

Holistic Leadership

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The workplace is an incubator for the human spirit.

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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to present an integrated model of leadership. I call this Holistic Leadership, one founded upon the premise that each of us must strive throughout our lifetime to become a centered individual who is able to effectively use the four principal components of leadership. Of particular significance is to understand the importance of the whole and the inter-relationships among the components and their elements.

My approach is not to focus on leadership equals position in an organization (i.e., management), but rather to talk about it as being resident in each and every one of us. It's important that any discussion on leadership be integrated with individual, team and organizational learning. Although an effective leader must be able to adjust her style to the circumstances and people she leads, this must also be done in the larger context of a learning culture.

So what is a learning culture? To paraphrase Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*), a learning culture exists when people collaborate to create their own future. From my perspective, this means that leadership must be shared if this is to indeed happen, and that people must work continually towards becoming holistic leaders.

Why All the Fuss?

The roles that people (managers and staff) play in today's organizations have become much more dynamic. They face greater complexity in their work environments as a result of the evolving and more sophisticated needs of clients; growing interdependency in the global economy; technological change; changing organizational structures and work processes; an ageing population, and fiscal pressures. For those in managerial positions, these individuals must not only be able to respond to the needs, values and aspirations of their staff, they must also anticipate changes in the future.

To help their organizations thrive in a rapidly changing economy and society, *everyone* must practice some form of leadership. While working in a collaborative manner with co-workers is key to helping their organizations succeed in the 21st Century, enhancing one's personal leadership is critical, and this requires self-discovery and self-awareness.

In his book *Principle Centered Leadership*, Stephen Covey stresses the importance of people achieving balance and greater fulfillment in their lives by following correct principles. Doing so gives people a base for all of their daily decisions. From a leadership perspective, this is

especially important because it instills a sense of *stewardship*, an essential element in effective leadership. As Covey states:

When people align their personal values with correct principles, they are liberated from old perceptions. One of the characteristics of authentic leaders is their humility, evident in their ability to take off their glasses and examine the lens objectively, analyzing how well their values, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors align with “true north” principles.

The need has never been greater for leaders—at all levels—who are capable of functioning effectively in organizations in which diversity and interdependence have become two major yet opposing forces. This requires new behaviors for leaders if they are to succeed in this new and complex environment. Let’s now look at a model I’ve called *The Holistic Leader: The Four Components & Their Principal Elements*.

The Holistic Leadership Model

The diagram below depicts an integrated approach to leadership. At the core is the *Centred Individual*, representing the person who has attained a high level of comfort and competency with the four primary leadership components. One may prefer to see the centred individual as having achieved balance. That’s fine, as long as it’s understood that balance does not mean using the four components in equal measures. Instead, the centred individual is able to seamlessly alter her leadership behaviour to meet the needs of her followers and co-workers under a given set of circumstances.

Because leadership does not exist unless there are followers, it stands to reason that at the core of the issues that demand the attention of leaders is *people*. This model was created with people as the cornerstone. Moreover, it respects the need for formal, managerial leadership *and* informal, shared leadership. *Both* are needed to support one another in an age of uncertainty, paradox, and speed.

Teaching

Much has been written on the need for leaders to be coaches and mentors. This is indeed essential to their effectiveness. But *Teaching*, as a key leadership component, is broader, encompassing the learning organization concept. Some writers have used the expression *The Teaching Organization* in place of the learning organization. *Teaching* becomes the responsibility of everyone in the organization. It begins from the inside. This is the quest for *personal mastery*: to continually strive to improve oneself, and in turn to *share* with others. In essence, we become *stewards* for teaching, because it is seen in the organization as highly valued and necessary to its long-term success.

To be a “teacher” means being *open*, both to self-discovery and to the views and feedback from others. *Reflection and inquiry* are critical if this is to occur, for without them we are not able to slow ourselves sufficiently to explore new meanings and possibilities. *Teaching* is fundamental to effective formal and informal leadership.

Directing

This component is critical to those in management, especially at the senior level. We read in the management literature how managers must possess certain key elements. They need to be *visionary* and *strategic*, yet also have a burning sense of *urgency* to move forward. Furthermore, they must be *results-oriented*, and to achieve this means that they must be capable of *mobilizing* people.

That these five elements are essential for effective formal leadership is not in dispute. But what about those people in middle managerial positions, not to mention staff? Little has been written on the need for people at the middle and lower levels in organizations to develop their skills for these five elements. However, they are critical skills to acquire if we wish to see a change in the culture of leadership in organizations.

