

The Wise Leader in a Postmodern Organizational Context

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What occurs, when an organizational leader confronts the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of a postmodern world? I propose that this leader becomes a learner. Rather than being the primary source of wisdom, knowledge or experience (as is so often the case in premodern and modern organizations), the leader becomes a lifelong learner who exemplifies the willingness and ability to absorb new information and consider alternative frameworks and perspectives when confronting these unique postmodern challenges. I further propose that the new learning can take one of four forms and that an effective leader will at various times in their career embrace each of these forms of adult learning.

The Emerging Models of Lifelong Learning

It was typically assumed during the first half of the 20th Century that leaders of organizations had already obtained a high quality education before taking on leadership responsibilities. If they have not received an education of quality then they have acquired a sound education in the “world of hard knocks”—that is they have acquired their education through extensive experience in the field rather than by attending a formal educational institution. This assumption was challenged during the second half of the 20th Century, when increasing attention was given to management education programs for men and women who were already in positions of leadership.

Yet, the model of education for these leaders was still (in most cases) built on an accompanying set of assumptions that were established in traditional educational institutions and in work with young, inexperienced learners. A revolution needed to occur with regard to these underlying assumptions and the ongoing educational and training practices that emerged from these assumptions. This revolution goes by many names. At a fundamental level, it can be called “adult education.” Yet, there is much more to this story than just the addition of the word “adult” to the word “education.” This revolution involved the move from a “pedagogical” model of education to what is often called “andragogy.” I will briefly describe this new model—then offer

two additional models that may be even more appropriate to a leader who is not only an adult, but is also facing the multiple challenges of our postmodern world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.

Model Two: Andragogy

This new model (andragogy) was first championed by such stalwarts of continuing and adult education as Malcolm Knowles and Patricia Cross. It stressed the unique and challenging needs of the mature learner for a different kind of educational experience that was more engaging, more flexible and, in particular, more appreciative of the existing knowledge base and experience of the mature learning. As a colleague, Elinor Greenberg, noted many years ago, the adult learner is likely to be “experience rich, but theory poor,” whereas the younger learner is likely (at least when they graduate) to be “theory rich, but experience poor.” The andragogic model of education has been and often still is very appropriate in the education and training of contemporary leaders. The andragogic model fails, however, just as the pedagogical model does, in meeting the needs of many leaders, who enter their positions of leadership with not only rich experiences, but also rich (if often implicitly held) theories about the world and their role in it. A third and fourth model of adult education are needed.

Model Three: Transformation

The third model is based on the assumption that leaders of contemporary organizations go through major transformations in their life. As Frederick Hudson (*The Adult Years*) has so effectively illustrated, adult development is not a linear or even curvilinear pathway from relatively simple to more complex development; rather, it is a series of life cycles, with mature men and women repeatedly moving through profound transformations. These transformations can be precipitated or at least energized in the postmodern leader by not only the opportunities that emerge in the leader’s organization (such as a promotion, rapid organizational growth, or success of a major project) but also the threats and vicissitudes facing the organization and this person’s career (loss of job, failure of a major project, personal or organizational bankruptcy). Transformations can also be engaged by organizational leaders in a more intentional manner, through the introduction of powerful, transformative learning experiences.

Model Four: Appreciation

The fourth model begins with the assumption that the successful leader of a contemporary organization is a person with as much experience, wisdom and insight as anyone else inside or outside the organization. The successful leader may actually be an expert—as well as a learner—in the field on which she wishes to focus. While the first three models of adult education are all based on a set of deficit assumptions, Model Four is profoundly appreciative in nature.

Model One (Pedagogy) assumes that the leader-as-learner needs to acquire certain knowledge or master certain skills in order to become a success. In essence, the Model One leader-as-learner is an empty (or near empty) mug into which knowledge or skills is poured by an instructor, trainer, mentor or coach with superior knowledge, skills or experience. The second model (Andragogy) is also deficit-based. While a leader enters a developmental program with substantial experience (one or more mugs that are already full), there is still the need for additional education, training, mentoring or coaches. There is an awaiting mug that is not yet full, but needs to be full (or at least partially filled) so that this leader-as-learner can prepare for a new role or for greater success in her leadership role.

