

Mastering Leadership

Bob Anderson,
Founder & CEO, The Leadership Circle®



The **Leadership Circle**®

At this time in organizational history we are breaking from traditional paternal bureaucratic forms of organizations to high involvement, empowered partnership and collaborating-learning organizations. Paternal bureaucracies did not need empowered people—except near the top. The new organization, however, will only take hold when people at every level adopt an empowered stance toward their life, work and leadership. In this paper I will build a case for the inclusion of personal development as a critical component in any organizational change effort.

Peter Block declared culture change to be the cop out of the 80's. He noticed that most people involved in culture change were unaware of their own contribution to the problems in the culture and were busy blaming others. Test yourself and see if this is true: "Who is responsible for the frustration I feel at work?" We approach the culture as if there were an "it" out there that needs changing; and "it" is never us. Empowerment begins when we realize the "terrible truths" Ralph Stayer (CEO, Johnsonville Sausage Co.) came to: "I am the problem; and if anything is going to change around here I have to do most of the changing."

The critical flaw in the way most organizational change efforts are constructed is that they pay too little attention to the deep personal changes that are required of people at every level. The flawed assumption is that we can create the new culture out of the level of consciousness, thinking, and behavior that gave rise to the old culture. When this fatal flaw remains unchallenged the change efforts start with a flurry of energy, vision and activity; only to grind to a halt when people start waiting for others to change first and to give them permission to act on the new vision. This disempowered stance blocks substantial personal and organizational change from taking place. When we act out of this orientation we:

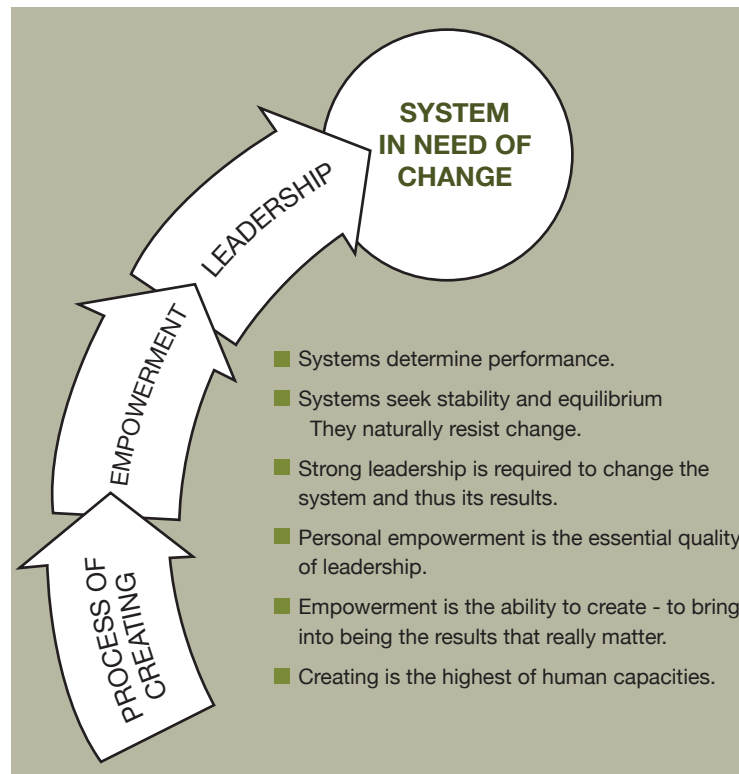
- Consistently put our political safety ahead of our vision.
- Avoid conflict by not bringing up the real issues that must be addressed if the organization is to move forward.
- Talk about letting go of control without ever examining our deep needs to hold on to it.
- Take no new action without first knowing all the steps . . . so nothing happens.
- Pass ideas for even simple change up the ladder for others to give us permission to move forward on things that are within our authority, and then claim no responsibility for our complicity and blame "them" if permission is denied or, worse, no answer comes back.
- Expect top management to have all the answers, provide the charismatic vision and generally fix the mess we are in (so we don't have to).
- Wait for the culture to change, for mixed messages to go away and for a guarantee of risk-free success before personally investing in change.

When this type of thinking is prevalent in a system, meaningful change is nearly impossible because there is not enough individual leadership present to get anything moving. Leadership happens when one of us (at any level) decides that what is going on around us is our responsibility, that the success of the business, and our life, is in our own hands. And that we need wait for no one to begin creating the future we want. We become empowered when we choose to create the future we want, in the midst of the current culture, and begin the process of learning what we need to learn to do so.

I define **empowerment** as *learning how to create what matters most in our life through our work. It is not something we do or give to others.* When I ask people what they would create if they could create anything, they often begin to describe their highest aspirations like world peace, love, great relationships, and exciting and meaningful work. For most, however, the notion of creating what

really matters is too good to be true; and, the idea of creating what matters at work is altogether foreign. Our unofficial statistics reveal that only 2% of us would remain at our current jobs if we won the lottery. What is the real likelihood of making substantial shifts in the quality of American made products and services in terms of the level of innovation, pride and commitment to turning out world class products when, on any given day, 98% of us would rather be someplace else? Slim to none.

