

The Visionary Leader in a Postmodern Organizational Context

While many forms of premodern leadership style focus on creating a vision, the modern leader often focuses on creating a tangible vision and this is done through motivation, setting of specific goals and monitoring the ways in which (and extent to which) these goals are achieved within the organization. The modern organizational vision could come from the leader herself or it might be assigned to her by other people in the organization (the so-called “stakeholders”). When this vision-oriented of modern leadership is engaged in a postmodern setting, then leadership is exhibited when one furthers the vision created and embraced by other people in the organization—not just the stakeholders. This model of postmodern leadership is truly democratic in that one becomes A SERVANT TO THE VISION of all people associated with the organization.

A Servant to the Vision

This concept of “servant leadership” has been portrayed in a very compelling way by Robert Greenleaf in a series of books he has written on this topic. A variant on this theme is evident in a quite different medium—the lyric of a popular song of the 1990s about “the wind beneath my wings.” This very appreciative statement offers a wonderfully poetic image of the role played by a masterful postmodern leader as servant to the dreams, visions and aspirations of the people with whom she works. A servant leader can provide the “wind” beneath the wings of her colleagues by first committing fully to the partnership, and then offering encouragement during difficult times.

A dedicated servant leader will neither hijack a colleague’s vision nor co-opt it unquestioningly, no matter one’s personal enthusiasm for the direction. While a leader may prod and provoke, she never takes over the client’s vision nor inserts her own alternative vision. As a servant leader, the value we bring is to encourage ongoing reflection on the part of our colleague regarding whether or not this is the best direction to take. We repeatedly participate with our colleague in the process of discernment—determining if the internal and external evidence that seems to be pointing our colleague in a certain direction comes from a place that is compatible with our colleague’s long-term welfare and growth. There is perhaps no more important role to play as a masterful Servant leader than to help one’s colleague make the tough choices between the very obvious and not so obvious, between the short-term and long-term, and, in particular, between the expedient way of life and the way of personal integrity.

Clearly, this is not the “usual” form of leadership that is written about in most contemporary textbooks—even those that focus on postmodern organizations. It is a “quiet” form of leadership. It is a form of leadership that is often associated with soulfulness.

Soulfulness and Servant Leadership

Servant leadership in a postmodern setting requires a shift from the modern proclivity to look upward and forward to attending *downward* and *inward*. This means a shift from visual to tactile modes of experience. We touch rather than look. Like the protective father in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, we embrace the people we lead and hold them safe from the storm. Soulful movement downward is a journey through embarrassment,

narcissistic wounds and loneliness. This contrasts with the journey of the spirit that is filled with inspiration, uplifting motives and great public adventures. We retreat to do soul work rather than leaping up to do spiritual work. In moving to soul work, we take on latrine duty or clean pots. As servant leaders we might even engage in the corporate equivalent to cleaning pots and latrines, namely, filling in the details, cleaning up after an event or handling a messy employee problem. When we are doing soulful servant-oriented leadership our role shifts from master to servant.

A shift from spirited (and motivating) visionary leadership in a modern setting to soulful (and less openly demonstrative) work as a servant leader in a postmodern setting is difficult. We see a graphic and poetic illustration of this difficult transformation in the tale of Don Quixote. Quixote makes something special of the mundane. As an aging man he was not satisfied with the everyday. Hence he looked upward (for spiritual guidance) and backward in time (for historical guidance). He looked back to the age of chivalry and valor—a romantic era that was ending at the time Cervantes wrote his epic tale. Quixote elevates the inn's sluttish serving girl, Aldonza, to a much higher status. She is transformed into the lady of the manor. He also restores her long-lost virginity. Quixote christens her, "Dulcinea." Windmills become foreboding ogres. The barber's bowl is transformed into a knight's helmet. Don Quixote is typical of a man dominated by spiritual forces. He is moved to the spirit ("in-spiration").

We see this dominance of spirit and the compelling nature of spirit enacted with particular force in the musical form of "The Man of La Mancha." Don Quixote asks others to "dream the impossible dream." Like Robert Kennedy, Quixote asks "Why not?" rather than asking "Why?" Like his older brother John, Robert Kennedy was assassinated before completing his own soul work, though clearly he was beginning the transforming journey during his short presidential campaign. Quixote was similarly denied a complete fulfillment of his own dream. This is commonly the case with visionary leaders who dream great dreams. Like John and Robert Kennedy, Quixote transformed the people with whom he associated in seeking to fulfill his own dream. Quixote convinces Aldonza that her name is Dulcinea: "thy name is like a prayer an angel whispers." Even the prisoners who hear the story of Don Quixote (as told by Cervantes, a fellow victim of the inquisition) are inspired. As the inquisitors lead Cervantes away for writing conspiratorial works, the previously depressed and downtrodden prisoners exhort him "to live with your heart striving upward."