Even Model Three (Transformation) is essentially based on a deficit perspective. Someone (the educator, trainer, mentor, coach, retreat facilitator, etc.) creates conditions for the transformation to occur. Without this assistance, the transformation is less likely to occur. Furthermore, it is assumed that the transformation is a good thing: it will enable the leader-as-learner to be wiser, more compassionate, more thoughtful, more socially intelligent, etc. We are “born again” as transformed leaders so that our new self can be even better than the old self. The leader now wants a new mug or set of mugs –and usually is shown where the new mug(s) can be acquired (or purchased).

Model Four (Appreciative) focuses on identifying and giving voice to the wisdom (insights, knowledge, skills) that the successful leader already possesses—not on new learning or growth. Furthermore, this wisdom is uncovered and appreciated within a specific context that is co-created by the leader and her colleague (mentor, coach, retreat facilitator). The leader’s current

mugs are overflowing. The leader has only to become more fully aware of these “bountiful” resources and the best way in which to engage these resources on behalf of her organization.

I propose that as our society becomes more complex, unpredictably and turbulent (the postmodern condition) and as our population becomes older on average (the “graying” of society), it is likely that the third and fourth models of leadership education will become more important, more often engaged and in need of further refinements.

The Challenge of Relativism

While I believe that postmodern leaders can become lifelong learners and have noted ways in which we are changing and expanding on our notions about adults learning, I wish to dig deeper and explore the profound challenge that underlies virtually any new learning associated with the postmodern realities of 21st Century life. I propose that we live in a world of relativity and uncertain knowledge. In such a world how shall we make commitments and honor enduring values? How do we continue to learn when new knowledge often calls into question our most closely (and carefully) held assumptions and perspectives?

Who knows if unadulterated good and bad, right and wrong were ever appropriate perspectives on the nature of truth and reality? The postmodern world is one that demands a relativistic perspective, if we do not want to shut out what we are learning. What are the tools of thought that will help us in our willingness to take action in a world that is fluid and in which ethics are more situational and elusive? William Perry’s description of the movement from relativism to a commitment in relativism offers us some insight into this process.

From Dualism to Commitment in Relativism

Perry suggests that many mature men and women move beyond a way of thinking (*dualism*) in which everything is either identified as black *or* white, good *or* bad, right *or* wrong, clear *or* unclear. They move to a way of thinking (*relativism*) in which there are rights *and* wrongs, and goods *and* bads that exist within a specific community of belief and are not universal. Thus, within a specific scientific community, certain postulates are accepted as valid and are subject to rules of verification that have been formulated by that specific community. Yet, within another

scientific community a different set of postulates are accepted and a different set of rules are followed in efforts to verify these postulates. Thus, in each of these communities there are “truths”—but in neither case can truth be claimed as universal or all encompassing. We see this dynamic played out in the field of psychology during most of the 20th Century. Three warring camps—behaviorism, humanism and psychoanalysis—and many sub-camps fought against one another, yet could never make much headways, since each camp made the argument for truth using methods and criteria of validity that neither of the other two camps accepted or even recognized as appropriate to a valid study of the human condition.

What are the responses of many leaders to this condition? The typical response is a turning to or a returning to the state of *multiplicity* in which we cynically conclude that since there is no one right way or moral way to do things, then any old way is acceptable as long as we don’t get caught. Such a cynical posture provides some shelter against the postmodern storm. Skepticism is another protective stance: Anyone who has grown up in a totalitarian ideological system, which has its seductive absolute truths and world-improving tenets, often spends their life in justified skepticism toward any ideology or absolute claims of truth: at least I will never be fooled or made to believe in something that is ultimately found to be inadequate or dead wrong.”