This is evidence of both how stifling organizations have become, and of how lost most of us are from our capacity to create. Our unfamiliarity with the creative process has led us to conclude that it is not possible to create the lives and organizations for which we truly long, undermined by our belief that vital change is impossible.



Empowerment is a change in the way we live our lives. We shift from being a reactor to becoming a creator, from being pushed and pulled by external forces and circumstances to being the author of the future we want and choosing to move toward it. Empowerment shifts us away from blaming our bosses, the culture, the obstacles and the constraints. That is, we stop blaming anything but ourselves for our current problems, and move toward taking full responsibility for what is happening. It means treating the business as if we owned it. We become entrepreneurs in the midst of our bureaucratic cultures.

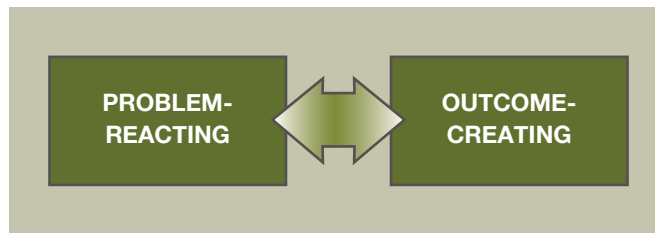
Empowerment means making our own behavior consistent with our vision. We become an example of how we want others to act. It means creating, in the part of the organization we can influence, an organization we believe can serve as a model of the culture and performance we want for the whole. Empowerment is a stance of responsibility for the whole, but it does not require that the whole rearrange itself to support our vision and provide a safe path. Rather, empowerment orients us toward influencing the whole through our own personal example. It is a stance of vision, courage, and authenticity. It is the stance of the leader.

If empowerment is the capacity to create what matters, **leadership** is *enhancing the collective*

capacity to create. As we move toward empowered partnerships and learning organizations the task of leadership shifts from being the decision maker, planner, and author to the vision, to that of helping the organization learn to create its future. With the downward distribution of power, more and more people are being given responsibility for creating the future. Consequently, as we become more organizationally empowered we need to become more personally empowered. We need to enhance our individual capacities to create. If we are not able to develop others' skills of creating, the whole strategy of high involvement may fail. It is hard to imagine organizations as high performing, creative, innovative, flexible, and capable of creating their desired futures, if individuals and teams have not mastered their creative processes. You can't have one without the other. Enhancing this capacity is the emerging role of management.

Changing paradigms

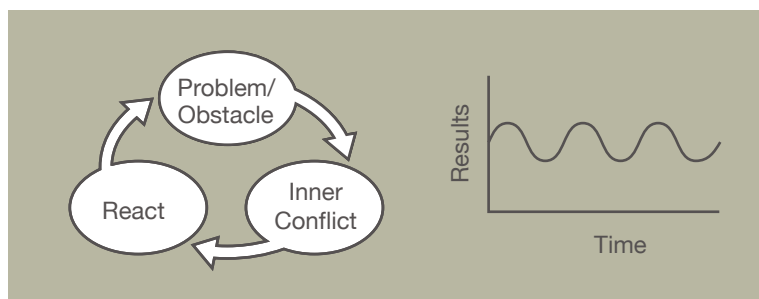
I want to make the case for a profound shift of mind and character as a prerequisite for leadership in the future. A more popular term for this is “paradigm shift.” I call the current, more common paradigm the “problem-reacting” structure. The rarer, more challenging paradigm for leadership and life I call the “outcome-creating” structure. This shift is one of the central paradigm shifts for leadership in the future.



Because this shift is so profound, there is no formula to follow to get from where we are to where we want to be. However, we can describe where we are in some detail, and we can describe the new model of leadership as well.

I think of these two models as contrasting “life stances” because we use or apply them so widely in our professional and personal lives. Both of these life stances serve us, but in very different ways. The problem-reacting stance is what we use to protect ourselves from danger and threat; we use the outcome-creating stance when we want to bring something we care about into being.

One critical characteristic of the problem-reacting life stance is that it is focused on removing what we do not want (problems, obstacles, threats, etc.). When this structure is driving our behavior, we tend to “move away from” problems and obstacles (or—more likely—move away from the unpleasant emotions generated by the problem) in order to make them go away. Our overriding goal is to get “back to normal.” Even the most efficient problem-solving strategies focus on leaving us without the problem, in a state of equilibrium—back where we started from. So what is the problem? No problem, if back to normal is where we want to go. However, the task of leadership is generally not the maintenance of normal, but creating a new future reality.

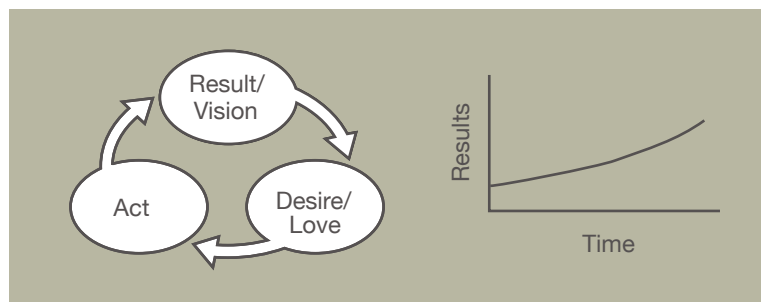


Another critical characteristic of this structure is that it is fear driven. The problem-reacting structure becomes especially insidious when our anxiety—our inner, emotional conflict—becomes our most important problem. As this happens, we take action to “solve” our anxiety—often times at the expense of solving the real problem or taking action to create the future we want. This structure becomes even more insidious because it works; and the fact that it works, makes it self-rewarding. In other words, we react to feeling bad either by leaping into action or avoiding action. The effect of these actions is that we feel better in the short run. Because we got what we want—to feel better—we reinforce the continued use of this structure.

