

**Issues & Observations**  
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## **Changing Our Minds About Leadership**

*Wilfred H. Drath*

It's generally agreed that life is pretty difficult right now—fast-moving, complex, even out of control—and we would all feel a lot better if we could figure out how to make leadership work better. Yet, somehow, just at the time we seem to need it so badly, good leadership has become elusive. The old-fashioned John Wayne style has been out for some time, of course, and the newer, more sensitive and participative approach is very difficult to accomplish, with the result that many people in leadership positions are just going through the motions of being empowering and participative and the people who work for them know it. Overall, we seem to have lost our way and we are searching for answers about leadership.

The encouraging thing is that being lost about leadership has not stopped people from continuing to push along in organizations, developing new ways for people to work together. Practice, as so often happens, is going ahead of theory. Managers in some organizations are doing things that are calling forth a new model of leadership, whether that is their intent or not. As I will discuss later, practices such as organizing around teams, breaking down functional barriers, increasing diversity, and trying to foster a learning organization all point us toward the need to develop a new model of leadership.

So, working from the theory end of this collaboration, the time has come to search for better leadership by exploring and questioning one of our most fundamental and cherished beliefs about it. This is going to be hard work, because it means possibly changing an idea that has worked well for a long time. But ideas do eventually outlive their usefulness, and maybe that has happened to this basic idea about leadership.

Maybe it's time to let go of the idea that leadership starts with a leader of some kind; time to let go of the idea that to get good leadership, you need to start with a good leader. Maybe it's time to stand that idea on its head. Instead of getting leadership by starting with some kind of a leader, what if you got leadership by starting with a community or workgroup or organization of *people making sense and meaning of their work together*? This process of meaning and sense-making would then produce leaders *as a result*. In other words, what if good leaders were the end product of good processes of leadership and bad leaders were the result of bad processes of leadership?

Let's imagine that we actually thought, believed in, and accepted as fact this upside-down idea about leadership—that good leaders come about as a result of good leadership. What if we behaved as if it were true that the process of leadership comes first and people called *leaders* come afterward, being produced by leadership? Just for the sake of exploring this idea, try to imagine that we live in a world where leadership is thought of as a set of relationships that produce a wide variety of outcomes such as meaning, values, goals, authority, structure, work process, and, last but not least, people called *leaders*.

If you were a leader of a workgroup in such a world and the group's leadership needed improving (say, the group did not have a strong sense of shared vision), you and everyone else would understand that the problem was in the set of relationships that comprised the workgroup and created its leadership. The fix would involve changing *relationships* somehow for the better. So, instead of you, the leader, taking sole responsibility for this problem and thinking, "How can I influence people to share in a vision?" everyone would be taking responsibility and wondering something like, "What might we change in the way we talk to one another? in the way we think about things together?" Thinking this might lead people to bring this up with others: "How can we work together differently so that we are all more on the same page? What can each of us do differently?" In other words, conversation would revolve less around the actions of individuals and more around the nature of the relationships people were using to do their work together.

Let's stay with this exercise of trying to imagine a different way of thinking about leadership, while not getting hung up yet about the admittedly important details—such as just how the problem in the

previous paragraph got agreed on. Let's stay with exploring an imaginary world that uses a different mental model of leadership. The details of how people act differently using this mental model are not clear at this point—yet, as already mentioned, some of our organizations are in effect laboratories for learning about these details.

We are beginning, however, to be able to see outlines of this model in some current writing. For example, leadership is about making sense together of the unknown (Karl Weick). Or leadership is about making meaning in a community of practice (Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus). Or it's about people intending real changes that reflect their mutual purposes (Joseph Rost). Or it's about confronting problems whose solution requires everyone in the workgroup or community or nation to grow and develop (Ronald Heifetz). It seems that the same idea underlies these approaches: Leadership is a property of a social system, an outcome of collective meaning-making, not the result of influence or vision from an individual. Leadership is being created by people making sense and meaning of their work together, and this process, in turn, can bring leaders into being. We could call the idea that leadership is created by a single person *individual leadership*. We might call this idea that leadership is a property of a social system *relational leadership*, pointing to the way it arises in the systemic relationships of people doing work together.

In a world that defines leadership as a property of a social system, there are leaders, but they don't make leadership happen. And there are followers, but they are not the objects of the leader's leadership behavior. Leaders and followers alike participate in leadership; their effectiveness as leaders and as followers is the result of the nature of their participation in that process. Their participation in the process, of course, has an effect on the process itself. People thus improve leadership by improving the way they participate in it. Followers can improve leadership just as much as leaders can—maybe more, because there are more of them.

In such a world, the effectiveness of leadership is determined by the extent to which people take responsibility for participating in leadership—not because some leader has figured out how to “share” leadership but because leadership is a property of the relationships people form when they are doing something together (thus it's shared by definition) and is therefore affected by the quality and nature of those relationships. Good sets of relationships constitute good leadership, which produces good leaders and good followers.

In such a world, leadership is developed by developing the whole community of people so that they can participate more effectively in the relationships of leadership. As Joseph Rost has imagined it, people called *leaders* and people called *followers* are understood as being two sides of the same leadership coin, and we try to develop the coin itself—the whole interactive set of relationships comprising leadership. Thus, “leaders” and “followers” all get “leadership development training” in how to participate effectively in the process of leadership.

A key question is whether this is pure fantasy or just fancy semantics. Could such an approach to leadership actually work? After all, isn't leadership really about power and influence and position? And aren't power and influence and position possessions of an individual? How can we think of leadership without putting the individual in the place of honor?

These questions are bound to be asked, and need to be deeply thought through, because this approach to leadership seems to diminish the role of the individual. This is especially disturbing to us in the United States because we believe in the sanctity of the individual. That word, *sanctity*, is not too strong. Belief in the sanctity of the individual is fundamental to our values about freedom, responsibility, and accountability. For example, how can organizations create accountability with such an approach? If *everyone* is responsible, isn't *no one* responsible? To begin thinking about this important question, we need to delve a little more into how we understand the word *individual*.