Multiplistic thinking is certainly a tempting stance for a 21st Century leader to take given the postmodern challenges this leader faces. It is based on the assumption of multiple truths and multiple realities, each of which is equally valid. Ironically, multiplicity is just another form of dualism: “if there is no one truth, then there must *not* be any truths!” As Foucault has so often observed, in this view truth and reality tends to be decided by less rational forces involving governments, political pressure, social-economic power, and subtle media-based coercion. We need not worry, therefore, about who is right; rather we must worry about who is in charge and what they believe or declare to be the truth and reality. A new golden rule applies for the Multiplist: “he who has the gold makes the rule [and defines reality]!”

Perry suggests another response to the problems of a relativistic world. This is the response he calls *commitment in relativism*. It is a response that is directly aligned with the learning-orientation of the postmodern leader. It is a response that requires the willingness to make a commitment to

something, despite the fact that there are alternative truths and realities that can make viable claims on our sense of the world. At this point, Perry moves beyond the line of argument that would be found among most relativists. He writes of the need for mature men and women to make decisions and take stances in the face of postmodern relativism. As postmodern leaders we must make commitments while living in a relativistic world. In order to be able to do this, Perry suggests that we need courage and the capacity for self-reflection. Dualism and relativism without commitment enable one to avoid anxiety, but courage alone enables us to transcend it.

Dualism, with its clear rights and wrongs, enables us - as Erik Fromm noted many years ago - to *escape from freedom*. Relativism *without* commitment enables us to float above the fray, and avoid making the tough decisions or any commitments. We can be breathtaking in our clever and often cynical social analyses. We are brilliant Monday morning quarterbacks regarding politics, corporate decision-making, and our parents' child raising strategies. Because we ourselves never have to make choices, we can successfully criticize those who do have to make decisions.

The Multiplists and Relativists do not view themselves as similar to the Committed Relativist, but instead criticize the Committed Relativist for retreating into Dualism. Like the Dualist, they confuse commitment for uncritical acceptance. In the case of the cynical Multiplist, the retreat is either a falling back into Dualism or an expedient move to commitment ("who is paying you to come to that decision?"). For the Relativist, the retreat is viewed as either an ignoring of alternative perspectives or as a "selling out" to the forces that are forcing simplification in our society. The Multiplists project their own turn to expedience onto the Committed Relativist, while the Relativist yearn for (and try to remain in) a world that enables them to stay detached and "objective."

In large part this misinterpretation of the motives and perspectives of the Committed Relativist relates to the emotion of grieving, which accompanies, for example, our "loss of innocence" when moving from Dualism to Multiplicity, for we must abandon our belief in one abiding truth. We also grieve when moving from Multiplicity to Relativism, for we can no longer embrace an undisciplined and cavalier attitude toward all purported "truths" in the world. Some ideas and "truths" are better than others, and expedient use of those truths that serve our own personal agendas are no longer acceptable. In the case of the move from Relativism to Committed Relativism, we

grieve the loss of freedom and broad perspective that required no final judgments or commitments. We are kicked out of three different Edens, and feel devastated and betrayed when forced to leave each of these refuges.

Commitment within the Context of Faith and Doubt

Leaders make an *existential leap of faith* when they face the complex, uncertain and rapidly changing conditions of postmodern life. When leaders are willing to make decisions and commitments within the context of these postmodern conditions, with insufficient and contradictory data, without absolute guidelines, then they have found what Merleau-Ponty has described as a *truth within situation*:

Courage and Self-knowledge in the Midst of Relativism

The movement of a postmodern leader to commitment without absolute certainties—to a truth within a situation—requires courage and a willingness to encounter an unknown and unknowable world and do the best job possible with the information and perspectives that he does. At this point, the postmodern leader is actually beginning to embrace a Style Two model of leadership—one that focuses on courage. She becomes courageous about her learning! Once this first courageous commitment is made by a postmodern leader, a bit of increased self-knowledge often comes along. As postmodern leaders, we find a new level of appreciation for our parents, our bosses and even our national leaders when we first discover how difficult it is to make good choices in a relativistic world. With increased self-knowledge, we become somewhat more comfortable about making commitments and about adopting a style of operating that leaves options open for an appropriate period of time and that moves the decision-maker to commitment.

