



Developing Leaders for the 21st Century Organization

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Let's face it:

Leadership development isn't working.

It's not for lack of trying. Organizations yearly pour hundreds of millions of dollars (that's a conservative estimate) into leadership development courses, workshops, retreats and tools. In-house, out-sourced, web-based or hands-on case study – they are all available, you have probably used most of them by now, and collectively, they aren't working. You know it and your fellow leaders know it. This emperor is stark naked.

Don't get me wrong – I'm not suggesting people doing leadership development today are dumb or incompetent. Quite the contrary – really good work is being done in leadership development by some very sharp people, and *some* of your leaders are getting it. *Most*, however, are not. That's the problem.

Proof? Prove it to yourself. Have you settled on a leadership development methodology that you have offered for the past five years? Or do you move from last year's boring old stuff to this year's hot topic? Do you have leaders eagerly lining up to get into your leadership development sessions? Or do you have to draft or even mandate attendance? Most pointedly, do you have clear evidence six months *after* the sessions that your leaders are in fact doing a noticeably excellent job of leading? If so, why are you still having trouble keeping the people you want to keep and beating your competition handily?

If you're quite sure leadership development is working – really well – for a large majority in your organization, congratulations! You may not need to read this.

For the rest of us, we need to get our minds around this problem, fast. It's not going to go away. It's going to get worse over time. And we're not going to solve it by doing more of what we're already doing.

We need a fresh start.

This problem has two roots:

1. The organization of the 21st century is radically different from the organization of just 40 years ago, but leaders are not. There's a reason for that.
2. Our leadership development methods are inadequate to the task, not just actually, but *in principle*. They *can't* be expected to shape future leaders. We need a significantly different approach.

Let's dig up both of these roots.

The Radical Change in Organizations

Leadership today is a great deal more complex than it was 40 years ago because the organization of today is a great deal more complex and diverse than it was 40 years ago.

The organization 40 years ago consisted overwhelmingly of

- men
- from a single culture
- who had substantial indoctrination in the competitive culture of games, sports and the military
- who had little indoctrination in the cooperative culture of informal groups and relationships
- whose job was well-defined and stable over time
- for whom technological change was a predictable, orderly process
- whose business was focused almost exclusively on one local geography
- whose personal lives were lived in an intact nuclear family
- who were largely motivated by the extrinsic factors of money, power and security, and intrinsically by achievement and problem solving
- whose leaders and leadership role models were exclusively male

The organization today consists of

- men and women in increasingly equal numbers
- from a number of cultures, including many who grew up outside of the USA and migrated here after formal education,
- some of whom have substantial indoctrination in the competitive culture of games, sports and the military, some of whom do not (and this does not neatly sort into men and women)
- some of whom have substantial indoctrination in the cooperative culture of informal groups and relationships, some of whom do not (ditto)
- who fill roles, not jobs, that are constantly evolving and rapidly changing

- for whom technological change has always been a rapid, accelerating paradigm-changing series of events
- whose business addresses multiple shifting geographies within a global marketplace
- whose personal lives are characterized by almost unbelievable diversity and choice, and constant multiple demands
- who are motivated extrinsically by specific combinations of money, power, status, independence and security, and intrinsically by achievement, problem solving, teamwork and, increasingly, service
- whose leaders and leadership role models are still largely male but increasingly female

All these facts about organizations are well known and well documented (especially within academe). Leadership theories, models and courses have been devised and implemented which attempt to address the new reality facing leaders.

These theories and courses have helped many leaders become clearer on the scope and nature of their challenge. They have notoriously done much less to improve actual leadership performance and capacity. As a result, the gap between *perceived challenge* and *actual performance* is large and growing for leaders today.

Here's the problem: leaders learn leadership the same way native speakers learn their language: through observation, participation and practice. What you take leadership to be and how you act as a leader depends primarily and essentially on what your experience of leadership has been – the models you have *personally* seen and experienced. These models are very specific to the community and circumstances in which the leadership takes place. Today's leaders learned leadership twenty years ago by observing and participating with leaders who, themselves, learned leadership in the organizations of 40 years ago.

In other words, *today's leaders learned to lead an organization that no longer exists*. And although some leaders clearly have grown over time beyond their received model, the large majority has not, because (the second root cause) our current leadership development methods make little difference in how they actually *act* as leaders.

Inadequate Leadership Development Models

An old Spanish saying says: “Before the Fulanese met the Spanish, they didn't know they were speaking Fulanese. They thought they were just speaking.”

Imagine for the moment that English was, not just the only language we spoke, but also the only language we knew about. If we knew anything about “language” at all (as contrasted with merely speaking it) it would be a very peculiar and limited sort of knowledge, because we would naturally assume that all languages

worked essentially the way English does. And, of course, they don't. The first "foreign" language is notoriously the hardest to learn because we are unlearning our inappropriate carry-over linguistic habits as much as we are learning the actual language. True polyglots tell us that it becomes remarkably easier to acquire a new language after your first two or three; at some point, you "get" *language* by contrast with merely getting a particular language.

Language is not learned in the abstract and neither is leadership. To repeat: leaders learn leadership the same way native speakers learn their language: through observation, participation and practice. What you take leadership to be and how you act as a leader depends primarily and essentially on what your experience of leadership has been – the models you have personally seen and experienced. Usually these are very specific to the community and circumstances in which the leadership takes place; what you learn is the equivalent of a specific dialect, like Cockney or Bronx English, and if your leadership is developed at all, it is the equivalent of polishing grammar and smoothing accent. It's still English you understand, not language.

