

# The Nature of Leadership—An Essay

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## Introduction

Language is the lifeblood of culture. It "is a special kind of artifact in human life. It is both an objective body of rules and conventions as well as a subjective and personal medium of expression" (English, 1994, p. 2). Essentially, "Language is a code of visual-auditory symbols that serves the psycho-epistemological function of converting concepts into the mental equivalent of [perceptual] concretes" (Rand, 1990, p. 10). Human cognitive efficacy relies upon a succinct conscious understanding of the way in which words and language are sensed, perceived, and conceptualized within a milieu.

There is no doubt our contemporary societal construct believes leadership exists. There have been literally thousands of books, chapters, and articles written on the subject within the past century (Bass, 1990). Organizations, indeed our very society, demands leadership from persons in positions of influence. However, before one begins a think piece such as this on the subject of leadership, it is prudent, if not imperative, to affirm leadership's very existence. That is, does leadership exist in reality?

In determining whether to believe something exists, epistemologically, one must bear in mind the following description from Ayn Rand's book *Introduction to Objective Epistemology* (1990): "Existence exists—and the act of grasping that statement implies two corollary axioms: that something exists which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists" (p. 4). In this fashion, leadership exists. It exists within the human consciousness because we as humans perceive it exists within our collective milieu. *Percipe ergo scire.*

## The Call for and the Challenge of Leadership

A call from on high. Congressman Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., the new Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and a history professor at Reinhardt College, Georgia, is teaching a course, *Renewing American Civilization*, in the Winter quarters of 1994, 1995, and 1996. The book for this course is of the same title, and has a prominent premier chapter, *Personal Strength in American Culture*. This chapter is focused on Principle Centered Leadership, as espoused by the authors, Covey & Gullledge. They state, "Perhaps the highest leveraged need today is strength of leadership, for leadership influences all areas of our life"

(Covey & Gulledge, 1993, p. 24). In accepting this premise, Congressman Gingrich is determined to revitalize America, but will he be using leadership? A call from within. Throughout government, industry, and education, the adoption and implementation of Dr. W. Edwards Deming's total quality management (TQM) philosophy has been heralded by some as the savior of our modern workplace... although, many are not aware of, or fully understand Deming's resounding call for leadership. In his fourteen points of transformation, point two states, "Adopt a new philosophy. We are in a new economic age. Western management must awaken to the challenge, must learn their responsibilities, and take on leadership for change" (Aguayo, 1991, p. 124). Taken literally, Deming realizes the necessity for leadership within management, and conceptualizes leadership as a distinct process. Ironically, many modern disciples of the Deming philosophy believe TQM is leadership. The American Management Association's recent book, *Essentials of Total Quality Management* (Williams, 1994) states, "TQM is mostly a style of leadership that creates an organizational culture which helps achieve the goal of creating the highest possible quality products and services" (p. 2). These two diverse views perpetuate the dilemma, and the question remains, what is leadership?

A call for caution. There exists today an unparalleled call for leadership. But one must be wary of the seduction from scholarly pursuit in leadership study. "Responsible scholarship requires that one clearly articulate the nature of leadership if one is going to expound on the subject" (Rost, 1993a, p. 70). As stated in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written almost five hundred years ago (cited in Starratt, 1993, p. 2), "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

One may conclude thus far that leadership exists within our modern societal consciousness. There is no doubt leadership is thought of as being necessary. Furthermore, it is easy to conclude that if one wishes to either study, or engage in leadership, one must cautiously, carefully, and clearly approach the subject of leadership. Even armed with these imperatives, there remains a significant deficiency in cogent understanding of the leadership process.

#### Clarity of Leadership Studies

"When leadership is established to unify the people, if the leadership is consistent, there is order, and if the leadership is inconsistent, there is disorder" Huai-nan Tzu, d. 122 B.C. (Cleary, trans. 1990). Is this true? Does "good" leadership bring about order?

Leadership mystifies our collective societal consciousness. Why?

The crisis of leadership today is the mediocrity or irresponsibility of so

many of the men and women in power, but leadership rarely rises to the full need for it. The fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity is intellectual. If we know all too much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership. . . . Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (Burns, 1978, p. 1-2).

