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New Thinking About Leadership for a New World of Business

# LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE BASELINE

By Dr. Pat Gill Webber and Catherine J. Rezak

All Jan Murphy kept thinking was, maybe the reason things weren't going well was related to *training*.

After all, Roy, Lillian and Ken had been standouts as managers in their respective divisions of a national retailing organization. When Jan, a vice president of operations, identified these three managers for the fast track to leadership within the organization, they were quickly put into the company's leadership development program — long considered a standout in the industry.

That was two years ago. And now . . . well, Jan can't bring herself to question her earlier judgment. She has built her career by recognizing talented managers like Roy, Lillian and Ken. They were winners. She just knew it. And yet, today Roy

is managing a series of teams that are struggling with change and are not producing results. Lillian, experienced as a project manager, recently delivered a new offering on time and under budget that simply failed to connect with the organization's strategic initiatives.

As for Ken, Jan recognized all too well the impact of the increased organizational demands on him. He is becoming less and less effective and is heading for burnout.

So what is the problem here? Granted, training makes for an easy target. Everyone blames the training. Perhaps the real issue, she told herself, is that leadership itself has changed. Perhaps it's time to revisit our thinking about what it means to be a leader in this organization.

Jan is right. Leadership is changing.

You may have noticed this. It rarely arrives in a flash of insight (“Hey! It’s time to revisit our philosophy of leadership!”). It’s more like that “boiling-frog syndrome”—a gradually dawning awareness that what used to work isn’t serving us as well as it used to, followed by discomfort, eventually evolving into a debilitating organizational pain. It’s the oldest story in business.

Nobody is too interested in being steeped in the boiling water of this high-stakes business environment. Increasingly, smart organizational leaders are recognizing that some leadership redefinition may be in order. Their leaders may have the core stuff down—setting goals, delegating, providing feedback, running meetings, and so on.

But as Roy, Lillian and Ken discovered, there are some critical missing pieces. Many new leaders lack an overall sense of accountability to produce significant impact on the business.

This used to be (arguably) the kind of accountability you’d expect for the person in the top square of the org chart. But today, the heat is on and the water is starting to bubble. Those higher-level leader sensitivities need to filter throughout the organization, from managers, to project leaders, to individual contributors, to the stock room, to the loading dock . . . and anywhere else in the organization where you find people working.

Call it a new age of worker accountability. Call it the practice of the learning organization. Use any buzzword you like. The point

is, organizational leadership is morphing into something new, moving out of the oak-paneled corporate suite and into the invisible realm of the thought processes of each and every employee. *That’s* the new frontier of leadership. To call it a “revolution” is no overstatement.

But there’s no need to throw out the baby *or* the bath water. As you consider new approaches to leadership, the challenge today is not to discard what you’ve learned in the past, but to build upon traditional competencies with a whole new and more complex set of skills, tools and sensitivities. Your training isn’t necessarily broken. But it may well be incomplete.

Historically, the human resource development field has done an outstanding job of producing approaches that build some core skills and competencies. The curricula rose to the challenge posed by its environment.

It’s just that the environment changed (which is what environments are supposed to do), and today those skills are merely the baseline. From here, new, higher-leverage competencies for leadership must be built.

Today, learning needs to boldly go where it has not gone before: beyond the traditional skill set and deep into the invisible realm of thought processes. It’s no longer just about building skill; today’s leadership training must build new perspectives.

## WARMING UP TO THE INVISIBLE REALMS

Granted, leadership development is entering some tricky territory. Take a look at the leadership titles

on the business bestseller list.

Today’s organizational theorists are stepping increasingly into the invisible realms for inspiration. From John Kotter to Meg Wheatley, the business literature sometimes is looking “soft,” as leaders are being called to tap into their own thoughts, intuition and human capacity for relationship.

You needn’t look far for evidence. For example, in their 2002 article in *Leader to Leader* titled “Illuminating the Blind Spot,” authors Jonathan Day, Joseph Jaworski, Michael Jung, Ikujiro Nonaka, Claus Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge demonstrate that the new focus needs to be on the personal development of the leader, since it is from that place of “self-leadership” that he or she will be able to begin to understand how to create the types of new understanding that lead to successful action.