Peter Senge explains that there are three main types of leaders in organizations. Senior managers are one category. A great deal has been written on this group. The second category of leaders is front-line managers, who Senge says are the most critical in an organization because they connect daily with staff. And the third is what he calls *Network Leaders*, or what others call *Thought Leaders*.

All three categories of leaders must interact because they each possess certain strengths. Front-line managers, unfortunately, have not been paid sufficient attention in organizations, with respect to improving their leadership abilities. In terms of the *Holistic Leadership* model, front-line managers need to ensure that they develop the *directing* component, because they are the ones who are best positioned to mobilize their staff. But this means that they need to be visionary and strategic, as well as results-oriented.

Network leaders are the seed planters, sowing ideas in their organizations and bringing people together. Their interaction with front-line managers is vital, in terms of reciprocal sharing of knowledge and ideas. And they play a key role in influencing senior management. Network leaders must also develop the elements contained in the directing component if they wish to increase their effectiveness.

Consequently, it's important that we rethink our assumptions on the *directing* component of leadership. These assumptions are oriented around power and authority and where they are housed in organizations. If we really wish to see our organizations evolve to embrace collaborative learning and shared leadership, then we need to shed some of our traditional beliefs on leadership.

Participating

This brings us to the participatory aspect of leadership. It doesn't matter what expression is used: shared leadership, participatory leadership, post-heroic leadership, roving leadership, etc. The point is that this component of leadership is critical to helping organizations create learning

cultures that are based on *power-sharing, inclusion, enrollment, alignment, collaboration, and commitment*.

Much has been written on participatory leadership. In both the private and public sectors, it is espoused by senior management as being the new way of working together. However, what is said publicly is often not practiced. This applies not just to management but staff as well. Modeling the desired behaviours that accompany this form of leadership is fundamental to its eventual success. Network leaders, for example, must practice the elements contained in this leadership. Staff, too, need to learn how to collaborate and how to find common ground when conflict arises.

Some time ago, I read an article that talked about the tacit collusion in which employees frequently engage to protect their functional boundaries. Specifically, people follow unspoken norms with respect to staying out of one another's jobs. When these norms are not followed, conflict typically emerges. The consequence is the "cementing" of behaviours and practices in organizations. When a major change initiative is introduced, senior management becomes frustrated by the rigid silos that have been erected among functional groups, and which in turn contribute to resistance to the change effort.

Participating is an extremely important component of holistic leadership because it provides the conduit to unleashing the potential of people. Again, this is important to those in senior and front-line managerial positions, and also to those who seek to play informal leadership roles.

Nurturing

This component of holistic leadership is one that is only beginning to receive attention. It is what some call the "soft" aspect of leadership. Because it is strongly oriented around relationships and the human dimension, it is not easily quantifiable. Moreover, nurturing is an area that has not traditionally been part of the heroic leadership mindset, and which has been dominated by males.

The ability to show *empathy* is vital to enhancing our leadership. To be empathetic means to be able to put oneself in another's shoes, or frame of reference. Stephen Covey, in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, speaks of the habit of *Seek first to understand, then be understood*. This is a difficult habit to learn because it requires us to listen carefully to the other person and to really understand their point of view, all the while refraining from speaking ourselves.

Improving our ability to empathize will in turn enhance our *communication* skills. Creating meaningful conversations, or dialogues, is essential if organizations are to enhance their collective ability to learn. But the challenge to this is the *diversity* that is growing in organizations. The holistic leader is able to see the value in diverse needs, wants, beliefs, expectations, personalities, backgrounds, gender, colour, age, etc. Being able to see from a systems perspective the benefits that diversity brings to an organization, and in turn influencing it in a forward-thinking way, is a strong leadership asset.

This leads to the creation of *bonds* within the organization. The holistic leader has contributed to creating a web of relationships, despite the challenge of addressing diversity in an organization that faces unrelenting change. These bonds, in turn, support collaborative learning and the creation of a learning culture.

The holistic leader understands and pays attention to the need for developing the triangle of *spirit, mind, and body*. Without daily practice of these three equally important parts, it is difficult to achieve a high state of personal *wellness*. As with personal mastery, personal wellness starts from within. But the holistic leader also strives to help her co-workers (and staff) increase their awareness of this important element of nurturing leadership. For example, the network leader sows “wellness seeds” in the organization as a way to assist the organization create a healthier workplace: spiritually, intellectually, and physically.