This relational model of leadership asks us to think of individuals (leaders and followers) as being created by a process (leadership). Here's an analogy: Mothers and fathers are created by the process of having a child. You become a mother or a father when your first child is born; this is something you feel happening to you. You are being created as a parent before your own eyes. Of course, you can always say, as we have been accustomed to saying about leadership, “We created the baby; the baby didn't create us” and push aside this whole line of thought, but it's also true that having the baby creates you as *parents*, creates a whole new mind that becomes a new you, the mind of a parent with its unique set of values and concerns, hopes and fears.

We might come to feel the same about leadership: that taking part in an organization creates us as participants in leadership. As you join an organization, you might think of becoming a participant in an

ongoing process in which people are making sense and meaning of their work together. You might become a participant in the process of asking and answering such questions as, "What is our work?" "What is its value?" "Who should we serve?" "Where are we going?" "How do we all fit in?" and "How do I fit in?" As you take responsibility for your role in the work, you also take responsibility for participating in the search for meaning. By taking your place, and by taking responsibility for your place, you participate in the creation of a system of meaning-making that constitutes leadership—the process of making sense together of common work. Thus, even as an entry-level employee, you feel yourself gradually becoming an integral part of the process of leadership.

Then one day you take on a role of increased authority. Now your participation in the process of leadership includes making decisions on behalf of the community. You understand authority as a grant of power to author certain kinds of decisions. Taking responsibility for the power to make decisions is a distinctly different way of participating in the process of leadership. People call you a *leader*, just as after your child was born, people called you a *parent*. You become a leader by virtue of your form of participation. What you have the power to do has changed, what you take responsibility for has changed, what people call you has changed, but what has not changed is the fact that you are participating in a process that is larger than you are and which is creating you as a person of authority, as a leader.

In other words, the individual is still there, as responsible and accountable and authorized as ever before. But this is an individual with an idea of participating in leadership—not creating leadership—and this feels more like being in service to the community (Robert Greenleaf) than it does like taking charge of the community. Such a leader may feel more humble about being a leader, maybe less likely to arrogate power and privilege, since leadership is understood not as something the individual brought to the position, rather as something the position brought to the individual.

Ideas and actions inform one another. Sometimes we need a new way to think about something in order to act differently; at other times we are already acting differently without really understanding why and what we need is a new way to think about what we're doing. As I suggested earlier, this is true in the case of this relational approach to leadership. People in organizations are already doing a lot of things that are consistent with this approach. Naming it and describing it can help make sense of some of the more advanced practices in organizations. At the same time, having this relational leadership idea will also help people in organizations develop fresh ideas for action. How can some current organizational practices be understood in terms of relational leadership?

A few organizations are organizing around teams and making these teams responsible for their own work without management supervision. In such a situation, each team is accountable to all the other teams with which it is interdependently linked. This creates a kind of marketplace accountability in which the work of each team is appraised for its quality and timeliness by the other teams with which the team has connections. The meaning of such a system starts with satisfying the needs of the customer, both internal and external. Leadership in such an organization can be understood as the meaning-making of the whole structure of interdependence, agreements, work flows, decision streams, sense-making protocols, and problem naming and solving methods by which the interlinked teams create a marketable product. Each person, and each team, and all the interlinked teams that comprise the organization participate in this leadership. There is often literally no one "making decisions" from a "higher level" in order to control the work of the teams. In many cases, the various teams are coordinating by something very close to mutual adjustment.

Many organizations are trying to break down the strict barriers, the stovepipes, that have separated and defined different functions. Boundaries will not go away, but our ideas about the nature of boundaries can change. In most organizations, functional boundaries are the product of coordination from above, from a level of more abstraction—the classic bureaucratic hierarchy. As organizations try to create a context in which functions can work more closely together, coordination from the top will likely give way to coordination from the side—from workgroup to workgroup instead of from manager to manager. Breaking such stovepipes thus moves toward a different idea of leadership that goes beyond the traditional model in which an individual manager is responsible for one function while another manager is responsible for another function and only the manager above those two is responsible for the coordination of the two. A relational model of leadership is being called for in such organizational practice. Some model of leadership that acknowledges and accommodates the co-construction of work *between* functions is required.

Increasing diversity in organizations also calls us to explore and evolve a relational model of leadership. If our organizations are going to embrace differing cultures, they will need to be able to

embrace differing values, philosophies, attitudes, ideas, and feelings. The individual approach to leadership, emphasizing how a single person can generate a vision and enlist others in its implementation, is unlikely to serve this need very well, simply because the vision of a single person will of necessity be the vision of a single culture and a single worldview. Vision in diverse organizations will need to be multifaceted, uniting hearts and minds in common work while reflecting significant difference. As difficult as this sounds—and it sounds very hard indeed—how can we even approach the problem without a more multifaceted and inclusive model of leadership?

The need to make organizations more directly responsive to customers is leading to the practice of granting increased nonroutine decision-making authority to operational people. This move to empower people is also tantamount to a call for a new model of leadership. Making people more directly responsible for their work and the outcomes of their work puts the identity and reputation of the organization into the hands of many. As operational employees take responsibility for making decisions in direct communication with customers, not following a script but exercising their own judgment, the enacted strategy of the organization unfolds in the day-to-day actions of a multitude of people. In order for the strategy of the organization to be effective, people at all levels and doing all kinds of work will need to be participants in the creation and evolution of that strategy.