Reality and Narcissism

The story of Don Quixote ultimately leads to a discussion of and reflection on the role played by narcissism in the creation of leaders. To some extent, all leaders have a bit of narcissism in them. They revel to some extent in the attention they have received from other people and are pleased that other people respect, trust or at least follow the direction which they as leaders provide. The extent of narcissism will, of course, vary widely from leader to leader. At one extreme we have those leaders who can think about (or talk about) nothing other than themselves. There is the old joke (that takes many forms) regarding the narcissistic leader who spent a long time

talking about himself and his many achievements. There is a pause in the conversation, at which point the narcissistic leader says “well that’s enough about me, why don’t you tell me a bit about the things that impress you most about me.” This is the extreme case of narcissism—yet it sadly is widely found in contemporary organizations. It certainly does not represent the type of generativity found in effective servant leaders.

There is a second type of narcissism which is somewhat less obvious. This is the “quiet” narcissism to which many of us might candidly admit. At some level we envy the accolades received by other people. We are uncomfortable being on the sidelines at events where other people are the focus of attention. We smolder a bit, though soon dismiss our resentment and join in to the celebration. This too is a form of narcissism and it can serve as a barrier to effective servant leadership. At these moments, we quiet narcissists can learn much about ourselves and our own leadership challenges. Like Don Quixotes, we must face our own reality.

Triumphant though Cervantes is in inspiring the other prisoners (and basking in his own theatrical glow), he ultimately requires Quixote to face reality and leave the dreams behind. Don Quixote must retreat from his narcissistic fantasy. Cervantes forced his fictional character, Don Quixote, to see himself for what he truly is. Quixote was required to look into a mirror, having lost in combat to the “Knight of the Mirrors.” This shattered his illusions and his dreams. The mirror is an instrument of vision and spirit, yet the triumphant knight is using a set of mirrors to destroy Quixote’s spirit. The knight is himself an illusion. He is actually a son-in-law of Quixote who has grown increasingly impatient with the Don’s antics.

The well-intended Knight of the Mirrors demands that the Don acknowledge he is actually an aging man of modest means. Quixote is jolted into “reality.” He has become a mad man who is dressed, not for a battle, but rather for a foolish masquerade. Like many postmodern leaders, Don Quixote is particularly vulnerable to ridicule and massive ego deflation. Ironically, we are most vulnerable precisely at the moment when we are most successful. We are balancing on a high wire and have a long way to fall. Don Quixote has gained many admirers and has won many battles against fictitious foes. He desperately wants to keep the masquerade going. His son-in-law won’t allow him to continue indulging his false spirit. When confronted with the mirrors, Don Quixote’s ego and spirit rapidly deflate. He is left an old and dying man, with neither illusion nor a will to live.

Don Quixote is thrown into depression, having suffered what psychologists call a “narcissistic wound.” He finds no support to match the challenge he is forced to face in the mirrors. In many ways, Quixote represents the fundamental challenge of postmodern leadership. He only recovers his “sanity,” or at least his spirit, when his “support group” (consisting of Dulcinea and his sidekick Sancho Panza) come to his rescue. They offer him appreciation and encouragement. Aldonza (ne Dulcinea) is transformed, like many important people in the lives of soulful postmodern leaders. Aldonza transforms herself from the highly romanticized (and distorted) love interest and pupil of Don Quixote to the role of female guide for him. She retains her identity as Dulcinea, yet now provides the Don with a bridge between spirit and soul. Similarly, Sancho serves the critical role of male

friend and companion to Don Quixote. With the assistance of Dulcinea and Sancho, Dox Quixote not only returns to his world of the spirit, he also turns inward to the world of soul. While others have learned from Don Quixote to value spirit and dreams, Quixote himself must learn about the interplay between dreams and realities. He must learn of this interplay if he is not to be the victim once again of misdirected but necessary attempts by members of his family to restore his sanity.

