

The Challenge of Leadership¹

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Leadership is one of the most studied areas in management because leadership is critically important for the survival and progress of organizations, professional communities, and societies. A good manager may be able to improve a system's efficiency, and even its effectiveness, but it takes a leader to speak a bold future and to inspire other people into action to make that future come to be. Leadership is widely studied, widely researched, quite controversial, and very misunderstood.

At the heart of the leadership misunderstanding is the fact that the operative factors in being a leader are not the same things that observers see when they watch a leader in action. The challenge of leadership is that people who are leaders do not see themselves in the same ways that we describe them. When we observe an effective leader in action, we say they are authoritative, confident, powerful, or that they have a certain "style". But, when the leader is interviewed, s/he talks about a commitment, a possibility, or a vision for the future. No leader ever says, "Well, I have this particular leadership trait, and that's why I can be so effective". Still, we study the observable traits, behaviors, and styles of leaders in the hope that emulating them (or encouraging them in others) will produce leadership.

The challenge of leadership begins with the recognition that the experience of leading other people is different from what it appears to be. The "story" about leadership that is so widely discussed today tells us what a leader is, how to be one, and how to get others to lead. But the story is told by people who are observing or reporting on leaders, not by people as they are leading.

We are interested in moving beyond the current story of leadership to the phenomenon itself. By examining what is present in the moment of leading, we may be able to develop leadership in ourselves and others. First, we will separate leadership from other things we sometimes think it is. Then we will discuss a new approach to leading, leadership, and developing others to lead.

Clarifying Leadership

Perceived Requirements of Leadership

When we watch a leader, we sometimes think that their leadership is a function of one or more of the five things listed below. Accordingly, we may think that to be leaders, this is what we need.

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While a range of sources are referenced throughout this article, we would like to make special mention of [Landmark Worldwide](#) and [Werner Erhard](#) whose work, programs, and ideas have informed, guided, and shaped our thinking and without which this paper would not have been possible.

Authority. Leadership is not authority. Although leaders frequently are people in positions of authority, leading itself has nothing to do with the authority of an individual or a group. Gandhi had no authority to seek a free India and Martin Luther King had no authority to speak for civil rights.

Power. Leadership is not about the acquisition or the use of power, force, or "good connections". We confuse the ability of leaders to enroll others in a future with some form of power. But leadership requires no power. The founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) had no power to change the law and Mother Teresa had no power to have people support the orphans.

Position. Leadership is not about one's position in an organization or field. We have confused the behavior of people who are in "positions of leadership" with leading. True, there are people in high positions who are leaders. But there are many people in those same positions who are not. One can lead from any position in an organization if they are willing to speak.

Style. Leadership is not style. It is popular today for people to complete questionnaires that ask how they relate to others, to getting work done, and to different situations, and then to plot their scores on some type of diagram which describes their style of leadership and the conditions under which that style is most effective. But style is a gestalt of traits, behaviors, and circumstances, and having a particular type of style does not make you a leader. All leaders have styles, but their styles did not make them leaders.

Management Capability. Leadership is not managing. Managing is a job in its own right, and a good manager is not necessarily an effective leader. Similarly, a leader may not be the best person to manage a project or program. The difference between leadership and management is an important one: management is what gets things done, with real results, on time, and under budget; leadership is what opens the possibility for a future, and inspires other people to get into action to bring about that future.

None of these things -- authority, power, position, style, or management capability -- will help you very much when you want to step out as a leader, or to develop somebody else to take on a leadership role. You can give someone authority over others, powerful connections in an organization or a field, a good position in the hierarchy, an analysis of their leadership style, and training in the fundamentals of management, and then send them out into a leadership situation and watch them perform. But that does not mean they will lead. Leading is not made of these elements.

Perceived Characteristics of Leadership

Then what makes a leader? Much leadership research focuses on the traits and behaviors of leaders. The assumption is that when we understand leadership traits and behaviors, we can develop them in ourselves or others.