Finally, the whole set of ideas implicit in what is being called *the learning organization* may depend upon and be calling forth a new mental model of leadership. Fundamentally, the difference between the learning organization and the traditional organization lies in the concept of closed and open systems. The traditional organization was conceived of as a more-or-less closed system with a goal of maintenance and stability in the face of environmental change. The learning organization is being conceived of (and we are still far from understanding what this means in everyday terms) as an open-system organization that evolves and develops continuously as it interacts with its environment. Although the traditional organization was reasonably well served by a model of leadership that emphasized a single, controlling vision or plan created by a leader who had a highly abstracted view of the enterprise—the leader created the leadership that kept the organization stable—the learning organization will need a model of leadership that points toward continuous developmental and adaptive change. This suggests that somehow we have to figure out how to achieve flexible navigation instead of steady direction. It's an image of a ship on which interdependent sailors call out to one another what they are doing and what they have learned about the sea in which they are sailing. It is an image of mutual adjustment, as opposed to an image of controlled direction. The task before us, then, may be to learn how to get leadership (collective meaning) from work that is conducted by mutual adjustment. Nancy Dixon points out the critical role of dialogue in fostering this kind of learning organization. If clear communication from the top was the hallmark of individual leadership, dialogic processes open to the entire community will be the hallmark of relational leadership.

To repeat: Practice frequently runs ahead of theory and ideas. Practices such as those just described are calling forth a new model of leadership. A new model of leadership, in turn, can help us extend these practices and also find new ways to continue to develop our ability to work together. For example, if we took seriously the idea that leadership development is actually the development of the whole system, we would arrive at the idea of creating *all* organizational systems as if they were developmental systems—that is, systems that develop (change and adapt) and that foster and support the development of people.

The most immediate practical concern of this theoretical work is to help redirect our attention and help us notice how our lives in organizations are changing our minds about leadership. If we are to continue to learn how to work together in ways that maximize responsibility and respect differences while forging unity and direction, we need to begin to notice how leadership can be something we are all doing together, not the special task of a few people called *leaders*. We need to notice how each of us participates in the process of making sense and meaning out of our shared work. This promises to increase our chances of living and working well in an ever more interdependent world.

## Suggested Reading

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# Leading Together

## Complex Challenges Require a New Approach

Leadership has become more difficult because of challenges that are not just complicated but also unpredictable. Such challenges demand that people and organizations fundamentally change, and make it virtually impossible for an individual leader to accomplish the work of leadership. What is needed is a more inclusive and collective leadership, a prospect that although difficult to achieve holds much potential.

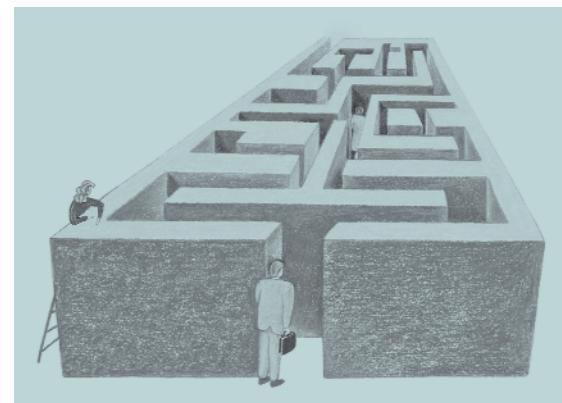
**P**eople in organizations want and need to work together effectively and productively. Individuals long to be part of a bigger picture that connects them to a larger purpose. This is what they expect leadership to accomplish. They expect leadership to create the direction, alignment, and commitment that will enable them, working together, to achieve organizational success.

The trouble is, it's getting harder and harder to make this happen. Creating direction, alignment, and commitment—the work of leadership—is becoming more difficult than ever.

There are a number of reasons for this. As organizations break down functional silos and develop greater

global reach, people more often work with others who are not like them. It's harder to get people who don't share a common set of values and perspectives to get behind a common direction, to align, and to commit to one another.

Adding to this difficulty, people don't work side by side as much anymore. People working together might be scattered over several regions and time zones, even over different countries. Subtle and not-so-subtle barriers to communication and trust are created by the lack of simply being in the same room together. It's harder to shape a common purpose and get people aligned, and it's more difficult for people who don't see each other face to face to commit effectively to one another.



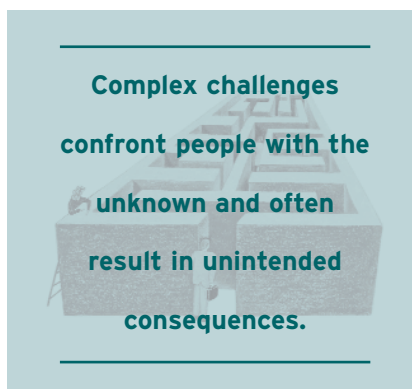
by **Wilfred H. Drath**

It's also getting harder to make leadership work because of changes in the attitude toward traditional ways of practicing leadership. Increasingly people without formal authority want to be involved in setting their own direction and in designing their own work and how they will coordinate with others. They are less willing to commit themselves to work in which they have had no say. Yet people may not be prepared to participate effectively in leadership this way. They may knock on the door demanding to be let in on leadership without actually knowing how to enter into it. It's harder to create direction, alignment, and commitment when there are different and sometimes competing ideas of how to best accomplish this leadership work and when people have differing levels of readiness for participating in leadership.

## FACING THE UNKNOWN

In general, leadership is more difficult today because of what Ronald A. Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, calls *adaptive challenges*, which can also be thought of as complex challenges. A complex challenge is more than just a very complicated problem. Complexity implies a lack of predictability. Complex challenges confront people with the unknown and often result in unintended consequences.

This unpredictability also means that a complex challenge is quite different from a technical problem. Technical problems are predictable and solvable. Using assumptions, methods, and tools that already exist, people can readily define the nature of a technical problem and prepare a solution with some confidence in the results. So, for example, if a key supplier changes the pricing on critical



components, and such changes are expected to happen from time to time (the problem is already understood), and there are established ways of responding (tools for solving the problem already exist), then this is a technical problem. A technical problem arises and is solved *without any fundamental change* in assumptions, methods, or tools. Also, the people who solve a technical problem don't themselves have to change.