Like Don Quixote, we must attend to our colleagues. If we are operating in a leadership role, we must create a container for those people with whom we work. We must provide a cradle, a bowl, a chalice. Anxiety runs amuck without a container. We must become servants. We cook the meals and host the guests rather than giving the after dinner speeches. We more often become the “power behind the throne.” As a postmodern leader we no longer have to be “the guy [or gal] in charge” with the big office and special parking place. We might concentrate on starting a modest new project. We are given the opportunity to be patient and take delight in small things. We nurture the next generation of leadership rather than being the leaders ourselves.

II. The Challenges

I have just described the unique nature of a servant-oriented postmodern form of leadership—a leadership that is founded in service to the vision held by other people in the organization. This is a style of leadership that builds on humility rather than hubris. It is a style of leadership that fosters collaboration rather than competition. It is a style of leadership that builds on a foundation of generativity and generosity rather than stagnation and resentment. Perhaps most importantly, it is a style of leadership that primarily requires the work of one’s soul rather than one’s spirit.

Generativity and Soul Work

There are two forms of generativity that challenge postmodern servant leaders. There is first, the generativity of spirit. This generativity ensures that our presence is felt in the world. In Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*, George was having a crisis of the spirit and was consumed by this crisis. He was unaware of and insensitive to the location of soul in his life. Soul was to be found in his loving family and friends, not in his worldly accomplishments. He had to resolve his sense of worthlessness in the world. He had to move past the generativity of the spirit before he could come to realize his deeper and more enduring worth as a loving husband, father and community servant.

Generativity of the soul concerns the discovery of that which we truly care about. It concerns caring deeply, thoughtfully and patiently for that about which we care. Generativity of the soul is about tending to sick or dying parents. It is about comforting the child in our arms. It is about protecting our child after a world-wide holocaust (as in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*) or a personal holocaust. George needed to attend to his crisis of the spirit. Then at the end of the movie, he could attend to his soul, which was so powerfully represented in the Capra myth of hearth, home and the fabled Christmas of bygone years.

The generativity of the spirit also concerns discovery of higher order truths. We soar upward, like Icarus, as we reach the highest point in our career, the highest point of status and influence in our communities. Those who hold the power define the truth and as leaders who hold power we are given the opportunity to define truth. We may foolishly think that we have “discovered” truth, when in fact we simply have the status and power to define what truth is and how it will be judged.

In the movie, *Network*, Paddy Chayefsky offers a penetrating analysis of contemporary corporate life and communications. He portrays a world in which those in power primarily define the truth. These powerful figures are predominantly white males. Yet, Chayefsky also notes that the new power elite is increasingly likely to come from non-western nations (in particular, oil-rich countries). Icarus doesn't soar for long. Chayefsky observes how precarious one's position is at the top, particularly concerning a grasp of the truth. His protagonist, Howard Beale, struggles throughout the movie with what truth really is and how easily it is manufactured. Beale encourages all people to stand up against the manufactured truth, yet seems always to be swayed left and right to different versions of the reality that are presented to him by other powerful men and women, in particular the Faye Dunaway character.

In postmodern terms, the “grand narrative” has collapsed. The widely accepted, abiding truths in our society are no longer viable and there is nothing to replace them. Like Howard Beale, we are left in a vacuum and look in vain for a solid source of truth. As postmodern leaders we are particularly vulnerable to this collapse of the grand narrative. We have reached the highest point in our career only to discover, as did Howard Beale, that those truths which do seem to endure are ugly. They are based in ego and greed rather than in any sense of rationality or community welfare.

The Losses: Freedom, Truth and Grace

As postmodern leaders we often discover that we have exchanged our freedom for the achievement of high social status and power. George Orwell writes of this tradeoff in his short story “On Shooting an Elephant.” The esteemed and powerful white leader of an Indian village, during the years of the British Empire, must kill a rogue elephant that is threatening the villagers. He hates the idea of killing this magnificent beast. Yet because he is at the top of the social order in this village, he finds himself walking down a path preparing to shoot the elephant. At this moment, the white male leader discovers that he has traded his freedom (to say “no” in this instance) for social status and power. This may be one of the most important truths that postmodern leaders must learn. We gain power in exchange for freedom. We must go “mad” like Quixote in order to gain more freedom. We must defy the system that got us to the top in the first place to confront and alter this truth. This is one of Chayefsky's most haunting images in “Network.” We witness Howard Beale go mad and become “madder than hell,” as a way of discovering his own freedom.

At other times, postmodern leaders have lost all truths as a result of social revolution or massive technological change. They are left without any foundation. My own experiences of leaders living in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union have lingered with me. Many of these men and women seemed to be wandering around in a haze. They had lost their ideology or their base of opposition to the dominant ideology. Now what do they do? Where do their abstract thinking and their spirit find a new home? With the collapse of the “grand narrative” in Western culture, we may similarly find our colleagues (and perhaps ourselves) wandering about, unable to find a new source of spirit and guidance.

