

DIVERSE VOICES OF LEADERSHIP: DIFFERENT RYTHMS AND EMERGING HARMONIES

Dr. Kathleen E. Allen
Allen and Associates
Keallen1@charter.net
www.kathleenallen.net

In our current research literature leaders have been identified through traditional sampling techniques, techniques in which individuals are selected by positions, reputation, and organizational success. I believe that methodology shapes results, and that these traditional sampling techniques have biased our view of leadership. The background assumptions for these techniques include that of leadership as a top-down phenomenon, in the industrial and business orientation of our studies. Most CEOs and presidents are men in their fifties and sixties. Articulated by these sampling techniques is a voice of leadership that is based within the American individualistic culture (Bellah et al., 1985), a voice from leaders who are white, older, and men. This leadership voice also blends management with leadership which embraces the need for insuring the organizational survival, and a corresponding drive for product.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether there are different voices of leadership which are not presently reflected in leadership research literature. It is not the intent of this study to rank one way of conceptualizing leadership over another, but rather to explore the differences. The sample for this study was designed to interview people who tended not to have been interviewed in our published studies. Five criteria were identified to reflect distinct differences from the composition of samples in past leadership studies. An individual was said to reflect diversity if that person represented difference in at least three of these criteria.

1. Positional diversity: defined as not being at the top of an organization.
2. Age: defined as being younger than 50 years old.
3. Gender diversity: defined as being female rather than male.
4. Ethnic, racial, or cultural diversity: defined as representing diversity in one or more of these areas.
5. Contextual diversity: defined as having practiced leadership in more than one field and setting. (Examples of fields are education, business, politics, volunteer organizations, and government.

Individuals who reflected these criteria were identified through personal contacts and referrals. All of them had been observed in a leadership context by the researcher or the referring individual. A preliminary conversation was held with each individual to assess if he or she met at least three of the five criteria, and perceived himself or herself as a leader. The sample consisted of 15 persons, 9 women and 6 men. An in depth interview was carried out with each selected person, the purpose of which was to collect that person's leadership life story. The interviewees were asked to identify the first time they thought of themselves as "a leader," to

describe what it was like, and to continue up to the present. Several follow-up questions were asked. Each interview was taped, transcribed and analyzed.

In reviewing the responses, one can conclude that there are differences in themes and patterns from our traditional concepts of leadership and in the way the interviewees in this sample think about and practice leadership.

Those who were interviewed saw their ideas of leadership as based in themselves and their own development. They viewed themselves as leaders and as individuals in a holistic way. It is clear from these interviews that leadership is reflected in the person and the person is reflected in his or her leadership.

None of the leaders interviewed used the word “followers” to describe the people they led. When asked why not, many stated that the word “followers” meant that someone was subservient or below them. These interviewees saw leadership as something they do with others, not over others. Therefore in these discussions, I have chosen not to use the word “followers” in describing themes and patterns. Instead I use euphemisms like “people with whom they work” or “others.”

The Moral Dimension

In past studies, effectiveness has often been used as a primary criterion of leadership. Gardner (1990) stated that a criterion beyond effectiveness is needed to identify leadership. “Ultimately we judge our leaders in a framework of values” (Gardner, 1990, p. 67). He defined morality as “the standards by which a community judges the rightness or wrongness of conduct in all fields. Our attitudes toward genocide, rape and torture are elements of our morality” (p. 76).

All the individuals who have been profiled had a moral dimension to their leadership. They were driven by core values that had been shaped in their history, experience and the contexts in which they lived, worked and led. There are common themes to these persons’ moral dimension. They are: a respect for life and individuals; a concern for the development of a sense of community; a feeling of connection to something larger than self-interest or organizational interest; a view toward the long term, rather than the short term; an interest in making a difference or an impact so that our society or community or world will be a better place for humankind; a drive to develop those around them, to release their human potential to become autonomous individuals who share in the leadership and development of others, and a value of being connected with others in mutual relationships and not of placing themselves as leaders above or over others in the practice of leadership.