Traits. The story of leadership has evolved over time. Initially it was believed that to be a leader meant that one had to have particular intellectual, psychological, social, physical, or demographic characteristics. Today we have expanded this perspective to include the traits of the organization, such as whether it has a climate for failure, a culture of leadership, or the conditions for leading. In either case, the belief is that there are individual and organizational

conditions, circumstances, or characteristics that hinder or help people in being leaders, and that without these leading is not possible.

Behaviors. There are people who argue that leading has less to do with the traits of people and organizations than with how people act. Leaders are prompt, speak forcefully, keep good schedules and reminders of things to do, communicate with key people on a project, get the most out of scarce resources, etc. So to be really effective as a leader, we have to identify the appropriate ways to act, at what times, and in what situations. Since most of us have experienced that what is effective in one situation may not work in another, there is considerable face validity to the idea that the way you act in a particular situation is important in being a leader.

Style, again. Style can now be understood as a mix of behavior and traits that appear to persist across different situations. Many people believe that you will be an effective leader when your style is appropriate to, or matches the situation. The overwhelming emphasis in almost all the literature and discussions of leadership is on answering the question "What combination of traits and actions - what style - is most effective in certain situations?".

The prevailing "story of leadership" is based in how leaders appear to operate. If one is to be a leader, they need to have or acquire the appropriate characteristics and engage in the appropriate actions called for by the situation. The focus of becoming or producing a leader thus shifts to the acquisition of attributes which are seen as requirements for being a leader. A would-be leader must find and acquire the appropriate attribute(s), or develop them, or be trained in them, or give up any hope of leading.

Could We Have It Backwards?

But what if it doesn't work that way? What if the prevailing story of leadership has little to do with actually leading? There are countless cases where people have been trained (consistent with the prevailing story of leadership) so that they have the right characteristics and engage in the right actions, and they have still not been leaders. Having the right personal or organizational traits, and doing the right behaviors, even in the right circumstances, won't necessarily produce a leader. Could it be that the story of leadership is backwards? Perhaps leading comes first, with traits and behaviors merely by-products.

Consider someone who is a "charismatic" leader. While s/he is "leading", there is something present, something that we can't quite put our finger on, that we call charisma. Now, no one actually has charisma, like they have brown eyes or a loud voice. Rather, charisma is an explanation we offer for why one is a leader. The mistake we make is in thinking that the explanation we have for why they are leaders, in this case charisma, is the cause of their leading. What if they are people who have stepped out as leaders, and, when they are in action, they appear to have that special energy we call charisma?

For example, many of us have read some of today's popular leadership books. After reading them, although we have some new information, we are essentially the same person we were at the start. Leadership "requirements" and "characteristics" may be interesting to analyze, but they are ultimately not capable of causing an individual to actually put oneself out in front of a project or an idea, and lead other people's thinking and speaking, to have an envisioned future come into being.

A New Approach to Leadership

"In the Stands" and "On the Court"

Most of us have attended some kind of a sporting event, like a baseball game, a tennis match, or golf tournament, or we have attended an artistic performance, like a ballet, play, or symphony. When we are watching what is going on, or telling other people about what happened or is happening, we are "in the stands". The stands are really the bleachers, the peanut gallery, or the audience: we are active as observers. But there is another place that is very active: "on the court". The court might be the tennis court, the theater stage, or the speaker's podium. The game, or the music, or the play actually occurs in both places. But the in-the-stands game is very different from the on-the-court game.

For example, during the Winter Olympics the captain of the American bobsled team was interviewed about steering his bobsled. To observers, the bobsled appears to be going very fast, and it seems difficult to steer while reacting quickly to the many changes in the course. But the captain of the bobsled team said something very odd: "For me, the bobsled moves in slow motion." The speed of the bobsled occurs differently for the people in the stands than it does to those "on the court".

Look at a time when you have actually been on the court, perhaps as a leader giving a presentation. While you talk, maybe you're also thinking about how you're doing, but mostly you are actually engaged in speaking something to other people. Then, afterwards, somebody comments on how it went, what they thought of your presentation. Think, for a moment, about the correlation between what they said and what you experienced at the time you were leading. How closely does their story match your experience?