However, two undesirable side effects more than likely result when our primary goal is to feel better. First, because the goal is to resolve the anxiety quickly, we tend to jump to a quick fix rather than address the real issue. This virtually assures that the problem will be back. Second, because the action we take is principally to alleviate the anxiety, the energy that motivates our action dissipates the more successful we are. Once the anxiety is gone, so is the reason for taking action. The consequence of this is that we stop taking action and the problem returns. We see lots of start-ups with few successful completions.

Can you think of a personal or organizational problem that you saw yesterday, you are seeing today, and you expect to see tomorrow—in spite of your past, current, and future attempts to solve it? It may even seem to you that the harder you try to solve it, the more it keeps coming back! I suggest to you that when this happens, the problem-reacting structure is in control of your personal or organizational behavior. In systems terminology, you are experiencing oscillation—a pattern of behavior that is a natural consequence of this structure.

Just as this oscillating pattern of behavior is no doubt familiar to you, you also probably know its alternative. Have you ever produced an important result in your life or work, something that you wanted for its own sake—simply because it mattered? That is, something that turned out pretty much as you had envisioned it, something that you can look on now with pride? Each of us has a natural tendency to create results that matter—to bring into being something that never existed before, and to create futures consistent with our aspirations and values.



The outcome-creating life stance focuses on envisioned results. This structure derives its energy from a very different set of emotions: love is not too strong a word. The resulting pattern of behavior is growth oriented rather than oscillation oriented. It becomes possible to get results and to keep getting more results. Why? Because as we act out of the desire we feel for the results we want, and as we see those results come into being, our energy for seeking these results increases. This does not mean that when creating we do not experience anxiety or problems. We do. However, we note and understand them, and continue taking action based on what gets us to the vision. In this structure, we experience what the systems thinkers call sustainable growth. In the process, we are much more likely to develop systemic, long-term solutions for the messes in which we sometimes find ourselves; in fact, we naturally expect that from a vision oriented structure.

I began this paper by defining **empowerment** as the capacity to bring into being what matters in our lives and work. I also suggested that **leadership** entailed cultivating this capacity in others and throughout the organization. I place leadership squarely in the outcome-creating orientation. Putting these two definitions together, I define **empowered leadership** as the *life-stance of continuously focusing one's attention and commitment on a desired future, and in the midst of the current situation, working cooperatively with others to take action that brings that shared vision into being over time.*

Leadership is a life-stance. It is a different way of going at life. It is vision oriented and driven by passion and commitment. It is, as we shall see later, a higher level of character development. We notice in great leaders the highest of human qualities and values. What distinguishes them as a leader goes far beyond their technical skill, market knowledge, and managerial competency. They are creators. They are creating themselves into soulful renditions of their true nature, doing the work they most love, and creating futures worthy of their own commitment and the full commitment of others.

Leaders, especially leaders of the future, are partners. They are creating shared vision and working cooperatively with others to bring that vision into being. More than that, they are primary contributors to the development of others and the system. Their goal is to help others learn the creating game and to encourage the ongoing redesign of the organizational system so that it better supports creating and collaboration.

Creative Tension

I have said that the outcome-creating life stance is the basis of real leadership, that it can be thought of as a deep new paradigm for personal and organizational behavior, and that it represents a structure that naturally tends to produce the results we want, rather than get us back to where we started. Now I would like to explore that structure.

In describing the outcome-creating stance, I referred to our awareness of the results we want to create. I call this picture of our intended result our “vision,” and I will discuss what a vision is and how we get one later in this paper. For the time being, it's enough to know that in order to create a result, we must have an idea of that result in our mind, clearly enough that we would recognize the result if we indeed created it. (If this seems overly simple or simplistic, remember that in the



problem-reacting stance we act without a result in mind other than being without the problem or being free of the obstacle.) This vision of the results we want to create is one component of the structure that is at the heart of leadership.

A second structural component follows naturally from the first. Before we can take action on the result we want, we have to be aware of what we have to work with. Before we can take a step toward where we want to go, we have to know where we are right now. We must know all we can about our current situation, or as I call it, our “current reality.” The trick here is not to get stuck in trying to fix current reality—just learn about it. Creators have something much bigger in mind (vision) than a fixed problem

Leadership Disciplines

or removed obstacle.

If our vision is clear and so is our grasp of current reality, then we immediately notice the third and most powerful component of the outcome-creating structure. We notice the gap between what we have now and what we eventually want to have or create. Our awareness of this gap creates a positive force I call “creative tension.”

