the stones in the way. It's a rightful calling.

My own lessons in leadership have been many and frequent, due to my adventurous nature! Some very significant learning in this arena has occurred within the last year, as I have become much more conscious of the dynamics of my and others' behavior. It is very apparent to me that authenticity, transparency, and surfacing those underlying issues that keep causing trouble, are practices required of anyone who would lead. I have been mired in a project for several months in which I have not had the consent or support from a fellow consultant to hold this kind of conversation with our team. Deliverables have been missed, group agreements broken, meetings canceled, and this consultant believes that no one else is willing to do the "personal" processing

needed to address these problems. Finding my own center amidst such denial and projection has almost undone me at times. Finding the courage to ask the essential questions without allowing others' angry retorts to stop me has been challenging. Finding illuminating ways to reply to people's concerns that I am bringing in negative energy by raising the specter of "problems" has been extremely puzzling and frustrating. Finding my colleague unable/unwilling to talk with me about all of this has been maddening.

If this is not the kind of fire I thought I would find and be able to walk through, so be it. This is the fire that enfolds me. It is up to me to take responsibility for my emotional despair about this project. As I contemplate what I need to make my decision to stay or to leave, I know that I cannot expect my colleague or team members to change. I might decide to risk the taboo conversation and be open to possibilities I cannot now imagine...

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