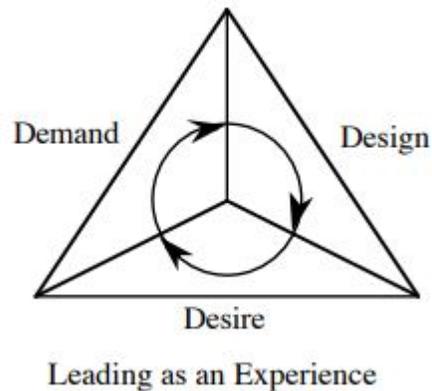
Even if there is some correlation, it often doesn't help us to improve our presentation the next time. It doesn't make us leaders, any more than telling a child how to tie shoes, or ride a bicycle, or do algebra will give the child the capability of performing those tasks. Then how can we produce leaders?

Leadership, from the stands, is a story told backwards. This is a very important distinction, where we recognize that all our talk about leadership is a conversation in the stands. We talk about the environment being safe for leadership, or we talk about a willingness to lead, or we talk about styles or traits or behaviors. That is all observing and reporting on something, but not doing it.

People don't learn leadership by understanding it. To be leaders, people need to engage in leading. Formulas, rules, and even past experience are ultimately irrelevant in the moment of leading. People need to invent leading for themselves - every time they lead.

The Experience of Leading

We get to leadership by working with the phenomenon of leading, not the story. We need to engage in leading: put ourselves on the court, and get into action. At the moment of leading, what is actually going on with the leader? We propose that there are three dimensions that constitute the experience of leading: Desire, Demand, and Design. The following diagram shows the three aspects of a leader's experience, and how they are related in an endless cycle of progression.



Desire

The foundation for leading is what we will call desire or, perhaps more appropriately, passionate commitment. This is not simply a strong "want" for some result or object, but rather it is a deep commitment to something, a firm stand for some future to occur. Especially a future that wasn't going to happen anyway, since standing in front of a mob that is already heading somewhere is not really "leading" anyone. A leader may be without authority or power, position or style, but s/he believes that things could be other than they are, and is willing to do extraordinary things to move people to make it happen.

The leader gives other people access to this desire: leading is the phenomenon in which people are given the fuel and the opportunity to go somewhere they didn't know they could, to commit to a future possibility. They use the leader's desire as fuel. Some people call this the "vision" part of leadership. Vision may be for a future that is grand and spectacular, or for more short-term things like the possibility of having a conference in which nurses and dietitians come together.

What makes a vision is that someone "sees", and strongly wants, something that could be, but that wasn't going to happen by itself given the natural drift of events. Without leadership, things will go in a pretty predictable way: our organizations, our projects, and our waistlines all have a reasonably predictable future. A deep desire can actually create a new future, and open the possibility that things can go toward a different end, take a different path.

Desire can foster a commitment to the realization of a new future. A passion, an intention, or a desire is the first working ingredient of a leader. One of the things that you might recognize in people that you think are potential leaders is that there is some passion there. You can not teach people passion, desire, or commitment. No mentoring program produces passionate people. People either allow themselves to be passionate about a possibility at some point in their lives, or they don't. People generate passion. This is the first element that sets leaders apart from less generative participants in an idea.

Desire is the foundation for leadership. You can't just take anybody and turn them into a leader, and you can't take someone and have them be a leader in just any area. They have got to desire something that is bigger than they can accomplish on their own. And it needs to be something big enough to require other people to participate.

Along with the element of passion comes our very personal relationships to risk and failure. Each of us has to balance risks we are willing to take against our passion for a new future. Some people are willing to go skydiving. They have a particular relationship with risk that is different from those of us who are more wedded to the ground. Some people are afraid to propose a new idea to their boss. They have a passion that is insufficient to get them to step out and lead in that area. The balance of passion and willingness to risk usually changes for each of us as we grow.

Perhaps everybody has a passion in some area of their life. If so, then perhaps everybody can be a leader in that arena. The problem we have when we are trying to develop people to be leaders is that we often want them to be leaders in some particular field, rather than finding out what they desire. The area they are passionate about may not be the one that you want to support, or may even be inconsistent with the goals of the organization. It is important to remember that leading begins with what a person cares about strongly. This is a wider definition of the beginning of leadership than having certain traits or styles. That means that there are probably people, whom we don't think of as leaders, who are in fact leaders in the areas of their lives that we do not see.

