

If Leadership Were a Purely Rational Act We Would be Teaching Computers

Chester J. Bowling, Ph.D.
Ohio State University Extension
bowling.43@osu.edu

In the 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* a reporter asks HAL, the 9000 series computer that controls the Jupiter bound Discovery 1 spaceship, if any 9000 series computer has ever made a mistake. HAL replies, "No 9000 series computer has ever made a mistake or distorted information. They are fool proof and incapable of error." Although this was a fictional account, the creation of a perfect thinking machine has long been a goal of technologists. This goal took a giant leap forward just five years ago when an IBM computer call Big Blue beat Gary Kasparov, the international chess champion, finally proving that computers can out-perform humans in rational thought processes. If computers don't make mistakes, don't distort information, and are faster thinkers than humans why is it unlikely that a computer will ever be elected to office or selected by a group to act as their leader? Intuitively we know this to be true – but why? Could it be because leadership is not a purely rational activity?

What is leadership? How is it defined? How is it created? Why even though it has been studied more than any other human activity does it yet defy being unified into a single theory. Not only is there no unified theory of leadership; the number of theories about leadership are multiplying. Why are there so many different theories of leadership and why do they all continue to be popular?

Answers to these difficult questions may be emerging from what at first appears to be an unlikely place, postmodernist and social constructionist thought. Postmodernism refers to a period marked by the end of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the grand "meta-narratives" which we once used to legitimize knowledge and practice – e.g. Christianity, Science, Democracy, Communism, or Progress. These narratives and the activities which were undertaken in their name no longer have unquestioned support. In postmodernism it is understood that truth and meaning are historically constructed and that there is value in exposing the mechanisms by which meaning is produced and accepted as truth. Therefore the issue is not simply about whether "truth" exists or not. The issue is: to whose truth are we listening, or in whose truth are we living?

Postmodernism moves us away from universal standards into an atmosphere of multi-dimensionality and complexity. Postmodernism replaces the sovereign autonomous individual with a collective experience. Ambiguity, collage, diversity of world-view, multiplicity of values, and plurality of belief are the foci of attention. Most importantly, we see the merging of subject and object, self and other, leader and organization.

Social constructionism suggests that much of the world we deal with on a daily basis is socially created reality. Through human meaning-making, we organize information about our world into patterns that make collaborative action possible. The collaborative acts created by this information organizing process eventually become social reality:

...human beings produce a world of their own making, a distinctly human one, in two ways. First, they mix their labour (to use John Locke's apt phrase) with what the natural world supplies and transform it by so doing. Such transformations of the environment are typically the result of joint efforts and the behavior of each agent is influenced by that of the others. In both cases we have examples of causal generation. But, second, in setting up patterns of coordinated interaction, human beings generate a new stratum of reality – namely, social reality. In this case, however, what is generated is not the outcome of some causal process but is rather what emerges when the patterns of human interaction assume a sufficiently fixed and permanent character as to acquire independent status in the form of social framework existing over and above the concrete activities taking place within it. Taken together, this framework and the collective human action whose context it provides, constitute the social world. (Collin, 1997, p. 2)

The answers to all the really important questions are socially constructed. During the meaning making process we decide such things as

- what is beauty and therefore beautiful
- what is good and therefore who is good
- what is important and therefore worth spending time on;
- what is valuable and therefore worth dying for
- what is leadership and therefore who are the leaders.

Leadership is one of the patterns of coordinated interaction created within human social systems, and hence it is a completely emergent process. Leadership does not lie within the cause and effect spectrum, but is created through the meaning making process.

From this point of view, leadership is not something independent of the way we think. Just the opposite: it is dependent on the way we organize what we take for granted as real and true. The presence or absence of leadership depends on the presence or absence of some knowledge principle that enables a person or a group or a community or organization to say, "That's leadership." (Drath, 2001, p. 6)

The knowledge principle that Drath is talking about is socially constructed. Together groups, organizations, communities and nations collectively create a set of taken-for-granted truths that are obvious to those who hold them. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan said that pornography was something he couldn't define, but he knew it when he saw it. This is an example of the use of a knowledge principle. Defining the "True", the "Good" and the "Beautiful" requires the use of knowledge principles. It is a knowledge principle that lets people categorize actions as leadership or something else. No matter what a leader does, if the members of the organization do not categorize her/his actions as leadership, they will see themselves as leaderless.

