



# Leadership by Creating Shared Meaning



## Leader and solitude

Recently, a manager was sharing with me his concerns about an upcoming meeting he had to lead. He was presenting a new project to his staff and partners. Even though he had worked long hours to prepare this meeting and had outlined a comprehensive action plan, he still felt anxious.

Predicting that certain people were prepared to resist his ideas, the manager wondered how to deal with the situation. So I asked him: "Rather than putting all this energy in developing your own action plan, and finding ways to convince different people to accept your vision, wouldn't a better strategy be elaborating it *with* them? And if they don't agree with your action plan, then what will you do?" He answered: "Well, since I am the leader, it's my responsibility to give the vision."

Unfortunately, many managers self-impose the burden of defining the whole vision on their own. Doing so creates distress in and around them. They become anxious leaders by putting the demand on themselves to "know it all" in order to be "good performers." They also generate anxiousness in employees who do not understand the reasons leading to the changes they have to put into place. Thus questioning our notion of leadership can help us move beyond much unnecessary distress we see at work.

## Leader and leadership

The role of leader generally has been associated with the person able to give vision and direction to others. Although this role remains an important one, leadership becomes more than transmitting the vision. It involves bringing people's ideas together to create a **shared vision** that everyone can call their own.

Criticizing the personality cult in leadership literature, Henry Mintzberg of McGill University speaks of the value of "communityship" (La Presse, 2007). We have to find a better balance, as he says, "between the place taken by the leader and the recognition of collective processes as sources of vitality for organizations and our societies." Leadership in this context is seen more as a **collective dynamic** than an individual achievement.

Dr. Yves Lamontagne, president of the Quebec Board of Physicians, explained in a recent interview the importance of leadership as a collaborative act: "In the past, we trained our physicians to be the best in their field. That's OK, but what we really need today is not so

much for people to be the best but to be **better together.**"

We are in an increasingly interactive world, where a manager's legitimacy no longer rests on possessing information, but in the capacity to create shared meaning out of it, in a way that free and intelligent people will want to work together. The French management guru Hervé Sérieyx (2005) speaks of the necessity to develop what he calls "**multiplying management**", a management which "multiplies interactive intelligences around shared objectives." Therefore, the greatest challenge for organizations today is not so much to lead people into being better **competitors**, but into being better **collaborators**.

## Leadership and collaborative processes

Many factors lead us to see leadership today more as a collaborative act.

The **complexity** and interdependency of today's environment makes us collaborate more and more with people from different fields, organizations or cultures to deliver, together, better products or services. Additionally, the continuous increase in the **quantity of information** to manage, combined with a greater specialization of fields, makes it impossible for any single person to know or to control all the necessary information. Working together is an inevitable sign of our interdependency.

*A community of leaders or no leadership at all.*

Peter Senge

Moreover, a better **educated** workforce expects a work environment where one can participate in decision making.

According to Estelle Morin, professor at the HEC Montreal, one of the four

factors contributing to psychological health at work is "that people can participate in the decisions that concern them, that they do not feel as mere transmission belts but feel they can influence the decisions with which they will have to work."

Last but not least, the increasing legitimacy of certain **feminine values** at work also influences the emergence of a more collective view of leadership. Qualities such as emotional intelligence, listening, recognition and compassion (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman, 2001), have become key characteristics of leadership today. We tend to work in less hierarchical project teams, committees and networks where **collaboration** is essential.

## Leadership and shared meaning

If leadership is the capacity to guide forward, a team will have leadership if all members **guide forward, together.**

The management of change and transformation of organizations cannot be accomplished by decisions of super-CEOs or small groups of elites, but by creating a shared leadership culture, where the parking attendant and the CEO both become part of the same learning and developing community. The guiding factor then becomes not so much the leader, but the shared vision or collective aspiration .