Demand

The second working ingredient of leadership is what we will call "demand". Demand is about communication. It occurs after you have recognized your passion, and its risks, and you know you are passionate enough about something to take a risk for it. Now you have to get into communication with people. No matter how passionate you might be, there is no leading without speaking: speaking about what you see is possible, about your passion and commitment, and about the new future you are committed to having happen.

Leading happens when someone is speaking a demand - a strong insistence - in which other people can participate. Their participation may be simply that they recognize the possibility you are passionate about, or they may contribute ideas or time or resources to your area of passion. But there is a demand, given by the passion, that other people become engaged in the conversation with you, and collaborate in making the new future happen. And some of the people accept the invitation.

Of course, the demand is sometimes refused. Not everyone wants to play in your game. But the refusals do not diminish the demand (since it is fueled by your passion), or at least not for long.

When you are with a demanding person, they will talk about what they care about, and expect you to care about that too. It is an important aspect of being a leader. Gandhi was a demand for a free India through nonviolent action. If you had had lunch with Gandhi, you would have talked about that, and not about your arthritis, your budget, or your pet project. Unless it had something to do with freeing India nonviolently.

You already know some demanding people: someone who is a demand for being neat, or punctual, or polite, or accurate. Some demanding people make us uncomfortable, so we might worry about being "too demanding". Being demanding is like a rigorous way of being with people. Few of us are inherently comfortable with being demanding of the time and attention of others. But leaders demand that other people be clear on the game they are engaged in. It's as if

they are saying, "If you want to play with me, this is the game, and yes, we will need to work some things out, but this is where we are going." Demand occurs in communication, regardless of what we are thinking or feeling. Communication includes all the conversations we have with people about what we see as possible, what we really, truly care about, and what opportunities there are for us to work or play together to bring about the new future. It is in these conversations that we get "followers", or people to play with in the new game. People do not follow someone unless they have enrolled themselves in a possibility they see out of what was spoken by another. People join in because they are enrolled in what is being created. If they are not enrolled, they will not join and there will be no followers.

The role of communication in leading is vital: there is no leadership without demanding that others pay attention to your passion. Communication means making it clear to people what your commitment is, and then asking them to participate. And this isn't ordinary asking. It's stronger than that. Because you want people to do something they weren't already going to do. Remember? This is about making a new future happen, not the one that was going to happen anyway. So we must ask people to say, or be, or do unreasonable things. Leaders invite people to be unreasonable about at least this one thing in their life.

Most leadership or mentoring programs are very cautious about asking people to go beyond their limits. It is tough for people to get away from the rational model: ask people to do what they can handle doing. The temptation is to ask what can - or will - people do, and then "demand" that. We are proposing that we demand something beyond what they think they can handle, for a possibility beyond what is already going to happen. The demand generates an opportunity for people to follow.

Leadership generates an opportunity for others to follow. How will you know if you have done that? Look and see if anyone is following. You can tell whether or not an opportunity has been generated by whether or not anyone is following. If people see an opportunity and enroll themselves in the game, they will follow. It is a simple test. Leading is not about making people do anything, or telling them to do something; it's about generating opportunities in which they can play and contribute.

The "demand" aspect of leadership is the communication with people in a way that requires them to step up, or step out, and to be more than they have been. That requires you to speak and communicate in ways perhaps you haven't done before. Demand is not a shy word.

Design

The last ingredient in the leadership experience is about your willingness to change your beliefs about yourself, your life, and your future based on who you are becoming as a leader. The leader has to redesign him/her self to be more consistent with what other people are seeing. Remember, leaders appear to have certain traits and characteristics. People will think you have them too. They will think you are confident. And so you must be.