A complex challenge cannot be dealt with like this. Existing assumptions, methods, or tools are no good in the face of a complex challenge and may even get in the way. To be faced successfully, complex challenges require altered assumptions, different methods, and new tools not yet invented. Complex challenges require people and organizations to change, often in profound and fundamental ways. This is where things get unpredictable. Some examples of cur-

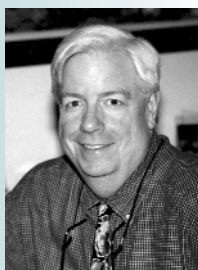
rent complex challenges are the need for companies that have merged to bring about culture change, for the health care industry to address the nursing shortage, for many companies to make the transformation from product push to customer pull, and for social agencies to get diverse constituents with differing perspectives to work together on such deep-rooted issues as reducing the number of youthful offenders.

Complex challenges are made even more difficult by the fact that no one can say with any authority or accuracy just how things need to change. This is where leadership starts to get a lot harder. Because the complex challenge lies beyond the scope of existing assumptions, the frameworks that people use to try to understand the nature of the challenge itself are not adequate. So, for example, it's not just that people in an organization that needs to undergo a culture change don't know how to make the change happen. It's worse than that. They have no way of being sure what sort of new culture is needed. No one who is part of the existing organization has any kind of especially gifted insight into the needs of the new, changed, still-unknown organization of the future. Everyone has ideas, of course, and everyone has a point of view and may be quite attached to it. Only by virtue of position and authority are anyone's ideas given special status. Unfortunately, although having a lot of authority may make it possible for a person to make sure his or her views hold sway, that doesn't guarantee the effectiveness of those views.

If all of this makes it sound as though a complex challenge requires a lot of talk and reflection among a lot of people in an organization, it does. And all that talk and reflection takes a lot of time. Because the complex challenge is not only complex but also a challenge, however, it demands a

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response now, not someday. So facing a complex challenge puts people in a bind and ensures that they will experience some stress as they try to think and reflect together without letting analysis lead to paralysis.

## NO GOING IT ALONE

In the face of complex challenges, a leader, no matter how skilled and otherwise effective, cannot simply step into the breach, articulate a new vision, make some clarifying decisions, and proclaim success. Because a complex challenge requires a whole system and all the people in it to change, it lies beyond the scope of any individual person to confront. Complex challenges make it virtually impossible for an individual leader to accomplish the work of leadership, and individual leadership therefore reaches a distinct limit in the face of complex challenges.

Since about the 1920s (in the writings of Mary Parker Follett) there has been talk of the possibility of distributing or sharing leadership and making leadership more inclusive and collective. If leadership is still needed (and who can deny that it is), and if no individual alone can provide leadership in the face of a complex challenge, then perhaps what is needed is the collective action of many people. It's conceivable, even compelling, that everyone in an organization could contribute in some way to facing a complex challenge. The possibility that a more inclusive and collective way of leadership could help organizations meet complex challenges and be more effective is promising.

The problem has always been—and remains today—*how* to get more people involved in leadership, and *how* to make leadership more inclusive and collective.

Two critical problems continuously block the way. The first could be called the *too-many-chefs* prob-

lem: the effort to make more people into leaders seems doomed to collapse in a cacophony of differing visions and values as too many individuals exhibit leadership. The second could be called the *diffused accountability* problem: when people share leadership, it seems inevitable that accountability will also get shared until, as everyone becomes accountable, no one is really accountable at all.

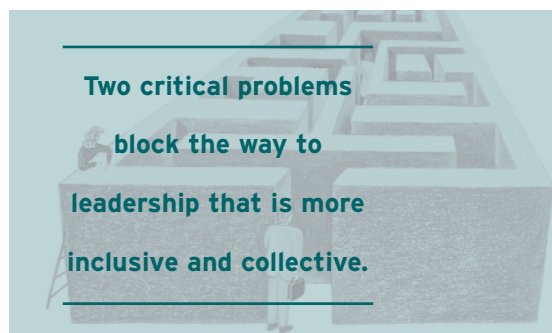
Both of these problems are real. Attempts to make leadership more inclusive and collective have often—if not always—foundered on just these obstacles. Such failures have made many people realistically pessimistic about the utility of a more inclusive and collective approach to leadership. Yet the promise of such leadership grows brighter as complex challenges surpass the ability of the individual leader to respond.

The problem is how to develop more inclusive and collective ways of making leadership happen without running afoul of the twin problems of too many chefs and diffused accountability. Somehow we need to develop the whole process by which direction, alignment, and commitment are created—not just develop individual leaders. We at CCL call the development of individual leaders *leader development*; the development of the whole process for creating direction, alignment, and commitment we call *leadership development*. Both leader development and leadership development are needed. But even though leadership development is becoming more critically important every day, it lags far behind leader development in most organizations.

## DEFINING THE TASKS

A good place to start developing a more inclusive and collective leadership is to think of leadership (both individual and collective) as a

process that is used to accomplish a set of *leadership tasks*. This makes it possible to focus not on the way leadership is practiced but rather on what people hope to *accomplish* with leadership. A useful question is, What work is leadership expected to get done? As already suggested, leadership is expected to set direction, create alignment, and generate



commitment—or some similar list of desired outcomes.

The too-many-chefs problem that often comes up in trying to share leadership is created when organizations try to get more people to act as leaders and exhibit leadership. This is subtly but importantly different from getting more people involved in the process of accomplishing the leadership tasks.


Getting more people to act like leaders does little more than multiply the individual leader approach. In the face of a complex challenge, simply having more people trying to say what should be done is unlikely to be effective.

In the same way, the diffused accountability problem is created when organizations make more people accountable by designating more people as leaders. This is also little more than a way to multiply individual leaders. Many ways of trying to share leadership in order to make it more inclusive and collective are actually still firmly rooted in the



tradition of the individual leader—designating more leaders can just add to the difficulty of accomplishing the leadership tasks in the face of complex challenges.

So having more leaders is not the answer. Instead the answer is to create richer and more complex processes of accomplishing the leadership tasks. Focus on how to create direction, alignment, and commitment in the face of complex challenges, and for-



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get about how many people are, or are not, leaders.