Franco Dragone, artistic creator for the Cirque du Soleil and Celine Dion, states, “what is most important in any creative project is the meaning we share together. My guide in any project is our quest for meaning. The leader, to Dragone, is responsible for putting into place this shared vision and for staying grounded to it. Otherwise, the risk is to suffer from what he calls “autism syndrome,” a phenomenon he describes as the gradual loss of awareness, in the midst of multiple tasks and emergencies, of the original meaning and intent of a particular course of action. **Practical advice:** In case of disorientation, leadership involves coming **back to the original intent:** What do we really want to do with this project? What is the core intention?

### Team leadership and co-creation

One CEO recently confided her disappointment about her management team. “They don’t say anything,” she complained. “I have to decide everything. They should take on their leadership roles, but they don’t.”

Yet, after attending one of this particular CEO’s management meetings, I noticed how she would not really let things be said. Intelligent and action-oriented, she knew how to lead a discussion, but appeared to have little time to “waste” on hearing everyone’s point of view and building team reflection. Not enough time was invested in letting shared leadership develop itself to produce real, collective ownership over the decisions being taken.

Leadership is inevitably an act of dialogue. The Greek origin of the word, *dia-logos*, actually translates to “moving forward with words.” Nodding in response to the boss’ idea, while not really believing in it, is not a sign of collective intelligence and leadership. The law of silence stifles creativity and sows the seeds for errors or abuses due to a lack of collective intelligence. Fostering **open dialogue**, on the other hand, allows a group’s intelligence to develop.

Beyond organizational settings, the French scientist and humanist Albert Jacquard (2005) calls for a “democracy of ethics” based upon our capacity, as humans, to define together what is good and desirable. As he reminds us: “Being superhuman is not about a single human, it’s when humans come together.”

The capacity to create shared meaning can lead to masterpieces of **harmony** and beauty. Jean-Marie Zeitouni (2008), orchestra conductor, chooses to lead differently than in the traditional ways of *mæstros* by

favoring leadership he describes as an exercise in two movements. As the conductor, he first defines his own interpretation of the piece. Then at rehearsal, when he meets his colleagues, a process begins in which he remains open to enrich his vision with various ideas and contributions.

Step by step, a group alchemy develops, as different changes and adaptations are included. This gradual process progressively builds up to a final interpretation which has then become a **co-creation**, a shared accomplishment much richer than the conductor’s original vision, in which everyone feels proud and part of the final result.

### Shared meaning and organizational networks

The capacity to lead by creating shared meaning is also recognized as a key factor by experts on organizational networks. Since networks bring together free and autonomous parties around shared objectives, defining the latter becomes even more essential. Hervé Sérieyx opines that “you can manage a pyramid by giving orders but you manage a network by creating meaning. A network involves the sharing, by all its actors, of a common vision, of values and principles. The ‘what do we want to do together?’ constitutes the network’s original foundation and then its **federative force.**”

Real Jacob, professor at HEC Montreal, believes the key element of any network organization rests on its

definition of a **superceding common interest**. Without this shared objective, conditions are set for the usual power games of personal interests, or chronic hyperactivity which excuses us from authentic dialogue and really defining shared intentions. If a group had only one question to ask itself in order to strengthen its leadership, it would be: “**what do we want to do together?**” Sounds too simple? Try it!

*Success [...] can only come from the will and capacity of people to share knowledge, to establish cooperations, to trust, to acknowledge the other’s otherness and right to their own subjectivity, and to engage with others on paths that have yet to be written.*

Dominique Genelot

### Shared leadership in practice

Numerous approaches try to facilitate the emergence of shared leadership within organizational change processes. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an innovative approach developed at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, has successfully applied positive psychology principles to develop a strength-based approach to organizational development.

According to David Cooperrider, AI’s initiator: “The capacity to cooperate is more likely to develop by **building on strengths** rather than working on problems. There is little capacity for creativity and innovation when one is overly concerned with avoiding mistakes or repairing something” (Barret & Fry, 2008).