Even after the decision is made, the committed relativist in a leadership role remains open to alternative perspectives that could lead to a modification in this decision, and follows up the decision with feedback on the effects of this decision. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön propose that the most effective decision-makers are not those who avoid making mistakes, but rather are those who learn from their mistakes and do not continue to make the same mistakes. By assuming the role of learner, the committed relativist effectively confronts the ambiguity and often immobilizing anxiety associated with the postmodern, relativist view of reality.

Seeking Truth in the Midst of Relativism

What then becomes the nature of certainty and commitment for a 21st Century leader in this relativistic framework? The key seems to lie in an emphasis on the process of knowing and inquiring rather than on the outcome or product of the search for knowledge or inquiry. Alfred North Whitehead first spoke of such an orientation in his portrait of a theology of process—in this sense, he was one of the first post-modernists. According to Whitehead, God is changing along with everything else—much as some scientists are now hypothesizing that the basic laws of the universe may themselves be changing over time. For Whitehead (and many contemporary feminist philosophers and psychologists), truth must always be viewed within its particular context and with regard to its purpose and use. Thus, a contemporary leader must examine not only the outcomes of his deliberations, but also the methods and purposes that defined this deliberation. The postmodern deconstructionists encourage us to look at the words and sequencing of words as well as the message and intention being conveyed by the words. Whitehead and his process-oriented colleagues similarly encourage us to look past the outcomes of thought to the thought process itself.

In a world of relativity and process, how do postmodern leaders grapple with the issues of faith and doubt? One answer to this question is obvious, though often ignored when talking about organizational leadership. This answer, as we have already seen, is the ingredient of *courage*. 21st Century leaders must find and manifest courage in order to confront the issues of faith and doubt in such a way as to lead to commitment. Courage, in turn, is to be found only when we have found some understanding of and have properly nurtured our own inner life. Courage comes when we have been successful in integrating the disparate elements of our selves. John Sanford suggests that the successful man is not someone who is able to achieve perfection (or thinks that he has achieved perfection by repressing aspects of himself). Rather, he is someone who has acknowledged and integrated all aspects of self—including those parts that are not very mature or even acceptable to our personal sense of the ideal self.

Puzzles, Problems and Mysteries

It is conventional wisdom to think of leaders as problem-solvers—as persons who along with colleagues identify problems, analyze causes, consider alternative solutions, and act on the solution that most promises desired results. Since the hey-day of logical positivism, and notably Kurt Lewin’s major contributions to organization development, we have tended to use the tools and deficit language of analysis and problem solving because *we have been taught to focus on problems*. And, as Cooperrider and others have so wisely and concisely observed, we have even gone so far as to see organizations (and, by extension, individuals who work within them) as “problems to be solved.”

Even if we were to look at problem solving as the cornerstone of our work, we would need to look closer. There appear to be three different kinds of issues. Some issues (*puzzles*) readily produce intended results through systematic analysis and action. Other issues (*problems*, in particular *paradoxes or dilemmas*) defy simple or single solutions, and often our attempts at systematic analysis and action create new, unintended consequences. Even more daunting are issues that are beyond rational comprehension, much less systematic resolution (*mysteries*).

With *puzzles*, the parameters are clear: The solution is completely in the control of those who choose to address it. The desired outcome of a puzzle-solution process can readily be identified and quantified and is often important to only a small number of organization members. Furthermore, a puzzle is unidirectional: It has only one successful solution; or, one solution tends to be unrelated to the successful solution of other aspects of the puzzle. The puzzle is clearly appealing to the Dualist. One need only apply a pre-established principle or technique to the puzzle and it will be successfully solved (as determined by a pre-established set of criteria). Examples of puzzles and their solutions abound: establishing a telephone registration system in order to make conference registration easier and more convenient; blacktopping more land in order to expand the capacity for parking in a Mall; conducting the search for a new member of the engineering staff.