Former President Clinton and the Lewinski scandal is a perfect example of this postmodern social construction phenomenon. After his admission of a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinski, the country and the world were clearly divided on the

subject of morality and leadership. Ambiguity abounded, and differences in values, beliefs, and world-views were exposed. Some people tried to polarize the incident, making it a clear case of right or wrong. Others refused to see it that way. Some saw a man cheating on his wife as a forgivable offense and others did not. Some saw a leader who cheated on his wife, not a president cheating on his country. But it was a presidential thing to do? What does it mean to be “presidential”? Was Clinton an immoral husband and a moral president? For some Americans morality is an integral part of leadership; for others it isn't. It was widely reported that Europeans in general thought that morals were not a part of leadership and the Lewinski scandal was much ado about nothing. During the scandal it was also reported that President Clinton had a high job satisfaction rating from a majority of citizens. What does that mean? For some Americans the country was leaderless but others were quite confident in their president. This multiplicity of views and the ambiguity about what leadership is demonstrates the variety of ways humans have of constructing “Truth.”

Is there a right answer to the question of what is good leadership? Good leadership is whatever the members of the group, organization, community or nation collectively say it is. The main function of leadership is to make meaning of events, numbers, activities – that is, to make meaning of life. That is what makes it so difficult to define and to build a theory for. This does not make leadership relative; it makes leadership choiceful. Humans have the ability to choose their path. They can choose those ways of being that will forward society or not. They are free to make the choice. But can't an organization construct knowledge principles that hurt the performance of the organization or set society back? Of course; that is the difference between Hitler's leadership and Ghandi's leadership.

Today we can see examples of communities that have constructed narrow leadership knowledge principles and therefore believe they have a leadership vacuum. The problem may not be a lack of leadership, but that the style of leadership is for all practical purposes invisible. The community has created a leadership knowledge principle that doesn't recognize what some social scientists call self-organizing leadership, and therefore they sense a vacuum. The reverse may also be true. If a leader is very decisive and the community has created a principle that identifies quick decision making as good leadership, the community feels comfortable. This is true even though the quality of decisions being made is substantially less than it would be if decisions were made by a group of people or the whole community.

So how does a community know if the knowledge principles they have created are helping or hurting their community? The only way to know is to look for what is working for all people when the community is at its best. When do all people feel the most excited, inspired, or engaged in the community? Whatever is happening at that moment is leadership. Living in the questions and using dialogue to expand relationships and make meaning is the most powerful thing a community can do. When do we see good leadership in our community? What is it that creates good leadership? When do our leaders feel the most excited or inspired while working? When do we feel the most

excited or inspired while working in our community? The things that create these feelings are, by the community's definition, good leadership.

But doesn't this lead to more of the same and if a group, organization, community or nation has constructed knowledge principles that are not helpful won't this perpetuate the situation? The question is: how can knowledge principles be taken to new levels. How can communities expand their leadership principle? And does this have any implications for leadership educators?

Drath describes leadership in terms of tasks: "Leadership tasks seem to center on three kinds of tasks related to direction (mission, goals, vision, purpose), commitment (alignment, motivation, spirit, teamwork), and adaptation (innovation, change, dealing with paradigm shifts)." (Drath, 2001, p. 19) These tasks must be performed inside the knowledge principles that the community constructs. If the community constructs principles that call for the involvement of every community member in important decisions, the leader needs to use a process that draws all community members into the decision making process. If she/he doesn't use such an approach, the members of the community will not see the leader's decisiveness as leadership. but as arbitrariness.

This suggests that to be most effective, leadership education should teach leaders how to make meaning in a variety of settings. If, to move forward, groups need to expand their knowledge principle about leadership to see the vast array of leadership activities within the community, then leaders should facilitate that process. To do that leaders can use a wide variety of tools to generate creative dialogue about good leadership. Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, and Open Space are specific examples of processes that can be used. Movies, art, journals and story-telling are more general examples of ways to help communities expand their knowledge principles.

During such processes, subject and object, self and other, leader and community merge. The clear line between leader and follower disappears. Relations between leader and community are no longer treated as objective aspects of the world and as a question of true or false judgment. Rather, relations become an infinity of possible meaning combinations. The good news about postmodernism and social construction is the realization that inside of all the human limitations, genetic inheritances, natural gifts, honed talents, and learned skills, the world we live in is a world of our creation. We can see examples of extraordinary ways of being and leading that demonstrate our ability to create, which push us to imagine what might be possible. The sources of leadership are dreams, the unconscious, and the imagination. And in leadership, as in dreams and in the imagination, everything is possible.

References

Collin, F. (1997). Social Reality. New York: Routledge.

Drath, W. H. (2001). The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the source of leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.