If we develop the discipline of focusing our attention on the results we most want while simultaneously telling the truth about current reality (without trying to quick fix it), then the natural tendency of this structure is to resolve by current reality changing over time to meet the vision (Fritz, 1989). Cultivating and maintaining creative tension is the central discipline of the outcome-creating life stance. It is the engine that fuels sustained growth. Leaders become masterful at cultivating it because they have learned that this discrepancy is not the enemy, but a friendly and powerful force for change.

However, establishing creative tension is not as easy as it seems, especially if the problem-reacting structure is an unconscious habit. As we become aware of the results we want and of our current reality, the gap between them may cause anxiety for us.

The anxiety that comes with creative tension is normal; we all experience it. However, we have a choice. We can react to the anxiety and find ourselves firmly stuck in the problem-reacting stance despite our best intentions, or we can focus our attention on results and consider our anxiety just one more component of our current reality.

This is a subtle yet powerful distinction, and it brings us closer to describing why developing our leadership requires life long discipline. Leaders sustain, even seek out, creative tension. They refuse to trap themselves into reacting to the inevitable anxiety. They do not ignore these negative feelings; to the contrary, they are students of their own fears. But they know that creative tension—which they learn to feel just as explicitly as we feel the tension in a rubber band—is the best source of the energy it takes to create the results they want.

There are eight disciplines that promote and sustain a shift into the outcome-creating stance of genuine leadership. Most of these disciplines are inner disciplines; that is, they are work that the leader does within him or herself. As Warren Bennis said, “The leader’s work is inner work.” Other of the disciplines are related to taking action. The rest of this paper describes these disciplines.

INNER DISCIPLINES:

- The ongoing discernment of a **personal purpose** worthy of our deepest commitment
- Translating that purpose into a **vision** of a desired future
- **Choosing** or fully committing oneself to that future
- Facing and inquiring into the **fears and inner obstacles** that limit us
- Developing **intuition** to balance and guide rational analysis

ACTION DISCIPLINES:

- Learning to **think systemically** and design new systems
- Authentically and courageously engaging in **dialogue** as we pursue our vision in cooperation with others
- Developing leadership **learning communities**.

PURPOSE

Leadership springs from the pursuit of purpose. Purpose is longing—love for what the soul wants most to pursue in and through this life. The Greeks called it Eros—the capacity to follow what is most intensely missing or unfinished in our lives. Purpose wells up from the soul. It is not something we invent. It finds us—if we pay attention. The primary task of life is to let it live us. This is leadership.

Most of us are unfamiliar with a deep and abiding sense of purpose, not because we don't have one, but because we have not integrated a discipline of silent attention into our lives. Without this discipline, we run the risk of becoming seriously off course and never living into our true destiny. Discovering purpose is simply a matter of paying attention to what our life has been telling us. Life has been speaking to us for a long time about what matters most. It has been leaving clues. It remains for us to have the courage to maintain a discipline of attention to the subtle way our soul calls to us.

Warren Bennis, in his book *On Becoming a Leader*, states that all of the leaders he interviewed agreed on the following points: “Leaders are made, not born, and made more by themselves than by any external means . . . No leader sets out to be a leader per se, but rather to express him/herself freely and fully . . . Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it's also that difficult . . . First and foremost, find out what it is you're about, and be that.”

The ongoing discovery and exploration of our sense of purpose is the central discipline of the outcome-creating stance. It is the starting place for true leadership development. The journey of leadership simply requires that we pay attention to both the inner world and the outer world. In this deep attention to life, we move toward leadership if we *follow our soul's longings until they lead to vision*. I believe that this is both the path to great leadership—the kind that can empower others, transform organizations, and move the world—and the purpose of life.

VISION AND ALIGNMENT

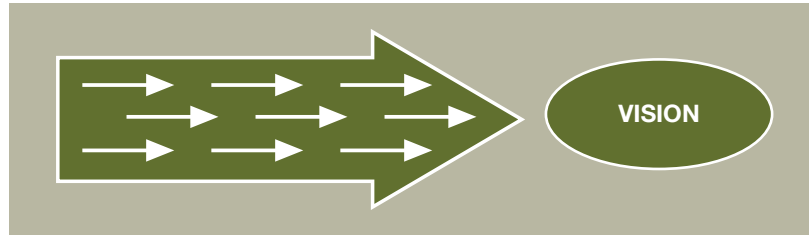
If purpose is the starting place for leadership, then vision is the leader's primary contribution. Leadership is fundamentally the act of articulating and acting in pursuit of a vision that flows from our commitment to a higher purpose. Each of us has a unique and personal purpose that is seeking expression through our lives. Vision is a picture of how we want to actualize that meaning in tangible ways. It is a way of perceiving the specific direction our spirit longs to go. True vision is specific, strategic, lofty and communal.

Vision must be **specific** enough that you would know it if you saw it realized. President Kennedy's State of the Union address is a good example. In that speech he called on the country to “. . .before the end of the decade, place a man [sic] on the moon and return him safely to Earth.” Notice that the President did not say, “We will explore the heavens . . .”—a statement of direction or intent—but rather named the result he had in mind, in enough detail that everyone would know (as they did in July of 1969) that we had done it.