Putting the accomplishment of the leadership tasks at the heart of leadership frames different and more useful questions: What are the obstacles to clear direction, effective alignment, and solid commitment? What resources exist in the organization for creating direction, alignment, and commitment as a complex challenge is being confronted? What different approaches to accomplishing the leadership tasks are possible for the organization? How might people act in new and different ways to accomplish the leadership tasks?

Answering questions like these can help organizations avoid the traditional problems of shared leadership by getting them past the idea that more inclusive and collective approaches require making more people individual leaders.

## THREE CAPABILITIES

Complex challenges require richer and more complex ways of creating direction, alignment, and commitment. The ways people talk, think, and act together—the culture of the organization along with its systems and structures—are what need to become richer and more complex.

At first this may seem to be a bad idea. When facing a complex challenge, surely the last thing needed is more complexity. Yet the very complexity of the challenge calls for an equally complex capacity to respond. A complex capacity to respond means something different from just a more complicated process. It means a more varied, less predictable, more layered process capable of greater subtlety. At CCL we believe that making the leadership process more collective, pushing the process beyond one that depends primarily on individuals, enriches the process of leadership to the level of sensitivity and responsiveness required by a complex challenge. Continuing to depend on individual leaders (no matter how many) to lead people through basic and profound changes is risky. This is because any individual leader, no matter how capable, may be unable to make such changes personally. Getting more people working together in more ways increases the likelihood that people who are able to make the needed changes themselves will become influential in the leadership process. We call this *connected leadership*.

Three collective capabilities can be useful for organizations needing to achieve connected leadership: shared sense-making, connection, and navigation.

*Shared sense-making.* Complex challenges do not come wrapped with an explanation. By their nature they cause confusion, ambiguity,

conflict, and stress. They are immediate, so they press for a solution now. But they also force people to change toward the unknown, so they also require reflection. Moving too fast can make things worse. What seems to be required is the capability to engage in shared sense-making.

This is not problem solving; it's not even problem defining. It's a process that must come before a challenge can even be thought of as a problem with solutions. The outcome of this sense-making is shared understanding. It involves people in paying attention to both the parts and the whole of the challenge. It requires people to experience multiple perspectives and to hold conflicting views in productive tension. It answers the persistent question about difficult change: Why change? Without an understanding of why change is required, people are rightly suspicious of it.

*Connection.* The process of leadership is realized in the connections between people, groups, teams, functions, and whole organizations. Complex challenges threaten existing connections. Think of what happens in an organization seeking to become more customer focused. The existing structures and boundaries that differentiate and coordinate such entities as production, marketing, sales, and finance begin to be more like impediments than workable ways of organizing. Facing complex challenges requires people and organizations to develop and enrich their forms of connection.

The outcome is relationships made to work in new ways both within and between groups and communities. Getting relationships to work in new ways requires people to see patterns of connection (and disconnection) in order to explore the root causes of the complex challenge and clarify differing

# You Can Help Explore Connected Leadership

The ideas in this article are drawn from an ongoing research and development project at CCL called Connected Leadership. The purpose of this project is to identify and test ways of enriching organizational processes, culture, and systems to support more inclusive and collective approaches to leadership by and among groups, teams, departments, and the whole organization. Its goal is to contribute to making leadership more effective in the face of complex challenges.

We invite readers of *Leadership in Action* to join us in exploring

and developing the potential of connected leadership. We are seeking collaborators in two broad categories. The first is people, organizations, and communities who believe they are developing and practicing some form of what is described in this article. We wish to learn more about the real-world experience of developing leadership as the property of whole systems. The second category is groups, teams, agencies, governmental entities, organizations, and communities that wish to collaborate with us in developing connect-

ed leadership. We believe the best way to develop the practice of leadership is through collaborative action.

For more information and to discuss possible collaborative work, e-mail or call Wilfred H. Drath, the project administrator, at [drath@leaders.ccl.org](mailto:drath@leaders.ccl.org) or 336-286-4409; Richard Hughes, a member of the project management team, at [hughesr@leaders.ccl.org](mailto:hughesr@leaders.ccl.org) or 719-329-7852; or Ellen Van Velsor, also a member of the project management team, at [vanvelsor@leaders.ccl.org](mailto:vanvelsor@leaders.ccl.org) or 336-286-4433.

and sometimes conflicting values. Often, new language emerges.

*Navigation.* Because a complex challenge is not a familiar problem to be solved but a reality to be faced through change and development, the process is one of learning from shared experiments, small wins, innovations, and emergent strategies. No one can set a goal whose achievement will resolve the complex challenge. It is a journey whose destination is unpredictable and unknown. A key to success is the ability to be keenly sensitive to the forces of change as they happen, like mariners who sail a ship by making minute, mutual adjustments to one another and to the elements of wind and current.

These capabilities cannot be taken on by individuals. They can be developed only between individuals and between groups, functions, and whole organizations. Too often the move to more inclusive and collective approaches to leadership is attempted without making this move into the space in between. More inclusive approaches to leadership

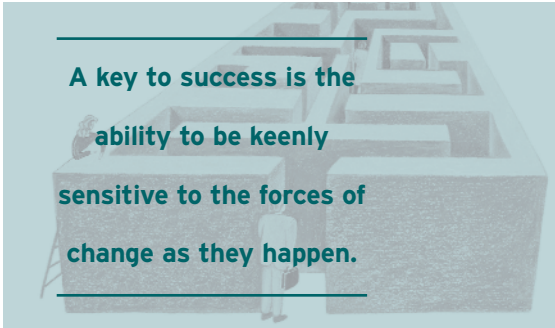
have often been expected to flow from a change in the competencies of individual leaders, such as when leaders are called on to be more empowering and inclusive and to share leadership. The persistence of the obstacles to more inclusive and collective leadership comes from the failure to let go of long-held and long-valued assumptions about the individual nature of leadership.