Wrapup

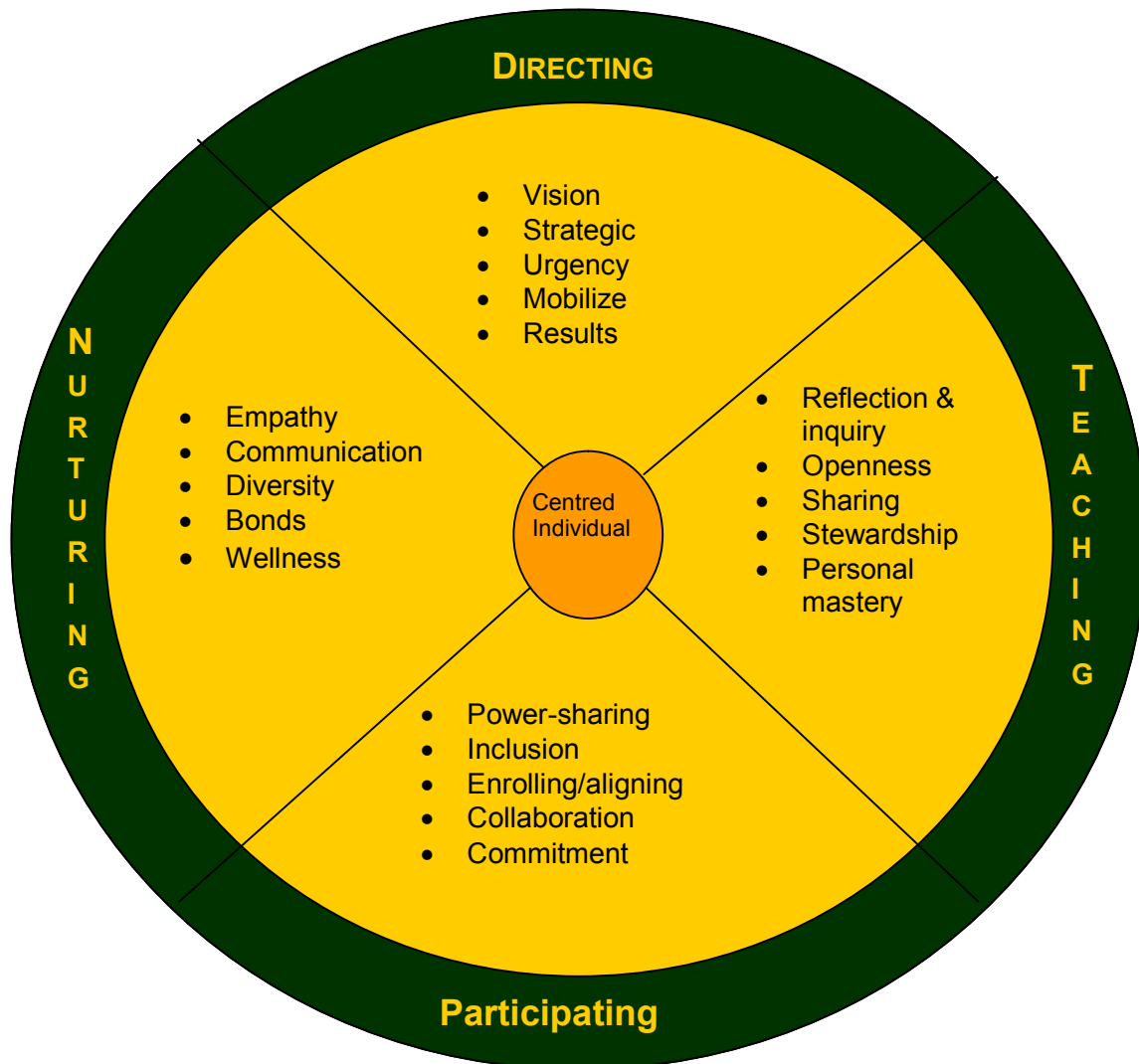
I have attempted in this paper to present an integrated model of leadership that is simple in design yet complex in practice. The four components of the holistic leader model are not discrete but rather interdependent. When looking at one part of the model it quickly becomes apparent of the link to other parts. And this is how we need to approach leadership: by understanding the web of relationships among the many elements. If we take the approach that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, then we will benefit from the synergies that emerge when we work towards becoming holistic leaders.

*Genuine inquiry starts when people ask questions
to which they do not have an answer.*

Peter Senge

The Holistic Leader

The Four Components & Their Principal Elements



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