Organizational Consultation XXXII: The Appreciative Leader: From A 21st Century Perspective

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Teilhard, Eisler and Greenleaf offer us many insights and inspire us to find new leaders and settings in which collaborative leadership can flourish. Unfortunately, their model of leader as lover, partner and servant may not be enough to meet the challenges of 21st Century organizations. Their model of leadership builds on traditional notions about community and collective responsibility. In our 21st Century environment of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence, we must enlarge their tradition-based vision of leadership. We must move beyond the interpersonal dynamics of community to the role played by leaders in highly dynamic and often temporary systems.

Many organizations are now moving into a phase that is typified by small to moderate size, fragmentation and inconsistency, and clear intentions but unclear boundaries. These contemporary organizations tend to be flatter than their modern-day counterparts. They encourage less direct exertion of authority or less consistent display of leadership. In *The Tao of Leadership* John Heider observes that:[i]

> Leaders who push think that they are facilitating process, when in fact they are blocking process. They think that they are building a good group field, when in fact they are destroying its coherence and creating factions. They think that their constant interventions are a measure of ability, when in fact such interventions are crude and inappropriate. They think that their leadership position gives them absolute authority, when in fact their behavior diminishes respect.

From a similar perspective, Peter Drucker suggested during the late 20th Century that contemporary organizations are: "far more likely to resemble organizations that neither the practicing manager nor the student of management and administration pays much attention to today: the hospital, the university, the symphony orchestra."[ii] The identification of these nontraditional modes of organizational life is somewhat paradoxical, given that hospitals, universities and even symphony orchestras are now becoming more business-like and are even being run as businesses.

Leader As Conductor

Drucker provides wonderful food for thought (or song for the ear) when describing a form of leadership in symphony orchestras that is very appreciative in character and form:[iii]

> There are probably few orchestra conductors who could coax even one note out of a French horn,

let alone show the horn player how to do it. But the conductor knows how to focus the horn player's skill and knowledge on the orchestra's joint performance. This focus is the model for the leader of an information-based [appreciative] organization. . . . Another requirement of the information-based organization is that everyone take information responsibility. The bassoonist in the orchestra does so every time she plays a note. . . . The key to such a system is that everyone asks: Who in this organization depends on me for what information? And on whom, in turn, do I depend? The list will always include superiors and subordinates. The most important names, however, will be those of COLLEAGUES, people with whom one's primary relationship is coordination.

I propose that appreciative strategies are essential to any successful rule play by a leader as conductor. First, the leader of an appreciative organization, like the conductor of an orchestra, must appreciate the diverse skills and knowledge of others with whom she works. A musician can conduct an orchestra without knowing how to play every instrument in the orchestra. Second, the appreciative leader must appreciate the contributions made by each member of her organization. A successful conductor must appreciate and rely on the talents of all members of the orchestra. During traditional times, a leader might have been a one-man band. However, during our contemporary era, he can't be a one-man orchestra.

Third, the appreciative leader must understand context. The way in which she leads an organization depends on the setting and task, much as the way in which a conductor leads an orchestra depends on the character of the orchestra and the piece of music being played. The "one-trick" orchestra leader will soon be out of work, for she lacks the flexibility that is needed to work with different orchestras and different types of music.

I am reminded of the young brother of the 1950s actress and singer, Anna Maria Alberghetti. He was invited many years ago to conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl. He did a wonderful job but could only conduct one work (William Tell Overture, *dba*: Lone Ranger Theme). Not bad for a child, but certainly not sufficient for a mature conductor of a major orchestra. All leaders must be able to shift their style and vary their approach when confronting the complex, unpredictable and turbulent conditions of 21st Century organizations. This capacity to be flexible, in turn, requires full appreciation of the unique setting within which leadership is expressed and appreciation of the talents that other members of the organization bring to this setting.

Leader As Jerk

This focus on the skill of a conductor in guiding a complex and subtle performance of a symphony orchestra speaks to one dimension of appreciation: understanding how and when leaders are successful. There is a second dimension of appreciation, however, that focuses on incompetence

and the role that systems play in bringing about failure. An appreciative understanding of leadership requires one to understand not only the forces that move a leader toward competence, but also those that move a leader toward incompetence.