A variety of words and phrases were used to describe this sense of social responsibility they all feel. Some examples are: “to make a difference,” “a responsibility for ethical leadership,”

“to do the right thing,” “to not let a wrong pass,” to contribute to the community, {to} teach, {and} serve,” “to have an interest beyond yourself, in pursuit of the common good.”

The moral dimension of these individuals created the foundation of the way they led others. Their values affected the relationships they built with people, the direction of their leadership, their need for collaboration, connection, and caring, how and what went about changing, and how they used power.

The placements of the interviewees in the organizations in which they worked and volunteered suggest that persons who serve at the bottom and in the middle of organizations, and who have this kind of moral dimension and drive to make an impact, can lead organizations, and people within organizations, from any position.

The leaders who are profiled here reflected the kind of social-ethic leadership that was reported by Burns (1978), and is beginning to appear in the literature as the focus on ethics increases in importance (Gardner, 1990; Nanus, 1990; Terry, 1988).

Relationships

The interviewees saw relationships as a key to their leadership. They did not talk about power, resources, authority, or position with the same intensity that current leadership research suggests as necessary for creating change or being a leader. The interviewees thought of leadership as a dynamic social process, which is grounded in the values of respect, equality, and mutuality.

The leadership dynamic is based in one to one relationships. These leaders often talked about the uniqueness of each individual with whom they worked. They did not see others as a group to be motivated, or an organization needing to buy into their visions. Rather, they saw individuals as unique, and their relationships reflected these differences. Sometimes they seemed embarrassed about the individual focus of their leadership, as if this made them soft or unusual; however each interviewee firmly believed that understanding the uniqueness of each person, no matter how complicated it becomes, is necessary, and makes a critical difference in that leader's effectiveness.

They saw people holistically. They did not separate the person and the professional. For these leaders to lead through a relational context, they felt they must know the whole person with whom they worked. There was a “human quality” to the interviewees in how they talked about working with others. Their relationships were not based on reinforcing separation or distance from others; rather there was an emphasis on connection, caring, and collaboration.

Because their relationships were personal as well as professional, complexity, messiness, and unusual problems resulted. Some individuals, for example, wanted their leaders to be

separate and above them, thinking that this is the role that leaders are supposed to play. These individuals were frustrated that their leaders wouldn't tell them what to do, or let them be dependent, or uninvolved. The leaders interviewed here wanted those with whom they worked to be independent thinkers, initiators, leaders, talkers, and to be engaged in a common dream. A strong theme of individual development thinkers, initiators, leaders, talkers, and to be engaged in a common dream. A strong theme of individual development ran through the relationships of these leaders and those whom they led. The leaders are all very good at moving people from dependency or low self-esteem to autonomy and self-efficacy. The frustration of the interviewed leaders with people who wanted to be dependent, or "yes men," put them at odds with the traditional "leadership as power or position view", where unquestioned loyalty is the mark of a good follower.

The leaders interviewed had the problem of often being caught between two worlds. The world in which they chose to lead, one based in the mutuality and equality of relationships, did not always match the world in which their organizations existed. Their organizations, for the most part, were traditional ones that reflected roles and functions in which authority and traditional forms of leadership and power are standard. These traditional standards of authority, leadership, and power are based in a separateness and control that is foreign to relationships of connection, empowerment, and equality of the leaders studied here. They found it difficult to have a foot in both worlds. It was a problem for these leaders to describe how they maintained authority and the closeness of mutual, human relationships at the same time. It was as if the words had not been invented yet to describe something this paradoxical.