This thought provoking statement cuts to the bone of leadership studies, and exposes a structure that this essay will use to synthesize the nature of leadership. Within this framework it is realized that in order to study the essence of leadership, a scholar or practitioner must do just that—study the process of leadership—not the leader.

#### Why not study the leader?

There is a strong conscious conviction within our modern industrial Western society that all things done well must have been done by the leader. Therefore, all who wish to do well must desire to become a leader. Our society places an inordinate value on the process of leadership, but typically rewards only the person in the position of the leader, not the persons involved in the process. This creates a tremendous perceptual problem of understanding what is leadership. In an effort to peer through the fog of the disparate understandings of the process called leadership, and therefore develop its true nature, Rost (1993a) in reviewing the body of leadership literature found that

Only when a third cut is done and one looks at the background assumptions (Gouldner, 1970) embedded in the definitions and models, when one looks at the meanings behind the words and investigates what the definitions and models really say, as well as what they do not say, that the revelation comes. And then the leadership literature makes sense (p. 92).

Rost's revelation is straightforward, yet profoundly earthshaking. He professes that the viewpoint of the persons writing on leadership were based upon their use of an industrial paradigm of understanding. Rost believes persons of the industrialized world perceive leadership as good management, and view the leader as a singular person, perched at the top of some great hierarchy, in some pivotal position of influence over a loyal group of followers, determining the direction, pace, and outcome of everyone's efforts. The industrial lens of leadership is therefore astigmatic in the projection of cogent futuristic scenes, and its use is perpetuated dogmatically within the panoptic industrial milieu. It is only when one adopts a postindustrial paradigm, as espoused by Rost, does the study of leadership make sense.

#### The Nature of Leadership

### Leadership for the Twenty–First Century–A Postindustrial Vision

Rost defines leadership as, "An influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (1993b, p. 99). Rost further identifies the four essential elements within this definition of leadership, all of which must be present if any relationship is to be called leadership. They are: (a) the relationship is based on *influence*, (b) *leaders and collaborators* are the effective agents in this relationship, (c) leaders and collaborators intend *real changes*, and, (d) leaders and collaborators develop *mutual purposes* [my emphasis] (p. 99-100). These four themes; influence, leaders and collaborators, real change, and mutual purpose, will be used to synthesize the nature of leadership. I will succinctly construct the nature of leadership using the literary who, what, when, where, and why approach. However, for clarity, I will not address them in this explicit order.

#### The Who of Leadership

Leadership is a process that exists in our societal consciousness. "The leaders and collaborators are the actors in this relationship" (p. 99). These actors are the *who* of leadership. As previously discussed, leadership is not something one person does; it is a collaborative process requiring two or more persons. Many authors, in describing leadership, focus on the single person, e.g., hero, great man or woman theory, or similarly interject the quantitative measure of traits in the great leader, in order to define if the leadership process did or does exist. Bass (1990), Burns (1978), Kouses & Posner (1987 & 1993), Ray (1993), and several authors of chapters in *Contemporary Issues in Leadership*, edited by Rosenbach & Taylor (1993), just to name a few, are guilty of this error.

#### The What of Leadership

Within Rost (1993b), influence is the *what* of leadership. According to Rost influence is multidirectional. That is, influence "can go any which way, not just from the top down" (p. 99). Lastly, influence must be noncoercive. If influence were coercive "the relationship would turn into authority" (p. 99).

Again, many authors, Bass (1990), Burns (1978), Kouses & Posner (1987 & 1993), Ray (1993), Starratt (1993), and several additional authors of chapters in *Contemporary Issues in Leadership*, edited by Rosenbach & Taylor (1993), are way off the mark in their discussion of leadership, because they believe (a) leadership is a top down process, and (b) coercion, power, and authority, are to some extent, allowed, if not encouraged in leadership.

In this sense, in the postindustrial paradigm, individual influence in the collective must be selfless. That is, the ends of the leadership process should not be a grounds for the motivation of the self. Persons who exhibit influence during the process of leadership must formulate their vision using the collective lens—not the

individual.

### The When of Leadership

Leadership as a process is episodic. It does not occur continually, twenty-four hours a day. The *when* of leadership accepts this fact, and further acknowledges that leadership occurs only when real change is intended. As stated by Rost (1993b), "**Intend** means that the changes the leaders and their collaborators promote are purposeful" and they "do not have to produce changes to do leadership, only intend them and then act on that intention. The intention is in the present the changes are in the future" (p. 99). Further, in explaining what *real* means, Rost adds, "**Real** means that the changes are substantive and transforming. Pseudo changes do not qualify for a relationship called leadership" (p. 99).