Vision is **strategic**, but it is not strategy. Strategy begins to chart the course of how to get from wherever we are to the vision. Vision is the capstone of strategy. It is a description of the business, as we want it to exist at some point in the future. It sets a direction that will allow the organization to thrive. Vision is a response to current realities of the marketplace, but it describes a future that is not limited by the constraints of reality. Vision defines the organization's unique contribution to real needs, real markets, and real social and cultural imperatives.

Vision is also **lofty**. It captures our highest aspirations for our lives and work (Kiefer and Stroh, 1984). It is unashamedly spiritual and fundamentally imaginative. A lofty vision grabs us at a deeper level than does the promise of profit, or market share. While a vision will often include these, by lofty

I mean that it appeals to our values, higher aspirations and personal purposes. In this way, a lofty vision also makes the pursuit meaningful and worthwhile.



Vision is communal. The alignment of others around our vision is essential if our organizations are to develop. Some advise leaders to create the vision and then get others to enroll or sign up. But this is patriarchal and counterproductive; no power comes from enrolling in someone else's vision. Instead, by expressing his or her vision, the leader causes others to reflect on what they stand for. It's very difficult to remain neutral in the presence of strong leadership. When we encounter it, we are challenged to examine or evaluate our own interests and our own stance. Alignment happens when other people discover that they too can realize their purpose by working with the leader in the interest of a common vision.

When the leader embodies the vision, stimulates reflection by others, and engages in dialogue about commonalities of purpose, he or she creates an opportunity for the true purpose and vision of the organization to rise to the surface. True alignment comes about as the dialogue continues. Leaders must initiate and sustain this dialogue, willing to influence and be influenced. The result of the ongoing dialogue is an emerging consensus about current reality together with a vision that expresses the highest aspirations of the group—one that excites, humbles, and fulfills its members and contributes to organizational success.

CHOICE

Another essential discipline of leadership is committing ourselves before we know how we will do what we say we will do, before it feels perfectly safe to make the commitment, and before we know with certainty that it is even possible. I use the word "choice" for this kind of commitment. To choose a result is to commit ourselves to it, in spite of all the reasons why that choice may not seem feasible. Making the choice is the fundamental act; everything else follows from that.

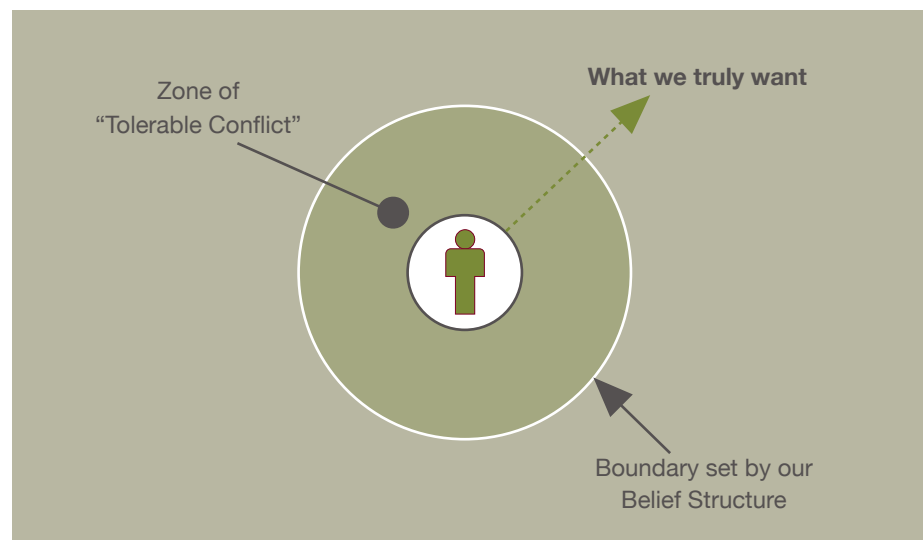
Choice is a leap. It means accepting in one moment all the risk that pursuing the choice entails. It means letting go of the need to know how and trusting that a creative how will be discovered along the way. Most of us are not used to full commitment of the will. And there is a vast difference between 95% and 100% commitment. Leaders ask themselves, "If I knew I could not fail, would I pursue this?" And if the answer is "yes," they make the choice—in full knowledge that they may fail, but also knowing that the best preventive for failure is full commitment.

When choosing, many people experience a powerful dose of anxiety, the source of which is their internal structure of beliefs about what's possible for them. Leaders study their anxieties for clues about their internal structure of beliefs, and they find ways to work with these beliefs in order to improve the odds that what they have chosen, they can indeed create. These beliefs form the most significant obstacles to our creating what we want. These beliefs do not need to be eliminated prior to choosing (in fact, as we will see later, they cannot be eliminated), nor do the inner conflicts created by the beliefs need to be resolved before making the choice. It is enough to know that we want it. If

we want it we can choose it even though these contradictory beliefs are creating anxiety. What we do with this anxiety and inner conflict is the next leadership discipline.