The humanness of their relationships allowed staffs to challenge their leaders, to fight with them, talk back to them, hurt them, respect them, care for them, and get angry with them. The leaders talked about how they responded to challenges and anger and the difficulty of staying non-defensive. They often spent a great deal of thought on the timing and tact with which they approached these situations. There seemed to be an intuitive understanding that emerged to tell these leaders when response to a challenge or angry statement was needed. Each response was designed with the uniqueness of the person in mind. The underlying theme of the response was one of development, respect and understanding, rather than control or putting a person in his or her place.

Many of these leaders personally struggled with the apparent conflict between need for connection and the separateness of traditional leadership. This was especially true for the women who were interviewed. The conflict became a significant leadership marker event for each leader, one often remembered 20 or 25 years later in great detail. Each person interviewed worked through the apparent paradox of leading while being connected, or leading with instead of leading over others, although the resolution took time and a lot of experimentation. Most interviewees developed a way of leading that allowed for relationships in which respect, caring, collaboration, and empowerment resulted in a leadership that was based on trust and mutual caring, rather than on authority, traditional power, fear, or control.

These leaders also believed that role modeling is an important aspect of leadership. With the goal of releasing a human potential embedded in their values, these leaders worked to achieve a sense of personal integrity among their visions, their modeling a kind of leadership that develops others to become leaders who can impact society.

Focus on Process

Leadership was described by the interviewees as a dynamic process. Decision making, relationships, creating change, leadership, or vision, all were described with respect to its end. The leader interviews were not made up of crisp definitions, or discussions of end products. Outcomes were embedded in context and in stories of how one got there.

The kinds of processes that the interviewees described included such words like collaboration, discussions, openness, care, development, mutual writing of scripts, challenge, feelings, fun, energy, and co-creation. While the product was important to these leaders, it did not have the emphasis that is found in traditional business leadership. Success and excellence are important to these leaders because these outcomes help people to grow. A person was involved in a successful event would learn, and would develop self-confidence; failing did not have the same positive impact. For these leaders means and ends were reversed. The end was the empowerment of other persons and a high-quality product was the means of achieving that. In leadership studies that are drawn from CEOs and presidents the focus is on the product as the end and the people as the means. Perhaps the fact that the leaders in this study were not CEOs allowed them to see the ends and means differently. Because of the nature of the role of the CEO, CEOs may not be able to take their minds off the product.

This concept of developing people as an end brought the importance of process into focus for these leaders, The way one involves people and works with people directly affects the end product (of developing people); therefore, these leaders took time to create and maintain an integrity between the means and process of doing things. The leaders worked on the premise that the way one goes about creating change, making decisions, creating visions, and using power all can either hinder or help to achieve the end of empowering others.

Development and Renewal

Themes of development ran through each interview. Development was considered on two levels, the leader's own, and others. The interviewees are active, life-long learners. They searched out opportunities to be challenged and to grow. The critical incidents in leadership life stories were associated with personal growth and insights. For these leaders, personal growth and leadership was an on-going learning process, an attitude toward learning to be modeled for others.

They also associated leadership very strongly with development and empowerment of people. In fact they did not seem to separate leadership and development, which seems connected to their interest in achieving mutual relationships with others. A relationship can't be mutual if others perceive themselves as subordinate or dependent on the leader, therefore, these individuals worked to develop a sense of sovereignty, autonomy, empowerment and competence in the people with whom they worked. This is essential to the development of a mutual relationship between leaders and those they lead.

The word development was used broadly, and extends to issues of self-esteem, self-confidence, cognitive thinking, values, relationship skills, and general and job specific skills. The leaders interviewed worked on all of these levels, moving freely among skills, values, and self-concept, simultaneously. To these leaders, all these developmental issues are interconnected.

Drive, Meaning and Vision

These leaders created their own meaning of events within the organization. They did not depend on the individual at the top, or on the organization's mission to generate a vision for them. They saw themselves as being connected to a greater purpose, such as "making a difference" or "having an impact" on humankind, and perceived this idea as transcending specific jobs or careers. Their life themes were the source of their visions, and were woven into everything they did.