On occasion, most contemporary leaders seem, in the words of Robert Hochheiser, to behave like jerks:[iv]

> Do you think of your boss as a grade A unadulterated jerk whose brains are on vacation? Does he act like a world class bozo who would get the Nobel Prize in bungling if there were such an award? . . . You're not alone—at one time or another, most of us have felt that we reported to bosses who wouldn't know a sound management concept if it bit them on the nose. They raise hell with us if we screw up, but then they display an almost total lack of ability to do anything right, and we suffer for their mistakes.

Hochheiser offers several intriguing ideas about the leader as jerk. How do bosses become jerks? What creates self-interest, limited vision, and working at a level beyond one's competence? In looking for answers to these important questions, Hockheiser identifies ways in which the system itself colludes to make bosses into jerks. He also suggests strategies for working within this system that makes one's boss look competent. Rather than fighting one's boss, and losing the battle and perhaps even one's job, Hochheier suggests that we appreciate the jerk and make him into a competent leader.

Hochheiser's jerks seem to be making decisions and operating in a manner that contradicts their own best interests and the best interests of the organization. None of us are immune when we assume leadership roles. We sometimes (or often times) behave like jerks with the people who report to us. A psychological perspective on organizational life, that is often associated with the Tavistock Institute in England, suggests that group members collude with one another in sustaining the competence and incompetence of those who serve as leaders of the group.[v] We tend to have a traditional attraction to leaders who are very wise, great warriors, or compelling visionaries. However, we simultaneously wish our leaders to be incompetent.

We are ambivalent about our leaders for three important reasons. First, we are ambivalent about our dependency on the leader if he is very wise. What are we going to do if he resigns, retires or dies? What happens when he is no longer "smart" or when someone else is more knowledgeable? Alternatively, we are ambivalent because the great warrior leader needs a strong enemy in order to justify his often-abrasive actions. We can never be totally successful in defeating our enemy if we are to sustain our warrior leader. Hence, we are ambivalent about this kind of leader because strife and destruction inevitably accompany his reign.

The third reason we are ambivalent relates to the role of leader as visionary. The visionary leader only has credibility as long as the vision is not yet realized. We are ambivalent because we need to keep our dreams intact. Therefore, we never want these dreams to be successfully enacted or modified by reality. Yet, if the dreams are never realized, then when will we be satisfied and how will we know if the dream was really worth the sacrifice?

So, in sum, we want the wise leader to appear foolish at times and in certain ways. When this happens, we don't always have to feel so foolish ourselves. We want the brave leader to lose to the powerful enemy, for the enemy defines the identity of our noble and just group. We want the vision or dream to remain unrealized, and the leader who is in charge of the dream to fail, because we want the dream to remain a pure, unrealized, always present, wish.

We act like jerks in our contemporary world for yet another reason. This reason concerns the ways in which leaders learn in an organization. Chris Argyris, Donald Schon and Peter Senge suggest that the models of leadership and management we identify as our working beliefs *(espoused theories)* are incompatible with our actual behavior and the assumptions that underlie our actual behavior (*theories-in-use*). [vi] We exist in organizations that never or rarely encourage the disclosure and discussion of these discrepancies between espoused theories and theories-in-use; hence, leaders continue to act without personal insight, and in a manner that is counterproductive and incompatible with their personal values and goals.

Both the Tavistock and Organizational Learning explanations are credible. Neither set of explanations, however, does full justice to the complex and demanding conditions that most leaders face in our 21st Century world. We are in a world that is shifting so rapidly and in such unpredictable ways that a group's collusion in the creation of incompetence among leaders must constantly shift. Leaders must continually be incompetent or untrustworthy in whole new ways! Sometimes the group helps the leader become an ineffective communicator. At other times, the group helps the leader become a great communicator who is highly manipulative and can no longer be trusted, as in the case of our city manager.