WORKING WITH INNER OBSTACLES

We are all mapmakers. We all make conclusions from our experience about the nature of reality and the nature of ourselves. Many of these beliefs were made when we were young and, therefore, inexperienced mapmakers. In fact, our maps are littered with errors. Most of the errors take the form of equating our self-worth and security with acquiring something external to ourselves, such as, the approval of others, recognition, love, perfection, being right, fitting in, getting ahead, being successful, etc. These equations (e.g., worth = approval) create a compulsive need to always have whatever worth and safety are equated to. I call these equations belief structures. Other beliefs that cause us problems are conclusions we have made that place limits on what we are capable of or what is possible for us (e.g., I can't speak well in front of others). We also form beliefs about others and the nature of reality (e.g., It is a hostile world where everyone is out for themselves). Taken altogether these belief structures make up a map of reality that we use to navigate our lives.

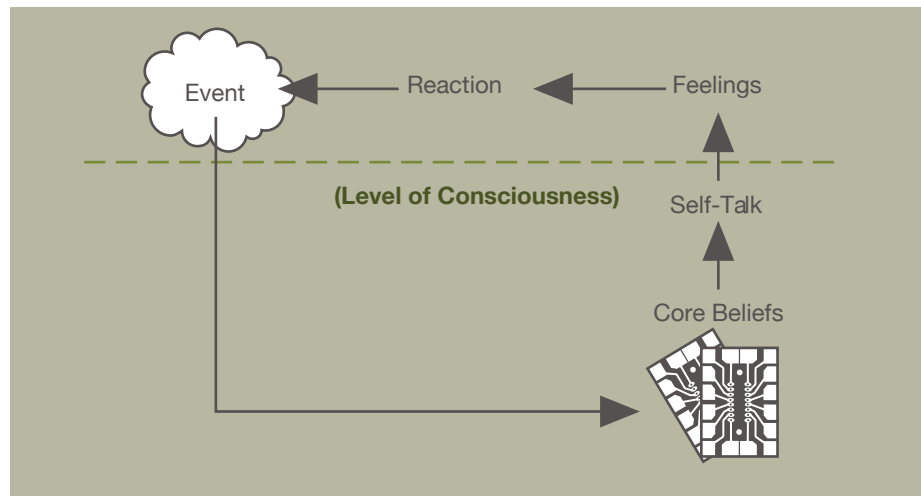


When discovering, choosing what we truly want, or taking action conflicts with our maps of reality and identity, we experience fear in one of its many forms: anxiety, doubt, despair, anger, helplessness, urgency, etc. If we then react to reduce fear and stay within the zone of “tolerable conflict,” (Fritz, 1989) our maps (the boundaries set by our belief structures) are defining our future rather than our conscious choice. Because most of us have serious flaws in our map, letting our map be the guide is a sure way of getting lost. Our lives become determined by past choices and conclusions, not by the future we want.

It may seem unrealistic, or even offensive, to observe that many successful managers and employees are unconsciously acting on strategies they adopted as children to establish a sense of safety and self-worth. Yet, I believe it is true. When we experience certain events, our subconscious or core beliefs are confronted. These beliefs generate self-talk, which leads to our conscious feelings, which produce reactions and behaviors related to the event. This is the problem-reacting orientation at work in the work place.

In addition, because these belief structures are unconscious, we frequently find ourselves espousing one thing as our beliefs drive a contradictory set of behaviors. And everybody sees this but us. The difference between our “walk” and our “talk” is that our unconscious self drives the former while

our conscious mind drives the latter. If we remain unaware of our belief structure, then our beliefs manage us. Only when we expose and examine these beliefs do we have the opportunity to manage them.



This exploration—the discovery and reframing of beliefs that prevent us from creating what matters most—is the deeper work of personal transformation and part of the path to genuine organizational transformation. It is perhaps the most challenging and rarest of all the disciplines of leadership. And, therefore, it is the most essential.

BALANCING REASON AND INTUITION

Much of what I have suggested about leadership in this article is highly rational, but not in the linear, logical way that we are most used to. The leader's sense of personal purpose does not come from the domain of logic; it comes from the domain of the soul. A vision of results that matter is created as much by the non-rational, unconscious mind as by the cerebral cortex. (I believe that our super-rationality is in part what makes it hard to envision results that—at the moment—we don't know how to create.) Finding leverage points in complex systems cannot be done by traditional analytical techniques (Senge, 1990). According to Jerome Wiesner, "Some problems are just too complicated for rational, logical solutions. They admit of insights, not answers."

We tend to ignore our intuition because our cultural bias tells us to. In order to lead effectively, we need access to every kind of information available to us. We need access to forms of perception beyond the bounds of our usual organizational rationality. We need to see relationships and interconnections that are invisible to linear, logical methods. The discipline of leadership is to recognize that intuition is real, that we all have it, that it can be developed through practice, and that—in the words of the philosopher Schopenhauer— "There is in us something wiser than our head."

SYSTEMS THINKING AND DESIGN

In the presence of a new and compelling vision, organizational structures must evolve, because when structural change is ignored, visions fail. They fail because structural forces are more powerful than individual commitment. Only when leaders have the courage to meet the challenge of structural change head-on, do they have a chance of seeing their vision become reality.