The leaders interviewed for this study carried their vision with them, and often looked for an organization or supervisor that fit their life themes. When there was a lack of fit between the leader's vision and the president's vision, the leader often saw the president as human with his or her own political agenda or problems. These leaders did not appear to give up their visions under this type of conflict, but rather to look for areas of congruence with the president's vision. If none were found, they continued to work their life themes into their leadership despite the dissonance within the environment.

The interviewees indicated that the drive to lead came from the core values that were shaped for each of them by history, experiences, context, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Drive and life themes connected their work with something larger than themselves and their organizations, and this connection helped them create meaning for their work and caused others to be influenced by them. The core values were embedded in a worldview of humankind as evolving, and of a future that could be co-created by themselves and others.

There were common larger visions that these leaders held. The generally held value of being a contributor to the common good included a vision of developing individuals who could become leaders. The interviewees connected what they did to the positive evolution of humankind in this way, using a sort of grass-roots approach to creating worldwide change. An

appropriate analogy would seem to be that of the rock thrown in the middle of a pond, its waves spreading outward in all directions. Perhaps it was because they were not at the top of their organizations that the visions of these leaders of impacting the world were shaped by how they impacted the individuals around themselves. The business of doing their jobs appears to have been just a vehicle for achieving their visions.

Connections

The words “connection” and “connectedness” kept reappearing in the interviews. These leaders saw their roles as making connections with people and between people and ideas, structures, processes, and communities. It may be the commonly held process orientation, but these leaders seemed to have developed a facility for seeing patterns of connections within organizations, issues and people, helping them see how they could work with persons who were different from themselves.

The processes these leaders used, the way they got people involved, and the ways they made decisions enhanced each person’s connection with others. They each had become very good at facilitating meetings, conflicts, and conversations about philosophy, and at drawing people out so that connections could be made. It appears that facilitation is a key process skill that keeps this sense of connectedness in focus.

These leaders were also good at creating structures that enhance involvement in decisions, long range planning, problem solving, organizational change, and insuring the development of individual voice. Their structures borrowed from participative management ideas, and went beyond them. For example, fun was included as an important element of a connected structure. There was the analogy made to a sort of hum that is heard or felt in an organization when people feel engaged and connected in what they are doing.

Power

These leaders were not naive when it came to the uses of power. They each had a healthy respect for the positive and negative impacts that traditional power can have. They made a distinction between coercion and power; coercion generally was seen as the manipulation of individuals against their will, and as negative because it “doesn’t work in the long run,” destroys human relations, and hurts people. They all had experiences where coercion had been used on them, and chose not to use coercion in their work with others because they see it as inconsistent with their core values.

These leaders varied in their views of the usefulness of the concept of power to them. A few found it useful as a tool for creating an impact; others felt that it inhibited the mutuality of a one-to-one relationship. All of them qualified or redefined the concept of power. Most preferred to use the concept of “empowerment,” a term that seems to encompass both shared

power and that personal power that connotes for the individual a sense of sovereignty, autonomy, and self-efficacy.

The idea surfaced that feelings of empowerment for the many generated a sense of energy within an organization. Most of the leaders saw that involving other persons in decisions, developing others, and having a common dream with others created the empowerment of people.

Location of Leadership

These leaders differentiated among a manager, a president and a leader. They did not associate leadership with a position, rather they saw leadership as occurring in people. These insights came early for many of these individuals, which might explain why they considered themselves as leaders regardless of the positions held within their institutions.

Teachers

All of the interviewees changed their conceptions of leadership as they learned from their life experiences, and although the struggles and issues change, the learning continues. It is this author's view that each person is like the snowflake whose history and experiences can be read in its final structure; the same can be said of these leaders. They have been shaped, in great part, by the presence and absence of teachers in their lives.