At the highest point in our career (maximum ego inflation and ego gratification) we are likely to fall from grace like Icarus, even if we don't go “mad” like Howard Beale and seek out freedom. We fall from grace precisely because our success breeds envy and power plays. If we are a bit older, our age suggests vulnerability to other people. They assume that we are now on our way “out”—or soon will be—or we have already departed and like the Jack Nicholson character in *About Schmidt* find that our carefully prepared recommendations and succession plans have been thrown in the garbage by our successors. Our long tenure in the organization may breed impatience among those who are younger and waiting their turn to take over. We may even come to realize, painfully, that our own egos and our own internal demons (unattended voices) breed mistakes, miscalculations, and a failure to grasp reality. Like Icarus, we fall back to Earth. We are forced to grovel and to return to the mundane.

Several years ago, while licking several of my own narcissistic wounds, I read an article in a local paper about a man who formerly was a major league baseball manager. He was now living in Maine. The ex-manager talked about going fishing each day and babysitting his granddaughter. He was not sure whether he would like another tour in leading a major league team. In our ego deflation of later mid-life, we are forced to deal with the soul and the loss of status and pride. We learn to find gratification in the mundane and the everyday. The wife of a colleague of mine (who went through his own traumatic ego-deflation, having been deposed as president of a major nonprofit organization,) speaks about how wonderful it is to see her husband tend his garden every morning before listening to his phone messages. He similarly acknowledges the important lessons he is learning about himself through his gardening.

A wounded leader is often someone who has fallen from grace or has never attained the heights of which he or she dreamed. If this leader remains wounded, she will go on to wound other people in her organization, especially if she remains in a position of leadership. King Lear is a man gone mad as a result of confrontation with fearsome forces and a turning to the soul. He soars to the height of his power. He flaunts his power, inflates his own ego, then falls and goes mad. Jane Smiley rewrites the Lear story from a female perspective in *A Thousand Acres*. The father in Smiley's novel is playing games of power, while his children are dying. How many stories concerning the fall from grace do we find among political figures in Washington? How many sad stories of ego inflation and deflation come from inside the Washington Beltway? A few years ago several now-

often-forgotten men could be mentioned: Bob Packwood? Alan Cranston? Then there are the big time figures in 20th Century and Early 21st Century American politics: Richard Nixon? Bill Clinton? George Bush? They are mostly men. But I can also identify several contemporary women in American political life. Those who are liberally-inclined might mention Sarah Palin, while those of more conservative inclinations might mention Nancy Pelosi. Other people around these powerful leaders helped elevate them and inflated their egos. These assistants and loyalists also have protected these powerful men and women from the real world. Ironically, these aides have often helped bring their bosses back down to earth. They have exposed them, shifted loyalties, and misinterpreted their aspirations and plans to subordinates or the media. These leaders (like Don Quixote) stand before the Knight of the Mirrors. They must confront their own reality and madness in order to begin the journey inward toward the soul.

Conclusions

In essence, the work of servant leaders in a postmodern setting involves moving inward as well as outward. We must return home to our family and our own inner life. We must cross the border into new worlds and new experiences. We must ultimately bridge the chasm between soul and spirit. Early in my own life I repeatedly dreamed at night of this bridging and integrating process. I now realize that this dream was preparing me for my future life, as do many repetitive dreams in our lives. I dreamed of climbing a flower-strewn mountain. This mountain rose up singularly and impressively from a plain. I now realize that it was a strong image of spirit and of achievement for me. Near the top of the mountain there was always a cave. This was a hide-away. I looked forward to reaching this cave while climbing up the mountain. The hideaway was always damp. This cave closely resembled a “clubhouse” that my brother and I built as small boys living in Illinois. We dug a big hole in the ground and covered it with plywood. The clubhouse wasn’t very pleasant. It was very dirty and offered little light. It soon was filled with water and spiders; yet, for a brief period of time this clubhouse represented safety and a respite from our schoolwork and family responsibilities. It was an enduring image for me of a soulful presence in my life. Similarly, the cave in my dream represented safety and a respite from the climb. The dream has taught me that I need to blend the spirit of the mountain and my climb up the mountain, with the soul work of the cave and “clubhouse.” This recurring dream and my recollections of the childhood clubhouse teach me about the essential integration of spirit and soul.