Organizational learning theory must adjust to the times. Espoused theory and the theories-in-use must be reconciled in our contemporary world. They must also be adjusted frequently to keep up with shifting conditions. A visionary president may initially believe that his visionary concerns, at times of crisis, help the employee's morale. He is then confronted with contradictory evidence. His behavior, in fact, lowers morale. Should he immediately change his behavior? A few days later, the president introduces a new vision because the crisis is itself caused by a lack of vision or long-term perspectives. Maybe the president is correct. Under these shifting 21st Century conditions, how will the president and his organization learn how to operate in an environment that is constantly changing and making new and often contradictory demands? How do they make sense of things in a world that is filled with ambiguity, complexity and volatility?

Leader As Rogue

Even this level of analysis is insufficient with regard to the challenges of contemporary leadership. Appreciative models of leadership require that we not only fully understand the complex dynamics that operate in moving leaders toward both competence and incompetence, but also the complex dynamics that operate when a leader is faced with an exceptional challenge. We are likely to find rogue events that profoundly effect, and determine the ultimate success of a leader, group or organization, in the case of most appreciative leadership, and, for that matter, in the case of virtually all behavior in a group or organization that is significant. These events create the occasion for special forms of leadership to emerge. The leader herself contributes to the rogue event.

Rogue events and rogue leaders are special. They can't be predicted. We can only predict that rogue events will occur. Rogue leaders will emerge in response to these events. When they do occur, rogue events and the leaders of these events, often have a substantial impact on the life and dynamics of the group or organization. The noted biologist and social anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, describes a rouge event when he writes about the problem of predicting the point where bubbles first arise in a pot of water that is being heated to the boiling point.[vii] The bubbles will first rise and the boiling will begin at a place in the body of water where there is a flaw or foreign element; thus, the value of shaking a little salt in a pot of water to get it to boil sooner. We usually can't predict where the first bubble will be located. We can only predict that as we raise the temperature of the water to 212 degrees the boiling will begin somewhere in the pot of water.

Similarly, we usually can't predict where honesty, service to others, or sacrifice will first be manifest by individuals, nor can we predict where visionary and courageous leadership will emerge in a group. We can only hope that a David will emerge to slay Golliath. Actually, we can do a little bit more than hope. We can create conditions though education, group development, and the formulation of encouraging policies and procedures that maximize the possibility that someone will enter this role. We can also help the group collude with a newly emerging leader to make her successful and nourished in this role, rather than colluding with her to fulfill fears and underlying hopes regarding the emerging leader's jerkness.

Peter Senge identifies several conditions that underlie what we have described as the rouge event.[viii] First, cause and effect are usually not very closely tied together with regard to most complex human systems:[ix]

> When we play as children, problems are never far away from their solutions—as long, at least, as we confine our play to one group of toys. Years, later, as managers, we tend to believe that the

world works the same way. If there is a problem on the manufacturing line, we look for a cause in manufacturing. If salespeople can't meet targets, we think we need new sales incentives or promotions.

This is certainly the case with rogue events. The cause and effects of rogue events are often disconnected in both time and space. A highly influence action or situation is often defined by us as a rogue event. Yet, we can't say much about what caused it or how the causes that we do identify are related to the enormous impact that this event has had in the world. We are confused about causes.

A leader seems to be acting like a jerk, because we have been unable or unwilling to look beyond immediate cause and effect relationships to identify the real causes of the rouge event or jerky behavior. A change in accounting practices resolves our manufacturing problem and we are surprised. It is a rogue event because we had failed to connect accounting to manufacturing. We are surprised by the impact that a slight change in a product line has on the effectiveness of a sales campaign because we previously ignored the intimate relationship between product design and sales. A leader becomes unexpectedly ineffective in motivating her employees because the connection between lower morale among employees and the company's new compensation package is neither recognized nor appreciated.

Senge offers a second observation. He notes that small changes—in this case, rogue events—can produce big results: "small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they're in the right place." This principle, which systems thinkers call *leveraging* parallels the chaos theory concept of self-organizing criticality, and is illustrated by Buckminster Fuller in the use of trim tabs on the rudder of a ship:[x]

> A trim tab is a small "rudder on the rudder" . . . It is only a fraction the size of the rudder. Its function is to make it easier to turn the rudder, which, then, makes it easier to turn the ship. The larger the ship, the more important is the trim tab because a large volume of water flowing around the rudder can make it difficult to turn.