Many authors, Bass (1990), Burns (1978), Kouses & Posner (1987 & 1993), Ray (1993), Starrett (1993), and several additional authors of chapters in *Contemporary Issues in Leadership*, edited by Rosenbach & Taylor (1993), once again, would have us believe that leadership is a continuous process, and that the leader is the one who solely determines the effective changes. This is unacceptable as a context for leadership in the postindustrial paradigm.

### The Why of Leadership

I discuss the *why* of leadership before the *where*, because it presents itself more clearly in this construction of the nature of leadership.

Leaders and their collaborators do leadership—but why? I believe they do leadership because of mutual purposes. This is the *why* of leadership. As explained by Rost (1993b) "the mutual purposes become the common enterprise of the leaders and their collaborators because the purposes are forged in the noncoercive, influence relationship" (p. 99).

I believe that in this way, the who, what, when, and why's of leadership are synergistic, and comprise the essential nature of leadership. These essential elements are used to define whether or not leadership exists within the participant's societal framework.

### The Where of Leadership

This is not a study of the geography of leadership, so the *where* of leadership is not concerned with the location of the process in the physical location sense, rather, it is focused on the question, within what existence does leadership occur? The answer clearly is that leadership occurs within a like-minded conscious framework. More specifically, in summarizing the previous points, using Rost's (1993a) definition, leadership occurs at the moment the actors (who), using influence (what), desire to do real change (when), while agreeing to mutual purposes (why). This is the nature of leadership. Further, I believe the *where* of

leadership occurs separately from the distinct nature of leadership, as explained above. Allow me to illustrate.

The *where* of leadership is not to be found within the nature of leadership. The nature of leadership is a sub part of the overarching process called leadership. Rost (1993a) is quite clear in this delineation. He stated, "If leadership is an influence relationship, then the process whereby leaders and followers [collaborators] interact becomes crucial to the ethics of leadership. The process defines both the nature of leadership and its ethical integrity" (p. 155).

Ergo, the *where* of leadership is this ethical integrity, and is distinctly separate from the essential nature of leadership. Therefore, one group's ethical milieu will construct the bounds within which the process of leadership will exist, and its existence is valid within that construct. That does not prohibit a different group, with a different, even contradictory ethic from doing leadership—however, perceptions across these two contrasting ethics would bring certain condemnation.

A modern example of this conflict is the distinct differences between the "right to life" and the "pro-choice" camps. I do not see a time where either of these two camps will ever see the other as doing leadership together, because of the moral imperative in the overarching leadership process. However, it is not difficult to assume that within their own camp, the view is quite different. Persons may certainly be seen, from within their own consciousness as doing leadership. As was discussed in the introduction, one's consciousness determines one's reality. In this, Rost's definition is not bogged down in the same mire as Burns (1978), English (1994), Kouzes & Posner (1987 & 1993), Starrett (1993), and others, when attempting to define leadership using the parameters of values, ethics, or morality. These dimensions are self-limiting—that is, in placing them into a definition limits the utility of the definition, temporally and contextually, neutralizing its efficacy within our limitless world.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the modern world is in the throws of a momentous transformation, unparalleled in history. Leadership is needed, if not demanded, to ensure successful transformation throughout all levels of society. The entirety of society is not required to change in order to accomplish significant change. Foster (1989) supports this concept, when he states, "Transformation does involve social change. But this does not necessarily mean *societal* change" (p. 52-53).

The nature of leadership exists within a human milieu. Language is the lifeblood of societal culture and the collective consciousness. When leadership is viewed through the lens of an industrial paradigm, aberrations appear, caused by lexiconic confusion. When one embraces the post industrial paradigm, as

espoused by Rost (1993a & 1993b), a clear vision appears, cutting through the fog, like the radar of some great ship, charting a course through the darkness towards the light of the twenty-first century.

Scholars and practitioners of leadership must turn away from the dogmatic seduction of leadership so prevalent in the modern industrial context. Adoption of the postindustrial paradigm of leadership is required to judiciously educate and prepare society's constituents for the twenty-first century, and the challenging future of leadership.

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