In practice, Appreciative Inquiry aims at generating a common vision of the most positive potential by first discovering the best that has been shared in the past. Four stages structure the AI process:

- Discovery: When we are at our best
- Dream: Images of the future we want

- Design: Aspiration statements
- Destiny: Action projects and ongoing process

Other approaches such as Open Space Technology, Theory U, Presencing, and World Café also propose **participative methodologies** so that members of an organization can become part of its strategy. Whether it is through sophisticated processes or simply by organizing a good strategy meeting, the intention is to find means by which team members can define and be guided by **common ambitions**. As management consultant and author Margaret Wheatley reminds us: "There is no greater power than a community that finds what it cares about."

**Try this:** You can easily organize your own strategy-team-building meeting by setting a few hours aside for your team to answer together the following questions and to identify those elements that bring you together:

- What do we appreciate most about working together and what do we consider important to keep in the future? (This will give you insight on your shared values)
- Where would we most want to be one year from now? (This will help you define a shared vision or direction)

### Leadership, hope and health

Leadership means guiding forward and thus implies an element of hope in the proposed direction. We elect political leaders to guide us towards a better future. We choose leaders in organizations in the hope that they will lead their projects and teams towards **greener pastures**. Hope is intrinsic to leadership.

Leaders inspire others in believing they can accomplish something greater together than they would alone. Look at a group of children playing, when one of them shouts "Hey, let's play this game!" and all of them rally with the shared hope that the game will be fun. For the artistic creator Franco Dragone, the question is whether we have **the capacity to see our future as great**.

In "Resonant Leadership" (2005), Boyatzis and McKee present hope as a key element of leadership. Integrating research on emotional intelligence at work, they show that a positive emotion, such as hope, has significant effect on:

- Psychological and physical well being
- Reasoning and problem solving capabilities
- Adaptability to circumstances and people

They also demonstrate that negative emotions such as hatred, envy or resentment generate opposite health effects such as anxiety, stress, and depressive feelings. Thus, building a team or organizational project that inspires hope is not only good for performance but also good for health.

#### In a few words:

- Leadership is not so much the responsibility of one but the process of bringing together intelligences around shared intentions
- One question which gives direction and cohesion to a team: "What do we want to do together?"
- A shared project which elicits hope is good for performance and for health

To conclude, the human organizations in which we work surely have an instrumental function in delivering a particular product or service, but they also are living communities, places of belonging, sharing and accomplishments. The distress we see at work is too often symptomatic of a sense of fragmentation and lack of shared meaning. Leading with shared intentions not only develops an organization's vitality and creativity, but can also prevent much unnecessary distress.

#### Selected references

- Barrett, F. J. & Fry, R. E. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry: A positive approach to building cooperative capacity*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.
- Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant leadership: Renewing yourself and Connecting with others through mindfulness, hope, and compassion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Cherniss, C. & Goleman, D. Eds. (2001). *The emotionally intelligent workplace*. Publishing City: Jossey-Bass.
- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great*. New York: Harper Business.
- Genelot, D. (2001). *Manager dans la complexité*. Paris : Insep Consulting.
- Goleman, D. (1996). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Jacquard, A. (2005). *Travailler en réseau dans un monde de plus en plus complexe*. Québec : Esse Leadership.
- Tremblay, J. & Mintzberg, H. (2007). *De l'obsession du leadership au communautéship*. Montréal : La Presse Affaires, 2007, April 14.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Senge, P. (2004). *Presence: Human purpose and the field of the future*. Society for Organizational Learning.
- Sérieyx, H. (2005). *Travailler en réseau dans un monde de plus en plus complexe*. Québec: Esse Leadership.
- Zeitouni, J.-M. (2008). *Jouer son rôle de leader, sans fausse note !* Québec : Magazine Vivre, Sep.-Oct. 2008.

Translated and adapted from a French article published in the Canadian Magazine *Spiritualité Santé*, vol. 3 no. 1, published February 2010. Written in collaboration with Pierre Agard and Lisa Nelson.



Organizational psychologist and consultant, François pursues his passion for developing leaders and teams by working with partners of various sectors in Quebec and throughout the world.