Problems are complex, important, and sometimes paradoxical. There rarely is agreement on the criteria for solving a problem or even knowing when solutions are successful. By its very nature, a problem can be readily viewed from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the outcome of the

problem- solution process itself is of significant interest to multiple stakeholders—and successful resolution of one aspect of the problem tends to make resolution of other aspects more difficult or to create additional problems. Moreover, problems are set in unpredictable and turbulent environments and have a combination of internal and external locus of control; that is, factors influencing the creation of a problem and attempts to resolve it are located both within and outside the control of the individual or the organization.

We often don't recognize problems for what they are. Rather, we tend to see them and act on them as if they are *puzzles*. When that happens, we dig ourselves deeper into the complexity of "the problem." What we often get as a result is what we might call a "mess." A "problem" of international dimension is the current "war against terrorism." How should we define terrorism? How do we identify terrorists, let alone find them? What are we willing to do to win the war? Who will we ally with, and who will be our enemy? How do we sustain civil liberties at the same time that we provide a secure environment for law-abiding citizens? What are our criteria for defining success? When will "the war" be over?

As one might expect, Dualists don't particularly enjoy working with problems, and seek in all ways possible to re-conceptualize problems as puzzles. Multiplists do not like problems either, and look to expedient (if short-term) solutions. Relativists often take delight in confronting a problem, though they prefer to remain on the sidelines, offering multiple suggestions regarding ways in which to interpret and address the problem, without having to come to a resolution! It is only the Committed Relativist who is willing to acknowledge that a problem—not a puzzle—is present and who is willing to live with the ambiguity and careful deliberations that attend any careful analysis of a problem and is willing to live with the inevitable emotional reactions (from multiple stakeholders) that accompany the choice of one solution to the problem over another.

Mysteries are of an entirely different order than puzzles and problems. A mystery is *theological* (inevitably viewed from many different perspectives that are systematic and deeply rooted in culture and tradition), *profound* (desired outcomes are elusive but of great importance to many stakeholders), *numinostic* (has no boundaries and all aspects are interrelated)—and the *locus of*

control is external (entirely outside the control of the person, organization or constituencies seeking to deal with it).

Mysteries are beyond rational comprehension and resolution, and they are viewed with awe and respect. Depending on one's perspective, they are the things "we take to God." Why is there evil in the world? Why did lightning strike our building but not the one next to it? When and how am I going to die? Why did my child die before me? Mysteries also encompass many positive events and moments of reflection: Why did I fall in love with this person? Why did this remarkable person fall in love with me? How did I ever raise such an exceptional child? Why is this world blessed with such beauty in its sunrises and sunsets, in its mountains and oceans, in its many life forms?

For both Dualists and Multiplists, mysteries are much easier to comprehend than are problems—for mysteries are outside their control. The Dualists are likely to see mysteries as a confirmation of whatever "truth" they have received from an external source: The "good" have been rewarded, or the ultimate plan has not been revealed by the "ultimate" source of truth. Multiplists will view mysteries as further evidence that there is no solid base for assessing the validity of any "truth" and that therefore one should abandon all critical analysis: "It doesn't matter what we think or believe, since what really happens in the world is a mystery beyond our control or comprehension. . . . So let's do whatever we want to do."

Mysteries are much more challenging for the Relativist and Committed Relativist who try to place a rational frame around experiences in their lives. Mysteries defy reason and leave the Relativist in a mood to become even more detached from reality, and the Committed Relativist in a mood to join the Relativist in this detachment. Having come to a difficult decision, the Committed Relativist hates the thought of some external event, over which he has no control, intervening and throwing off the carefully deliberated course of action that he has taken. We finally decide on a candidate for this new job and she must decline because of a death in her family. We have chosen the new location for our shopping mall and we find that it is located in a seismically-active region and, hence, is not suitable for development. The Committed Relativist

curse the perfidious predisposition of Nature and moves back to ground zero in order to make different, thoughtful decision.