So what's the problem here? If leadership is merely one, comparatively minor, aspect of what you are called upon to contribute, you probably have no important problem: a little polishing of your native leadership ability may be all you need. But people in key leadership positions in today's organizations are called upon to contribute at a much higher level than their native leadership ability and understanding can support, and no amount of polish and smoothing will bridge the gap. We need leaders who understand leadership, not just their native version of it; leaders who can lead effectively in circumstances that are far different from those in which they originally learned their leadership dialect. We need leaders who "get" leadership the same way skilled linguists "get" language – not to enable them to write books or teach courses, but to enable them to lead effectively in the complex and evolving circumstances of today's diverse, global organizations.

You don't "get" leadership by reading about it or studying it. You "get" leadership by learning to lead in circumstances different enough from your "native" circumstances that the parochial specifics drop away, enabling you to see what is in fact fundamental. You learn, metaphorically, a second "language" of leadership.

And you are not going to get there with a two-day or even week-long course.

You would not expect to learn Mandarin Chinese by reading a few books and attending a two day workshop – even if it gives you feedback on your Mandarin skills and identifies areas of improvement! To learn a second language you must engage over a significant period of time in conversation with people who know the language well, and get guidance in learning from your experience. Shortcuts may help you know *about* the language, but they won't help at all when it comes time to *speak* it.

All this is true of leadership as well. Our current methods of leadership development are shortcuts. They engage the Observer-Critic part of our functioning; they help us know more *about* leadership. But they do not engage us as active agents – people who don't just *know* but who fundamentally *do* – and so they have little if any effect on what we *do* when we are called upon to actually *lead*.

We need to change how our leaders *actually* lead.

How? The same way we learn a new language, or change how we swing a golf club – by focused experience and practice, over time, guided by a qualified coach. You learn language by speaking, golf by swinging the club and leadership by participating *with* and *as* a leader.

A New Model of Leadership Development

Here are three key components of a Leadership Development model that is adequate to changing how executives actually lead:

1. A guiding principle
2. A central process
3. A key player

We need conversation about each of these in detail. To launch the conversation, here's a brief account of each:

(1). The **guiding principle** of leadership development is:

Engage the Actor.

I ***do not*** mean Actor in the theatrical sense – someone who learns a script or a role, who is “acting” rather than being their authentic self. Quite the contrary – I mean Actor in the sense of active agent, the part of a person that *does*, rather than merely *knows*, and it is our *most* authentic way of being.

People function and learn in two very different modes: Actor, and Observer/Critic. As Actors, our knowledge is direct, automatic and immediate. We don't have to think about what we do; we see what is called for and do it. We learn as Actors only through experience – we observe, participate, and practice.

Observer/Critic is a secondary, derivative mode of functioning and learning. As Observer/Critics, we think about and analyze what has been done. Our knowledge is in the form of facts, principles or algorithms, which are used essentially for self-correction and guidance.

Actor knowledge and Observer/Critic knowledge are two categorically different types. Notoriously, Observer /Critic knowledge does not readily carry over to

Actor knowledge – otherwise everyone who had read Harvey Penick’s Little Red Book would be a scratch golfer. Observer/Critic knowledge can make you better and better at knowing what you *should* do, or what you’re doing *wrong*, but it rarely has much impact on what you *do*.

Our current leadership development processes are designed almost exclusively to develop Observer/Critic knowledge.

We need a process that engages the Actor.

(2). The **central process** for leadership development consists of participating with a group of leaders as both a participant and a leader. The group and its tasks are structured to match closely the make-up of the 21st century organization. Participants will discover the ways in which their native ways of leading are limited and ineffective; more importantly, they will see and practice different ways of leading (for example, through influence rather than merely through authority) through which they progressively master a “second language” of leadership. The group works together over an extended period of time (at least six months, perhaps as long as 12) – obviously not full time, since they all have important jobs already, but with a significant time commitment (say, one day per month plus two hours weekly). Incidentally, this is less time commitment than executives routinely make to become a good golfer.

(3) The **key player** in this model of leadership development is the Leadership Coach. This is not just a new bottle into which we pour the old Executive Coach or Leadership Trainer wine. It is a different and challenging role which is essential to the success of Leadership Development.

The logic in brief:

Arnold Palmer did not use a swing coach; Tiger Woods did – twice, both times with extraordinary results. Palmer never used a personal trainer; Vijay Singh does.

The difference is not in the men; the difference is in the times. The game requires performance at an unprecedented level. No world-class athlete attempts to win without a coach or trainer, usually both.

A leader who aspires to be world-class should have the support of a coach or trainer, probably both in a single package.

The game for leaders has elevated drastically. The game for the leader’s coach must elevate accordingly.

A Leadership Coach focuses on the leader’s:

- Leadership challenges and performance
- Leadership models and experience

- Leadership (Actor's) knowledge, principles and skills
- Leadership capacity

A Leadership Coach must have masterful grasp of:

- The creation and implementation of organization strategy (including vision, mission, values, goals, etc.)
- Making aspirations real
- Goal setting and prioritizing
- Team creation and team leading
- Group and team dynamics
- Business relationships – individual and group, internal and external
- Financial and technical realities of business
- Communication, in particular authentic self-presentation, hearing, and dialogue
- Sustainable living (beyond “balance”)
- Articulating principles and acting on them
- Intrinsic motivations and how to work with them
- Himself or herself in relation to working with others
- Leadership

Obviously, this is a pretty formidable set of requirements and it probably is not complete. But would you trust the development of your most important leaders to someone who did *not* have mastery of one of these?

In brief, that is Tony Putman's stake in the ground on leadership development.

What do ***you*** think?