

# From Transactional Leadership to... Reflective Leadership

James L. C. Taggart

*Most of us seek quantum leaps in our performance levels by following  
a strategy of incremental investment. This strategy simply does not work.  
The land of excellence is safely guarded from unworthy intruders.  
At the gates stand two fearsome sentries—risk and learning.  
The keys to entrance are faith and courage.*

Robert E. Quinn

“Hi Dan,” Sheila called as she poked her head into the office of one of her managers. “Are you interested in taking a two day coaching course next week? It’s aimed at helping managers become better coaches.”

“Sure, why not. Sounds good,” Dan replied. “I could learn a few tips to make myself a better coach. But to be honest, Sheila, everyone’s talking about coaching and mentoring. Just look at the shelves in the bookstores and the business sections of newspapers. Coaching’s hot stuff. Some of us were talking about this in the coffee room last week, and we basically agreed that this is probably another fad. Next year they’ll be on to something else.”

“Maybe so,” Sheila responded. “But try to go into the workshop with an open mind.”

“Okay,” Dan sighed. “What about you? Do you plan to take it sometime?”

“Nah. I’ve been around in management long enough,” Sheila said. “I’ve read some books on coaching and mentoring and have plenty of experience managing people. Besides, I’m too busy to give up even two days. Gotta run to a meeting. See you later, Dan.”

“Right.....oh, and thanks,” Dan muttered, scratching his head in puzzlement at his boss’s reply.

This fictional conversation serves as a segue to delve into the inner side of leadership. Leadership development has traditionally been based on an externalized approach. In other words, people take training courses that instruct them on the desirable characteristics, or qualities, of leaders and how they should act. Moreover, training has relied to some extent on old assumptions about leadership. In particular, the “heroic” approach to leadership (i.e., the strong individual leader) still prevails in some areas of leadership development.

It is only recently that a growing portion of the literature is concentrating on leadership development from the inside out. That is to say, getting people in formal or informal leadership positions to take a hard look at themselves. “Who am I as a leader? Why do I behave as I do?”

are questions that we need to periodically ask ourselves. When we pose these questions, it takes us to a deeper level of inquiry and reflection.

*Few people question their basic assumptions  
about the world or are even aware of them.*

Patricia Cranton

In the conversation between Dan and Sheila, each holds a different mental model about leadership. During their interaction, Dan and Sheila are each having *unspoken* conversations; in other words, what is going on in their heads, which reflects their unconscious assumptions and beliefs.

*Dan's unspoken conversation:*

“I’m still pretty new to my job as manager and feel kind of inadequate. This coaching stuff sounds good but people issues make me feel uncomfortable. I’d rather just focus on the technical parts of my job. But Sheila sure could use some training. She micro-manages all of her managers. No wonder she puts in ten hour days.”

*Sheila's unspoken conversation:*

“This coaching stuff’s B.S. I know how to get people to do things, and I know the work inside-out. My managers do what I tell them to do. None of this warm and fuzzy stuff for me. I’ve worked my way up the hard way, and I didn’t need a fancy degree to get where I am.”

Sheila perceives herself as a competent director, who doesn’t need to learn a new skill. Her self-image is one of “I’m already there. Been there, done that.” But yet she is insecure with the changes underway in the organization, in particular the growing emphasis on the “soft,” people skills. Her unconscious fear is leaving what is secure and comfortable for something that requires personal insight and discovery.

Dan, on the other hand, is ambivalent. He knows down deep that to be an effective managerial leader that he has a lot of work to do. Yet he is apprehensive of the commitment he must make to go into this unknown territory. He is not yet comfortable with having to develop a deeper understanding of himself.

One of the most difficult realizations we have as human beings is that we are *never* there. Even the manager who has been in her job for 15 years and knows the issues, processes, and technical aspects inside out still has more to learn. What does she *really* know about herself?

The assumptions we carry with us—call it our personal baggage—affect how we interact with others, whether it is at work, home, or in the community. These assumptions, developed and cemented from our life experiences (good and bad), form our mental models. These in turn distort our leadership lenses through which we see the world. How we lead people is affected profoundly by our lenses. If a manager’s lens is distorted by the debris of hardened assumptions, this makes it that much harder for her to be open to other views and possibilities.

*There's nothing more powerful you can do to  
encourage others in their quest for personal mastery  
than to be serious in your own quest.*

Peter Senge

In her book *Transformative Learning* (1994), Patricia Cranton refers to S. Brookfield (*The Skillfull Teacher*, 1990), who states: "...routine, habit, and familiarity are strongly appealing, and for some, the conduct of life is a quest for certainty, for a system of beliefs and a set of values—even for a well-defined social structure—that they can adopt and commit to, for life." She follows with her own comment: "Adults will resist contradictions to their beliefs and will deny discrepancies between new learning and previous knowledge. In response to a challenge to their assumptions, many learners will entrench themselves even more firmly in their belief system and become hostile or withdrawn in the learning environment." (p. 18)

Take a moment to reflect on the above paragraph, especially the concluding comment by Cranton. *How often have you seen this behavior in your organization? How do we get beyond this type of response by people?* Focus for a moment on what this means for managerial leadership. If managers, as leaders and coaches, engage in this type of behaviour, how will organizations ever take the necessary leap of faith to become learning organizations? What do managers fear? And what do staff fear in expressing their leadership abilities in their daily work?

Reflect further on Brookfield's words: "The human capacity for denial knows no limits."

How, then, do managers transcend from a traditional, transactional approach to leadership, in which the manager negotiates with the subordinate: "Do this, and this is what I'll give you." Often, these are not explicit conversations, but rather implicit understandings. The employee knows that if he does 'this and this,' and not 'that and that,' he'll receive something in return. Does this method of 'leadership' build commitment from staff? Does it *enroll* the individual in a common mission and vision? Or is it oriented more towards compliance and implicit consent of not rocking the boat?

The leader who understands herself and who does not fear sharing her strengths, gifts, weaknesses, and warts with her staff is on the path to becoming a reflective leader. This person understands—and values—the human dimension of leadership. It is an inner journey, one that each of us struggles with for life. We're never *there*, but continuously striving towards a personal vision of enhanced self-awareness and service to others.

This makes leadership a not-so-easy discipline to follow. The books, tapes, seminars, etc. promise great things to make us effective leaders. But leadership, the kind needed for learning organizations, cannot be sold over-the-counter. It is not about techniques and gimmicks. When we understand that it is about lifelong personal growth, filled with struggles and stumbles, we'll have made one significant step forward.