## MAKING GAINS

In facing complex challenges, people, organizations, and communities can develop ways of accomplishing the leadership tasks that give more people a sense of being responsible for setting direction, creating alignment, and generating commitment. Successfully facing complex challenges will support a sense of shared power and collective competence.

It will also create the possibility for leadership strategy. Because strategy means making choices among alternatives, no strategy is possible without alternatives to consider. So if the development of connected leadership, of a more inclusive and collec-

tive leadership process, adds to the alternative ways that leadership can be carried out, it also creates the possibility that choices can be made about leadership. Leadership then would no longer be a matter of making a single kind of practice work for every context. Instead of seeing lead-



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ership as simply a natural force to which humans are subject and that comes in only one naturally determined version (such as the forceful leader taking charge), people would come to see leadership as a process that humans control and that can be shaped to human needs through intentional choices. ✍

# The Third Way

## A New Source of Leadership

Where do we expect leadership to come from? Until now people have recognized the individual leader as the obvious source of leadership, through either personal dominance or interpersonal influence. But because today's workplace challenges are so difficult and complex, these two wellsprings of leadership cannot sufficiently address them. What is needed is a third source of leadership: people making sense and meaning of their work together.

**D**o you feel confused about leadership? I often ask groups of managers and executives that question, and when I do, heads nod affirmatively all over the room.

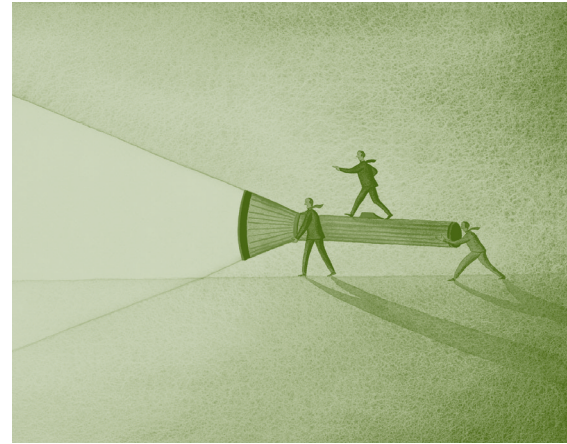
Those managers and executives are not alone. Most of us, despite being awash in advice about how to practice leadership, are confused about leadership itself.

Why? Because what used to be a widely shared understanding of leadership is showing the cracks and strains of a rapidly changing world. Many things that once were agreed upon about leadership are now open to doubt and questioning. When people no longer have a shared understanding of leadership, its practice becomes confusing.

The confusion starts with a basic question: Where do we expect leadership to come from? The answer would

seem to be a no-brainer: leaders, of course, are the source of leadership. Although this answer makes sense in many ways, it is also the cause of a lot of the confusion about leadership. It is the basis for the widely held understanding of leadership that has prevailed for so long. But it is also an idea that does not work as well in the world we are moving into.

In a world that is globally interconnected; that is networked electronically, economically, often culturally, and even spiritually; and in which differing views of life are held in a dynamic tension, the concept of *leadership from a leader* is much less workable than it was in a world where people stuck more or less in like-minded groups. Leadership from a leader still seems to make sense on the surface, but it often doesn't work as expected. And that's confusing.



by Wilfred H. Drath

What people are looking for is a new source of leadership. It's a little like running out of a precious natural resource. Leadership is needed just as much and maybe more than ever before, but the traditional source—the individual leader—is drying up. A new source is needed, and I believe it's right under our noses: leadership can come from the activity of people making sense and meaning of their work together.

In this article I will show how this source of leadership is just as powerful as leadership from a leader—and is even more workable in today's changing world. I will also look at some of the practical implications of thinking about the source of leadership in this way.

## LEADERSHIP AS PERSONAL DOMINANCE

To understand this new source of leadership, it will help to review the logic of thinking about leaders as the source of leadership. Let's start with the idea of personal dominance.

When leadership literally involves going first, dominance is critical. Imagine a group of humans thousands of years ago setting out on a journey into unknown territory. Everyone except the leader has someone to follow. The leader, who goes first, must face danger before anyone else and make decisions about which obstacles to confront

and which to avoid. The leader must also overcome the fears and doubts of followers to retain their loyalty. The leader has to be strong, cunning, inventive, and resourceful. The capacities for personal dominance and for leadership are thus logically and closely linked.

It is a short step to viewing leadership as an aspect of the leader's individual being—physical presence, personality, character, and psychology. The nature of leadership is tied to the nature of the leader. If the leader is harsh and demanding, leadership will have the same qualities. If the leader is kind and caring, leadership will be the same.

Because leadership comes from the leader, there is only one way to make leadership happen: the leader must provide it. Leadership occurs as the leader acts on followers. Directing, inspiring, motivating, evaluating, rewarding, and punishing are logically seen as leadership behaviors.

Whatever needs are seen as leadership tasks—for example, the need for direction and commitment or to face major challenges—are what the leader is expected to accomplish for the community. If the leader is effective at completing these tasks, the community or organization moves in accordance with the leader's vision, aligns with the leader's plans, responds to the leader's call, and adapts as the leader adapts. If the leader fails at these tasks, the community or organization drifts aimlessly, loses its sense of purpose, and falls apart. Followers thus depend on the leader not just for direction, commitment, and adaptation but also for their sense of meaning and belonging.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF PERSONAL DOMINANCE

Because leadership as personal dominance is so logical and compelling, people have learned to understand and accept personal dominance as leadership. In many circumstances it

has been and remains a workable notion of leadership. But there are circumstances in which leadership as personal dominance is limited.

For one thing it requires the continuing presence of the dominant person. If the leader is taken away, leadership is lost. The only remedy is to find another dominant person. And this can fail because the original leader's leadership cannot be duplicated. When leadership is directly linked to the leader's individual being, the new leader may not be seen as providing the type of leadership that is needed.