The teachers of these leaders taught them a variety of things. Some taught them what to do, others what not to do. They taught them skills, values, and helped empower them. Many of these leaders had significant leadership teachers within their family and junior high or high school teachers. Many of the leaders in this study who are women and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds had to seek out people who thought of and practiced leadership in a different way; one that fit them better. Some of these leaders mentioned the absence of teachers because the way they thought about leadership was not modeled in their organizations.

Model for the women were often other female colleagues, supervisors, mothers, or grandmothers. The teachers for the six men in the study were men with one exception; Jim was also greatly influenced by his godmother.

Change

These leaders saw change as a process, not as something that is forced, but as something that unfolds in the context of relationships. One must not be misled into thinking, however, that change did not occur because of, or was undirected by, these leaders. These individuals were like water wearing away the contour of a riverbank. They were persistent. They didn't get caught up in the formal, top-down, change process. Their change was driven by making

connections with people, negotiating credibility, finding agreement that arises out of shared values, and creating decision-making processes that insure diverse participation. They tended not to use the formal power of their positions, but rather their personal power and the empowerment of others to create change.

These leaders were driven to create change in themselves, in individuals, departments, organizations, communities, and the world. In this author's view, creating change was second nature to these leaders, they seemed to need it as a fish needs oxygen to breath. A fish moves through the water to gather oxygen; without oxygen it dies. These persons continued to swim.

Uniqueness of Person

Each of these leaders was unique. Some were quiet, others were extroverted and funny; some were intuitive, others were more concrete; some were "thinkers" and others were "feelers." They were diverse in their geographical locations, up bringing, gender, and positions within organizations. Despite these apparent differences, they were driven by a common way of thinking about leadership. Their moral dimensions were similar, and that affected the way they practiced leadership.

Leadership from a Care Perspective

The theme of connection and the interest in developing both their own voices and the voices of others suggest that there may be a gender-related "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1982) that is at the base of the leadership practices of the interviewees. Participation and collaboration was important to them as vehicles for the development of voice. They seemed personally to have developed in conditions where collaboration and connected learning occurred, so they tended to use those same methods with others. This is reflected by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), when they wrote about the rhetoric of debate versus the rhetoric of understanding. The interviewees demonstrated a preference for the rhetoric of understanding. They used processes of involvement both to understand one another and create new visions.

An Emerging Voice

These themes reflect a number of issues that were raised in Chapter II, where different paradigms of leadership, power, and organizational theory were identified. The dominant paradigm represents the traditional voice of leadership; in the emergent paradigm, one finds suggestions for a different set of possibilities. The dominant and emergent paradigm reflects a range of possibilities in ways individuals thought and think about leadership.

The individuals chosen as interviewees were selected because of the diversity they represented from our traditional samples. The purpose of this study was to explore if diversity in sampling would lead to different conceptualizations of leadership. Each of these individuals

was unique in their thoughts and practices of leadership, and these individuals articulated variations of the emergent paradigms of power, leadership, and organizational theory; however there were common themes within this diversity. The ideas in common presented in this chapter may help us to identify how leadership might be practiced in our complex, constantly changing world.

Conclusion

This study indicates that there are multiple ways of thinking about leadership and different ways of practicing leadership. Given the diversity of individuals and cultures, no single truth of leadership appears possible. Themes and patterns of leadership can be identified, and the voice of leadership most identified in this study was one from a care and connected perspective. It appears that this voice may be affected by gender and by a socio-centered upbringing.

These findings have implications for those who wish to empower leadership at all levels of their organizations and want to encourage individuals of different cultures to feel free to practice a different way of leading. There are many further areas of research that are suggested by the findings in this study. This study points the way toward viewing leadership from the perspective of diverse voices with different rhythms and emerging harmonies.

A copy of Divers Voices of Leadership: Different Rhythms and Emerging Harmonies by Dr. Kathleen E. Allen can be obtained from UMI Dissertation Information Service, 300 N Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, (800) 531-0600 Order #9030748

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