A Special Type of Problem: The Paradox

If choosing between left and right in a definitive way is dangerous, and if defining good and bad in absolute terms is no longer philosophically defensible, how do leaders in a postmodern setting make choices and decisions? In 1992, Barry Johnson gave us *Polarity Management*, an elegant and eminently practical solution for “identifying and managing [such] unsolvable problems.”

As I already noted, puzzles have simple solutions and lie within our control. Many problems have multiple solutions, are infinitely complex, and require multi-directional cooperation, since they are not subject to one locus of control. Another category of challenges, *mysteries*, can never be solved completely: “What is love?” “Why am I here?” And then there are *paradoxes* or dilemmas, which require action and can be moved along, but can never be resolved once and for all. Think about it: Can there be *one* ultimate answer for the choice between career and family life? Can the world conclusively choose between globalization and local needs? Between freedom and security in America? Can a manager choose between driving for performance and attending to his people’s needs? In these cases, the “solution” has to be... both! Instead of choosing between these apparent alternatives, we are learning to manage, not try to “solve” these dilemmas.

Barry Johnson suggests as a first step for handling everyday dilemmas, that both the benefits and the disadvantages of the *two legitimate but opposite forces* be analyzed. The two opposing forces are often embodied in “camps;” For example, the comptroller’s interest in minimizing expenses is pitted against the marketing department’s need to invest in consumer research. A central government has the need to unify the nation, but the states or provinces need flexibility in running their daily affairs. Neither position is “wrong.” The postmodern leader who understands polarity management will regularly bring both parties to the table and facilitate a mutual understanding of the respective benefits and possible negative consequences of *exclusively* holding either position. Enormous understanding and empathy result from this first step alone.

Once the strengths and risks of the two sides are understood, the discussion is directed by the postmodern leader to what happens when we try to *maximize* the benefits of either side. It turns out that such unilateral bias to one side of a paradox or dilemma soon causes the downsides of that same force to manifest. Therefore, Barry Johnson warns that we not try to maximize but rather carefully *optimize* the degree to which we incline toward one side or the other and for how long. Optimizing means that we must find a reasonable and perhaps flexible set-point as we incline toward one side or another. Finding these acceptable optimum responses and redefining them again and again is the key to polarity management; and it requires a constant process of vigilance and adjustments. We want to find a dynamic, flexible balance, so that each side's beneficial contribution can be enjoyed, without engendering serious negative consequences. It seems that as a safeguard against overshooting toward either side it would be prudent for postmodern leaders to build in alarm systems that warn that we may be trying to maximize one side, and are on the verge of triggering the negative reactions.

Conclusions

The sign of a leading mind today is that it can hold opposing views without flinching. The sign of a successful postmodern leader is that she can live with and manage the dilemmas she faces in real time—without questioning her identity at every turn in the road, whip-lashing her strategies, tearing and rebuilding her organization's structures reactively, or scapegoating people within or outside her organization. Many years ago, Orson Welles was featured in a unique cartoon that showed two warring factions that were in great dispute over a minor issue that soon became major. One day, one of the members of one of the warring factions made an extraordinary (and very brave) statement. This leader said: "maybe they're right!" Everyone and everything stopped—in amazement—on both sides of the battlefield. Members of each faction began articulating reasons why the other side was, at least in some respects, correct in their assessments, in their assignment of priorities, in their priorities. This fictitious world began to change and Welles, in his magnificent voice, ends by suggesting that just perhaps the people with whom we violently disagree in the "real" world might "... just be right!" Such is the case for the 21st Century leader, who must acknowledge, in a relativistic frame, that there is validity in the multiple perspectives, values and ideas being offered by the various stakeholders to whom this leader is accountable.