> . . . [S]hips turn because their rear end is "sucked around." The rudder, by being turned into the oncoming water, compresses the water flow and creates a pressure differential. The pressure differential pulls the stern in the opposite direction as the rudder is turned. . . . The trim tab . . . does the same for the rudder. When it is turned to one side or the other, it compresses the water flowing around the rudder and creates a small pressure differential that "sucks the rudder" in the desired direction. . . .

The entire system—the ship, the rudder, and the trim tab—is marvelously engineered through the principle of leverage. . . . So, too, are the high-leverage changes in human systems . . .

Rogue events closely resemble Fuller's trim tabs. Rogue events are often small forces that impact on larger forces, which in turn bring about massive change in an organization. There is an important insight to be gained from this connection between rogue events and trim tabs. Appreciative leadership may be effective when it operates like Fuller's trim tab and when small forces become powerful rogue events.

A leader may not be able to turn the ship or organization herself, for the organization is simply too big, too complex or too unwieldy for any one person to make a major impact. Rather, the effective appreciative leader will pick a specific rogue event that has already occurred or will help to create a small, roguish event, that will, in turn, impact on other moderately large events, which in turn may bring about significant organization-wide changes.

This careful selection of leverage points for change resides at the heart of an appreciative style of leadership. We build on the existing momentum of the organization. We look for the existing skills, knowledge and aspirations of those working in the organization. We lean into the future through creating a compelling image of a feasible future. Put simply, we seek out the natural pulls in the organization. Chaos theorists identify these natural pulls as *strange attractors* and suggest that these attractors account for some of the most powerful and inherently useful forces operating in dynamic systems. Often, as in the case of Fuller's trim tab, one will actually produce, use or encourage a rogue event that moves an organization in a direction that is opposite to that which is intended. The reaction against this event will, in turn, create a new momentum that moves the organization in the desired direction.

I am reminded of the biblical tale about the wise King Solomon. Solomon offers to cut a child in half in order to resolve a conflict regarding custody of the child by two contending women. The horrible prospect of such an act drives at least one of the women (the true mother) in the opposite direction. She is willing to give up the child in order to spare its life. In this way, the true mother was discovered. A threatening inhumane act leads to humanity and resolution of the conflict.

An excellent, real-life example regarding the use of leverage and rogue events in corporate life concerns the emergence of courage and honesty among a group of corporate executives in a major American financial institution. I was consulting with a senior vice president in this institution, who had a reputation among his vice-presidential subordinates for being very demanding and intimidating. The Senior Vice President knew that he was discouraging risk-taking behavior through his abrupt manner and wanted to change this style of leadership in order to encourage more creative problem-solving on the part of his staff during a particularly turbulent transition in the life of his institution.

A consulting team collected extensive information from his vice presidents regarding the Senior Vice President's leadership behavior. Much of this information was quite critical of him. After reporting the information back to him, which he received quite openly, the team met with all of his subordinates and himself at a retreat site and presented an oral summation of the interview data. The immediate and highly emotional reaction of his vice-presidential reports to this presentation was an absolute and unqualified rejection of everything that the consulting team had said: "[Senior Vice President], you are a wonderful leader! How could the consultants have so grossly distorted the facts!"

Members of the consulting team began to wonder if they were at the right meeting or if they had been set up. After about twenty minutes of killing the messenger, one of the vice presidents who had been quiet spoke up. He took a deep breath and then stated that "the information being presented by these people is accurate. I've talked with many of you in my office or in the hall about these very issues. I'm tired of beating around the bush. Let's bring this stuff out in the open!"

Everyone looked at the senior vice president for his reaction, which was somewhere between neutral and appreciative of the vice president's candor. After a short pause, the other vice presidents began cautiously to state their own concerns and verify that the information contained in the oral report was accurate. The meeting was productive and tangible steps were taken to alleviate some of the personal and structural problems that this group of financial leaders faced. This is a remarkable example of rogue leadership.