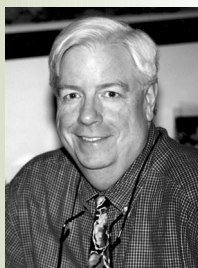
Another major limitation is that the dominant person must have an almost perfect understanding of all the factors involved in the leadership tasks. This becomes more difficult as these factors become increasingly complex. Even when the factors are beyond the comprehension of any one person, however, if both the leader and the followers believe that the leader grasps them, it can be enough to keep leadership working fairly smoothly. But the leader may come to recognize that the factors are too complex for one person to handle. And if glaring failures occur often enough, the followers' faith in the leader may waver.

Thus personal dominance is also limited by the need for continuity among followers. If there is a loss of followers who believe in and are committed to the leader and who are willing to face the challenges identified by the leader, leadership can falter. The followers may physically depart, or they may begin to question their reliance on the leader and demand that they be included in leadership tasks.

We have seen some of the ways by which the power of personal dominance to make sense of leadership can be lost. When this happens, a new source of leadership is needed. Interpersonal influence has been this new source.

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## LEADERSHIP AS INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE

At first glance, interpersonal influence may seem to be little more than a softening of personal dominance. But it differs radically: it is a way of understanding leadership that overcomes the limitations of personal dominance. Unlike personal dominance, interpersonal influence opens up leadership to the participation of followers. The leader's voice is no longer solo and dominant. The source of leadership becomes the negotiation of values and perspectives between the leader and followers. The leader's voice becomes a *compound* voice that includes the voices of followers.

In this view, truth, which the dominant leader spoke without question, is open to a process of reasoning and argument. It is also open to doubt. The leader's mode is persuading rather than telling. Persuasion in turn is accomplished by connecting and shaping the diverse values and perspectives of the leader and the followers. Interpersonal influence emphasizes the relationships among the hearts and minds of people in a community.

So how is the leader distinguished from the followers? If the leader is not dominant and everyone in the group or community is open to influence, the person who emerges as having the most influence is understood to be the leader. This is a big step forward in the understanding of leadership: new leaders can emerge as conditions change. Someone who was a follower can become a leader if he or she has gained the most relative influence in the context of a changed environment.

Interpersonal influence as a source of leadership is not a total departure from the personal dominance principle because personal attributes such as knowledge, persuasiveness, intelligence, authority, power, and creativity count as influence. But these attributes do not themselves consti-

tute leadership; they only allow a person to become relatively more influential. Leadership thus comes from a relationship in which influence is negotiated, and a person becomes a leader by participating in this process.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE

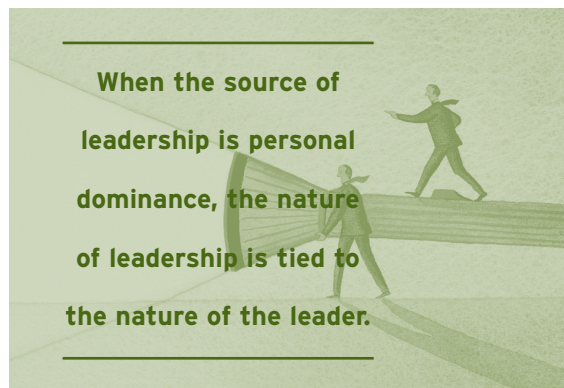
Leadership as interpersonal influence is an advancement on leadership as personal dominance: it provides a new source of leadership to replace one that is less and less workable, and it overcomes the limitations of the latter.

But does interpersonal influence also have limitations? Although they are just beginning to become evident, the limitations of interpersonal influence will become increasingly important.

Global transportation and communication and the interdependence of economies have created a growing need for leadership that can deal with significant differences in values and worldviews. Interpersonal influence allows people to make sense of situations in which there are some differences in values and perspectives, but its effectiveness in contexts in which worldviews are dramatically different is less certain.

For example, when EgyptAir Flight 990 crashed in 1999, U.S. and Egyptian crash investigators agreed on one thing: they had to determine what caused the Boeing 767 to plunge into the ocean off Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. Yet in considering a critical piece of evidence—the meaning of words uttered by the copilot when the plane began its rapid descent—the two groups of investigators arrived at disparate interpretations. Did the copilot's prayer indicate that he was committing suicide by crashing the plane deliberately, or was it just a normal reaction in the face of imminent disaster? The U.S. and Egyptian interpretations of the copilot's words

were based on widely divergent ways of understanding the world. People who don't share a general view of the world can find themselves in disagreement about so-



called facts. Leadership as interpersonal influence involves negotiating values and perspectives, but that is difficult to do without some basic agreements about reality.

Challenges to interpersonal influence are encountered in other contexts as well. In nations throughout the world, for instance, there has been a slow but inexorable movement toward recognizing the legitimacy of diverse voices in community life that once were stifled. The views of people outside the mainstream, of immigrants and other newcomers, and of disenfranchised communities are now being heard. These once-marginalized groups are now in a position to voice concerns and to exert influence on traditionally entrenched sources of power.

There are fundamental challenges that can prevent these once-marginalized groups from gaining the legitimacy needed for influence in the leadership process, however. Mutual influence can be viewed as a loss of power by the traditionally enfranchised and as acquiescence and assimilation by the disenfranchised. This can lead to resistance and frustrating stalemates.

So, like personal dominance, interpersonal influence has limitations that decrease its viability as a source of leadership. This creates a need for a

third source of leadership: the activity of people making meaning and sense of their work together.

## LEADERSHIP AS RELATIONAL DIALOGUE

Personal dominance and interpersonal influence are recognizable as leadership in everyday interactions in communities and organizations. They seem obvious, perhaps because we have seen them so much. The accepted notion is that leadership is either a leader taking charge, being commanding and forceful (dominance), or a leader being participative, open to input, and a facilitator (influence). People tend to think of these as differences in the style of the leader, but they may be better viewed as differences in ways of knowing and recognizing leadership.