Organizational systems seem to have a life of their own. That is, they act as any living organism does,

they seek homeostasis or equilibrium when change is introduced (Senge, 1990). This tendency to resist change helps to ensure the survival of the system; it also makes them very difficult to change. This resistance cannot in the long run be overcome by any amount of increased motivation or skills enhancement. What can change systems is leveraged action: strategically focused action aimed at particular points of leverage that may be far removed in time and space from the symptoms that infuriate us at the moment. Finding leverage points requires us to know how to see and explore the dynamic system-ness of our current reality. This means that when we establish creative tension, we see the systemic structure of current reality, not just symptoms and problems. To do this we need to resist reacting to the hot or loud symptoms closest at hand; to focus attention on the redesigned system we choose to create; and to live with the anxiety of not responding to all the problems as we search for leverage.

A primary role of leadership in operationalizing the vision is as an architect of structure. An architect does not do the construction, he/she guides the process. This means that senior leaders ensure that processes are in place so that the organization learns to think systemically and to redesign itself over time. It does not mean that senior leaders do the redesign and then require others to adapt to new roles and processes. The real challenge is to develop a change strategy that gets broad-based involvement in the ongoing renewal of the system. In addition, the deeper work of leadership development needs to go on side by side with system redesign. When leadership development is integrated into a well-conceived strategy for wholesale involvement in systems redesign, visions become reality. People grow and translate that growth directly into organizational improvement.

AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE AND COURAGE

There is much written and spoken about organizational culture, how to deal with it and how to change it. Much of this material discusses culture as if it is somehow separate from the individuals who make up the organization. In fact, it is the daily behavior of all these individuals that creates and recreates the culture continuously. The power to recreate the culture lies in authenticity. We all know what happens in a meeting when someone drops the pretense and speaks from the heart about issues around which everyone is ducking. The room goes quiet, we take note, and attention is riveted. Someone has stopped the game. This is power. This is when culture has the possibility of transforming.

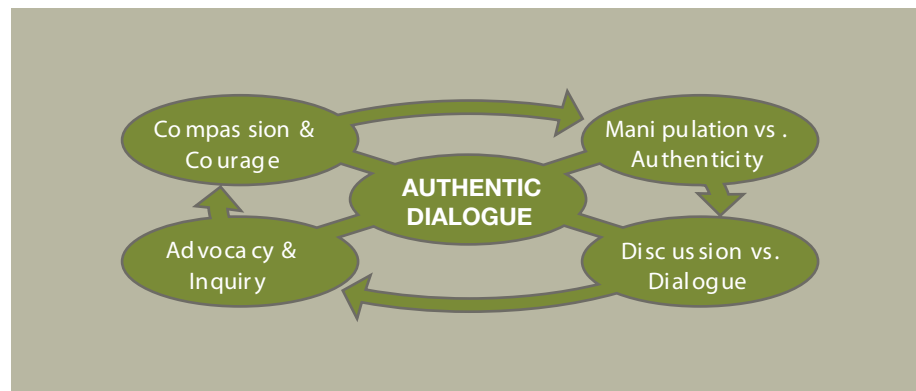
Most of us would genuinely be shocked if we acknowledged how much of our behavior with others comes from a place of fear in us. We are quick to show our anger, perhaps, but will hide the real hurt that lies just underneath it. We speak up at meetings or remain quiet in front of our colleagues and bosses, hoping to look brilliant or avoid looking foolish; seldom realizing the underlying fear that drives our behavior. In conflict or disagreements with those we live or work with there is a subtle tightening of the chest that goes unnoticed as we defend our positions, state our viewpoints and attempt to selectively listen to others. This tightening is evidence of our armoring our hearts and defending ourselves against being hurt by others. We hide the soft spot so others cannot and will not see us as we are. We hide this soft spot even from ourselves so we won't see ourselves as we are. We retreat to places in the head when matters of the heart are at stake. These and other strategies like them are essentially manipulative. We misrepresent ourselves or our own truth, in exchange for support, favor, safety, and even friendship.

The choice between manipulation and authenticity in our daily dialogue at work determines the culture. Authentic dialogue is life long work that begins with the choice to open ourselves to our own life and experience, to stop hiding who we really are from ourselves and others, to stop armoring our heart. It is the toughest work of all. It is not the work of becoming fearless. It's learning to speak truthfully even though we are afraid. Authentic dialogue, therefore, brings us face-to-face with the choice to move through life either in a manipulative or authentic posture. The journey towards

greater authenticity begins with acknowledging our own manipulative strategies— compassionately.

As we choose between manipulation and authenticity, another culture-building choice confronts us: the choice between **discussion** and **dialogue**. As Peter Senge has described it, discussion comes from the same root as percussion, and can be taken to mean throwing our ideas at each other, hoping to score points and win the day. This, too, is normative political process in most organizations.

Dialogue, in contrast, means—as Stephen Covey has expressed it—seeking first to understand, then to be understood. To engage in dialogue requires us to believe that we may have something to learn. If we do have something to learn, then we must balance our use of **advocacy**—promoting views that we may feel strongly about—with our use of **inquiry**—committed exploration of what others believe, feel, experience, are trying to say but cannot find the words for, are afraid to look at, and so forth. Only when we have navigated this terrain in ourselves can we be of real service to others.



To do this, especially in connection with issues we care deeply about, requires both **compassion** and **courage**. If we want to design and build an organization with a culture that supports our values, then we must act out these values in every encounter (Block, 1987). This frequently means telling the truth; that is, saying what we really think even though it may result in disapproval or the loss of things related to our self-interest or even to our self-esteem. I believe we almost always know what we should say; we do not say it because of a lack of courage.