This is where you listen to what the people in the stands are saying about you, and you take it as an instruction. When they say you are confident, you are. When they say that you are powerful, start thinking of yourself as a powerful person. When they say that you need to improve your posture, start doing posture exercises. The more effective you are at "designing"

yourself to be a visible, out-front person, and a demand for what you desire, the more you will strengthen your passion as well as your ability to demand that other people grow with you.

All leaders have at least one moment, early in their growth as a leader, when they realize they are out in front of everyone, and that there isn't anybody behind them backing them up. You are on your own: you are the whole event. You have gone beyond your mentor, your teacher, or your boss. After that moment, you are not the same person you were before; you are a new person. You need to "design" yourself, and make some deliberate changes in the way you act, the way you look, and/or the way you think about yourself.

The design aspect of leadership is where an ordinary person becomes someone who represents a possibility, not a personality. The individual has become more than a set of traits and behaviors. S/he has become a demand for a new future, a generator of opportunities, and a speaker of possibility. This is a transformation, not a development.

This design part of leading is neglected in most leadership work. But most leaders can remember the first time s/he was approached by a person who was highly enthusiastic about the presentation, and who couldn't say enough about the difference s/he had made in his/her life - and the leader had never seen that person before! This is the designed change from being a private individual to being a public commitment to a possibility. The leader, in that incident, will accept the acknowledgment, and congratulate the person for all they have done and become. One's attention shifts away from oneself, and is given to the future.

When we lead, and step out into our passion with a demand for action, we are likely to forget that we are not just the same old person having a new experience. An experience like the grateful stranger whose life was changed by your words reminds us that we are not the same person we were a year ago. We need to be responsible for that, and we need to help other people be responsible for that.

There is an undeniable risk in speaking passion and demand, and when someone takes that risk, they are rearranging some fundamental ways of being from their past. The acknowledgment of the accomplishment, through intentional self-change, will keep the development happening. Passion will be rewarded, not stifled. Demand will be encouraged, not embarrassing. The design of a leader is in the hands of the passionately insistent: we generate ourselves as we generate the future.

The Cycle of Leadership

A way to look at all this is that you, as a leader, desire some new future, some new possibility. You are willing - and you are willing to practice - to demand other people's participation. And you are willing to give up who you thought yourself to be, and to revise your image, and your self-image, as a leader. The sequence fuels the passion, strengthens the demand, and renews the demand for re-design. It is an unending cycle, unless we interrupt it by saying (a) my desire has run out, (b) I can't keep demanding, or (c) this is the way I am, and I can't design myself any other way. We can build ourselves to be leaders with what we already have on hand.

We have got to stop "preparing" ourselves to lead, and stop waiting for the right conditions or circumstances. The conditions may never be right for a leader. The world needs too much from you to wait any longer. Just look to see where your passion is and speak it out. Give people an opportunity to join you in making your ideas a reality.

Leadership is a cycling through these three ways of being: desire, demand, and design. For those of you who are developing others to be leaders, you can have an incredible impact on somebody by encouraging them to articulate their most heartfelt commitments, to speak them in a way that provides others an opportunity to participate, and then to reassess themselves in light of that accomplishment. Leading doesn't have to be some unattainable thing for only the special few.

Maybe we can develop ourselves, and lots of other people, to be leaders, starting from right where we are. Maybe leading is really mundane, and we have overlooked some real opportunities to design a leader. Can an act of leading be as small as someone asking, "What if we go to lunch over there, where we have never been before?" We can imagine that the speaker actually sees a possibility and is willing to speak it to others as an invitation, although with only a very little bit of demand in it. We may respond no, we don't want to go to lunch there, so there is no following. But an opportunity to follow was generated, and it wouldn't have happened unless that person spoke. S/he actually made a demand, and people chose. If we took the opportunity to say "Thanks for suggesting that. It takes some courage to try to get this group to change it's lunch habits," we might be assisting the redesign of an individual. Maybe leading is going on around us, hoping to be encouraged.

Leading is not only for Presidents, powerful people, and those with special traits and behaviors. Every time you recognize leadership in unlikely places, you can move it to its next place in the cycle. Where it is not moved forward, people will stop their own development; where it is acknowledged, courage will grow. And courage is the heart of leadership.

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