The vice president who first spoke up exhibited courage, as did the Senior Vice President who contracted with the consulting team in the first place to present their critical report, without editing, to all of his vice-presidential reports. Perhaps both men were simply tired of the old way of operating and were willing to take risks in order to change things. Perhaps both men felt sufficient job security to take a chance. Maybe I was witness to a very special kind of organizational courage. Typically, when courage does occur in an organization, it operates like a rogue event and rogue leadership emerges. The event and emergent leadership is unpredictable, momentary, surprising, and often transformational.

We usually can't determine beforehand when courage will be exhibited or who will be the courageous rouge leader, though we are often terrific Monday morning quarterbacks. As in the case of Bateson's pot of heated water, we cannot accurately predict when or where the first bubble of courage will form or when it will come to the surface. We can continue to heat the pot. In the case just presented, we can continue to offer information that had never before been presented in a public setting. Perhaps we can sprinkle a few grains of salt in the water. We can offer words of encouragement or create a supportive retreat setting. This might encourage the water to begin boiling sometime and somewhere.

A second example of rouge leadership comes from a quite different source. Before his death, John Lennon often told a story about the police who were protecting John and other members of the Beatles at a concert in Los Angeles. The crowd became very excited during the concert and began to storm the stage located in the middle of a baseball field. The police began clubbing members of the crowd and serious injury was eminent, as members of the crowd became more agitated. The police grew more anxious about their own safety, as well as the safety of the Beatles.

As a rogue leader, John Lennon suddenly stopped the concert and calmly told the police that "these people will not harm us, so please don't harm them." The crowd and police immediately ceased their confrontation, everyone quieted down, and the Beatles completed their concert with no further incidents. This exemplified, as did the actions of the Senior Vice President and his vice-presidential subordinate, the intrusion of courage or optimism into a complex and highly charged event. This one action by John Lennon dramatically changed the emotions and behaviors of all people who were involved in the concert.

Conclusions

Using an analogy that a Chinese colleague of mine recently offered, the rogue leader is a butterfly. This type of leader knows that she has a limited time to live or be credible. She must constantly change and shift directions with the wind. The butterfly is not protected in the cocoon, as is the traditional leader, nor does the butterfly leader do the mundane and safe managerial work of the modern leader, as represented in the labors of the silkworm. The butterfly is not always valued for its product as is the silkworm, nor does it have the potential of the cocoon. The butterfly leader is a real person rather than a mythic possibility. The butterfly leader must find purpose and value in subtle ways. The rogue leader must leap out into the world without certitude or even immediate credibility.

Tomas, the protagonist in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, deeply loves Tereza. Yet, he also knows that Tereza loves him by chance and could just as easily have fallen in love with someone else. Like Tomas, we must find meaning and purpose in the seemingly random and chance events that propel us into positions of rouge leadership, or that place the people for whom we work into positions of rouge leadership. Rogue leaders must be clear about personal and institutional mission and purpose, while fluttering in a turbulent environment. Only in this way, can they not only be successful as leaders in 21st Century organizations, but also find satisfaction in this highly demanding role.

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[i] John Heider,*The Tao of Leadership* (1985, p.57)

[ii] Peter Drucker. *The New Realities. New Realities.* New York: HarperCollins, 1989, p. 207.

[iii] Peter Drucker. *The New Realities. New Realities.* New York: HarperCollins, 1989, p. 214.

[iv] Robert Hochheiser. *How to Work for a Jerk.* New York: Random House, 1987, p. 1.

[v] A. Colman and W. H. Bexton. (eds.) *Group Relations Reader.* Anchorage, Ky: Grex Press, 1975.

[vi] Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, *Theory in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974; Chris Argyris, *Reasoning, Learning and Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982.Chris Argyris and Donald Schon,*Organizational Learning*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978; Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

[vii] Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: Dutton, 1979.

[viii]Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

[ix]Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990, p. 63.

[x] As reported by Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990, pp. 64-5.