Underlying our traditional ways of knowing and recognizing leadership is the assumption that leadership is about something a leader does. Personal dominance and interpersonal

These contexts require a kind of conversation that is not just respectful of different perspectives but also opens every perspective to the possibility of transformation. Also called dialogue, such conversation is sometimes used as a tool in interpersonal influence, but in contexts in which no single individual can make leadership happen it must become more than a tool—it must become the source of leadership itself. In short, the activity of people making sense and meaning of their work together becomes the source of leadership.

Relational dialogue creates the rules about what is true and what is real. It is not just agreement about goals, not just shared knowledge, but is more pervasively the creation of a world in which it makes sense to have shared goals or shared knowledge in the first place. Thus relational dialogue is the source of leadership needed for Americans and Egyptians to step away from a strictly Judeo-Christian or Islamic worldview and create a world in which a joint understanding of the facts about Flight 990 can be articulated. In a business context, relational dialogue is the source of leadership needed for management and labor to disengage themselves from the home base of their identities and create a ground upon which they can work together.

This new source of leadership will be needed in the world we are making. However, people will have to be able to recognize relational dialogue as a source of leadership just as they recognize dominance and interpersonal influence.

People will recognize relational dialogue as a source of leadership when there is a mutual acknowledgment of shared work but no common ground on which to do the work. Many of the examples already cited fit this paradigm: differences across cultures, attempts at cooperation between labor and management, and efforts to bridge the gaps between the traditionally powerful and the tradi-

tionally marginalized. Whenever people share work across enduring barriers and conflicts, this new source of leadership will become more likely to be recognized.


In such contexts, there will sooner or later come a time when differing and even opposing worldviews will need to be judged as equally worthy. The commercial developer will acknowledge that the environmentalist's view of reality is equally worthy, and vice versa. Once differing worldviews are acknowledged as being equally worthy, relational dialogue will be the only workable source of leadership. No individual will be able to make leadership happen; it will require joint action across worldviews to make a new sense and meaning of shared work.

This view of where leadership is headed might sound hopeful, impossible, misguided, or even dangerous. These are all likely reactions because relational dialogue as a source of leadership is only beginning to emerge. The process by which it will come to make enough sense to enough people that leadership can be created has only begun. Yet even now there are some ideas that will constitute the *logic* of relational dialogue as a source of leadership.

## A NEW SOURCE IN THE MAKING

The first idea is that people become individuals through relational processes. Each person is individual and unique only through interrelations with others. The terms *leader*, *follower*, *parent*, *child*, *introvert*, *entrepreneur*, and *artist* all describe relationships more than they do individuality.

The second idea is that people construct the realities of life in participation with others. People rarely know what is real or possess meaning alone; it is usually a shared achievement. People get their sense of what is true and real from participation in



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influence both depend on a leader to make leadership happen. But what if situations and contexts arise in which it is unlikely or impossible that a single person can make leadership happen? The U.S.-Egyptian investigation into the crash of Flight 990 is one example, but in the business world the context could be a labor-management task force on worker safety or a customer-supplier partnership. Such examples are becoming more common every day.

communities, families, work, church, clubs, and so forth.

The third idea is that just as individuals and reality are relationally constructed, so truth and meaning cannot be discovered or found but must also be constructed. The claims that truth and reality have been discovered, revealed, or found are supportable only within a given worldview. The moment we acknowledge shared work across worldviews, the moment we try to create a new context for new truths and meanings, we must step away from a commitment to our truth as *the* truth and work across worldviews to construct truth and meaning.

But isn't this more like the end of leadership than a new source of leadership? What about the undeniable power of individual leaders to change minds, shape events, and inspire followers? The construction of this new source of leadership will also require an understanding that all leadership is shared leadership. This will allow for the recovery and reconstruction of personal dominance and interpersonal influence as sources of leadership, reenergized by a relational turn. From this viewpoint it's evident that even the most heroic brand of personal dominance is achieved through the leader's participation in a community that does not just bow to that dominance but creates it as well.

## MOVING TOWARD ACTION

To begin clearing up the confusion about leadership in order to practice it more effectively, we need to start asking new questions about leadership. For instance: How do people working together in teams, groups, organizations, and communities bring leadership into being? How can their capacity for leadership be increased? What role do individuals play in creating, sustaining, and developing leadership? What contexts are being created in your organization or community for which personal domi-

nance and interpersonal influence cannot be the source of leadership? What practices are already under way in your organization or community that might be considered leadership as relational dialogue? Is it worthwhile for you to support the development of these practices? If you are responsible for leadership development in your organization or community, what changes would you need to make to recognize and support the emergence of a new source of leadership? What implications would such a source have for current practices in your organization or community with respect to authority, accountability, decision making, and human resource planning?

These questions and hundreds more like them will drive us as we struggle to construct a new source of leadership that is workable and fit for the world we are making. ✍

## Suggested Reading

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## Did You Know?

When talking with people whose native language is the same as yours, you can speak quickly and use idioms and slang without losing the meaning of your message. In fact, idioms and slang can highlight points you make.

However, when talking with someone from outside your culture, who may have learned your language in a school or other formal setting, understand that your conversational style can create confusion, misunderstanding, or bewilderment.

To be effective in communicating across cultures, build your awareness of your speaking and writing styles. Pay attention to how you talk. Consider how your words might strike someone who isn't completely familiar with your language. Think about the medium: Are you writing a letter? Chatting in the hallway? Sending an e-mail or fax? Leaving a voice mail? Delivering a presentation? Each of these communication channels has its own challenges when messages travel across cultures.

When giving feedback to subordinates, it's important to keep your message simple. Be direct and honest, and limit the feedback to the impact of the subordinate's behavior. If you observe troublesome behavior, you may be tempted to go beyond describing the impact to exploring reasons for behavior. That invites misinterpretation that can damage the trusting relationship you've worked so hard to build. Even if you were to be perfectly correct in your attributions and interpretations, your subordinates would still be responsible for changing their behavior. You have to give them choices for making changes, not excuses for avoiding changes.