We all tend to believe that if we speak out, we will “get shot” (Block, 1987). And certainly people do get shot in organizational life. Studies have clearly shown, however, that people more often are shot for the way they stand up rather than for the content of their speech. They get shot for arrogance, hostility, blaming, undermining, denying responsibility, or attacking people rather than issues (Hornstein, 1986). I think of these behaviors as the dark side of courage—courage unrestrained by compassion. Compassion means supporting others’ positions as reasonable and valid for them, understanding others’ harsh reality, owning up to our own contribution to the existing problems (Block, 1987). Culture change is not slow when this quality of dialogue prevails. Getting to the point where we consistently incorporate authentic dialogue in our daily conversations is what is slow.

The art of leadership is to act out of courage, but to do so in a compassionate way. I agree with Donald Wolfe, “It takes a special kind of courage to stay in tune with your feelings when those feelings conflict and seem to work against you. It takes courage to speak the truth in many situations, especially when that truth is unpopular and may bring down the wrath of others . . . And it takes courage to live fully by one’s beliefs and values—to persist in actions that run the risk of failure or the risk of hostility and rejection from others.”

BUILDING ALIGNED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Our organizations are too complex to figure out ourselves. The disciplines of leadership I have

described are largely personal; yet they cannot be successfully learned or practiced in isolation. We need other people with whom we can share our search for purpose and meaning. The act of choosing results to create is much more powerful if shared; in fact it must be a shared choice if the results are to be shared as well. The inner obstacles we face are—much to our surprise—very familiar to those around us and can be worked on together. The systems we are trying to lead and change are beyond us. Only the joined insights, analysis, and intuition of people in groups have a chance of discovering the most promising points of leveraged action.

Imagine a group of leaders learning together about their shared purpose, the common vision they have for their lives and their organization, and the myriad ways that their inner obstacles interfere. Such a group I would call a leadership learning community.

We need to commit ourselves to developing and sustaining leadership learning communities—groups of leaders (at every level) characterized by the shared practice of the disciplines I have described. We need leaders for whom positive political behavior—of the type I have advocated under “authentic dialogue”—replaces the negative politics we are used to. The thirteenth century mystic and poet, Rumi, wrote, “If you are here unfaithfully you are causing terrible damage. If you have opened your love to God’s love you are helping people you have never seen and will never know. Is what I say true? Say ‘Yes’ quickly.” We need to open ourselves to the spiritual part in each of us, which is also the truest part of us regardless of what spiritual discipline we come out of. We each have suffered under the consequences of living and working with people who were here “unfaithfully.” If you are like me, you have no doubt caused pain and suffering in others through your own faithless actions. We need to build communities of people in our organizations that encourage people at all levels to wake up.

Conclusion

Never has the world more required leadership. In the past leadership arose in response to a crisis or an attack from an outside enemy, but today there is no outside enemy or crisis on the horizon. In addition, the challenges that face us today point to fundamental flaws in the foundations of our basic world order. Consequently, the solutions to our current problems will not come from the thinking that created them. What’s required is leadership built on spiritual purpose, leadership with vision that arises from a deeply systemic view of the world, leadership willing to face our individual and collective beliefs, and a leadership willing to act authentically and courageously in community with others to build a new future. This future will be created or not created to the extent that our corporate vision and cultures are capable of learning and transforming. This will require empowered leadership—leaders capable of creating from the soul, collaborating with others, building learning communities, and living authentically.

I believe we are here to contribute to the world—through developing our abilities to create results that matter—and also to become whole—by exploring and reframing our structure of beliefs. To combine these two efforts—to serve and to heal—is to be a leader. Engaging in these disciplines with honesty and authenticity, as a committed student of oneself and one’s surroundings, moves us toward leadership and true empowerment, toward greatness, and toward organizations, nations, and a global community that reflects and fulfills our highest aspirations.

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About the Author

As founder and CEO of The Leadership Circle, Bob has created and conducted intensive leadership development workshops, pioneered innovative assessments, and mentored practitioners worldwide in how to manage complex leadership transformations. Spanning nearly 30 years, Bob Anderson's story is one of an innovator and visionary in leadership development. As early as high school and college, Bob staffed intensive personal and leadership development retreats. In business school, his love for statistics and economics helped to culture a unique talent. He became skillful at taking complex ideas and integrating them into models and methods for leadership development that are powerful, tangible, and accessible. While working as a manager in manufacturing, Bob completed a Master's degree in Organizational Development. Early in his career, he was fortunate to have had Peter Block as his mentor. He has also worked closely with some of the industry's most respected names including Peter Senge, Robert Fritz, and Ken Wilber. He and David Whyte co-taught leadership workshops created by Bob.

Today, under his leadership, The Leadership Circle's clients rank among the nation's top companies. Bob explains, "We now recognize that leadership is a process of transformation whereby a leader is encouraged to make a profound shift—to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, the world, and their relationship to others. This deeper, longer term work is what our Leadership Profile brings to the table, what The Leadership Circle stands for, and this is the kind of work we invite organizations to experience."