That’s right, we said *personal development*. It’s okay; you can say that now in organizational settings. And you need not fear that it is merely a feel-good concept with no ties to results. Research confirms again and again that it *does* feel good. And it does deliver results. (And that makes it feel even better.)

## LEADERSHIP FINDS ITS HEART: A BRIEF HISTORY

None of this is particularly new, promoted by publishers eager to milk the latest cultural zeitgeist. This has been incubating for a while.

It’s a story that begins in the 1950s—a hallowed age of the contemporary organization. During that decade, two prevailing traits

emerged in the leadership profile. On an inventory of leadership attributes, they might have shown up as “enabling” and “forceful.” *Enabling* is the “people” piece of the equation, with an emphasis on treating people well, using participatory approaches, and so on. *Forceful* is about producing results; it is getting the job done, making things happen, pushing the boulder up the side of the mountain through sheer willpower.

Not that anyone is arguing with this. Forcefulness or “moving the ball forward” still appear prominently on any list of leadership competencies. Sure, we may use different language today. “Aligning business objectives” or “executing strategy,” we call it. But it’s really the basic premise established in the 1950s that leadership is about creating bottom-line results.

Then, from the 1950s to the 1960s, some new ideas began to take root. In 1954, Maslow’s *Motivation and Personality* introduced the hierarchy of needs, with “self-actualization” perched at its summit. In 1960, McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y suggested that a participatory leadership approach (as opposed to an autocratic one) was the way to increase productivity.

Though they had been percolating since McGregor, these ideas really entered their golden age in the 1980s. Business bestsellers began to stress the need for support and care of employees and the development of cultures that provided trust, good relationships, teamwork and feedback. This enabling stream of literature was filled with case studies and research that indicated that the ways

in which people were treated and the ways in which the culture developed were key determinants of leadership, and ultimately, business success.

From Argyris’ early works through the ‘80s and ‘90s popular management books such as Max DePree’s *Leadership is an Art*, the key has been dealing with people effectively and in a supportive and enabling way. “The first responsibility of a leader,” DePree wrote, with a humanistic flavor not at all unusual in the literature of the ‘80s, “is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.” (DePree, 1989, pp.11-12)

Then came the 1990s and the emergence of a new theme. We’ll call this the *transformative* theme of leadership. In this mode of thinking, it is no longer enough to be enabling and forceful or to run the organization more efficiently. Rather, leaders were called upon to develop deeper skills for the purpose of fundamentally changing the organization ... and themselves.

These ideas show up notably in the work of Warren Bennis and Peter Senge (whose seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline*, prompted leaders to delve inward into their own patterns of thought, including integrated systems thinking). Few made this case more boldly than Daniel Goleman, who, in *Working with Emotional Intelligence* and *Primal Leadership*, was hugely influential in prompting leaders to pursue deeper levels of self-awareness and self-regulation as a cognitive discipline.

And yet, even as these themes continue to be validated as critical to leadership success, this in no way

invalidates the core assumption from 30 years earlier. The purpose of business is still to generate measurable value.

Far from being at odds with one another, the approaches are profoundly compatible.

The equation works like this: Thinking drives behavior; behavior drives results. So if you want to change the results—and indeed, change the organization itself—the highest leverage is achieved by changing the thinking of leaders and managers throughout the organization.

## CALLING ALL CHEFS

So that’s where the collective thinking on leadership is today.

As for training ... *that’s* a different story.

Though significant strides are being made, much leadership development remains focused on the *enabling* and *forcefulness* traits established nearly 30 years ago. This is a good baseline. As the thinking evolves, so must the approach.

Consider a metaphor (itself a useful learning device for engaging on hidden, cognitive levels). Reflect on the differences between a chef and a cook.

A cook knows the basics. He knows the right and wrong techniques. He follows recipes accurately. A good cook can meet the majority of cooking needs in any family. If you have lived in a home that lacked a good cook, you need no persuasion as to the value of these competencies.

Now consider a chef (perhaps one of the many “celebrities” that can now be viewed 24 hours a day

on cable TV). These aren't just "power recipe readers." They're in a different league. Chefs, like cooks, know the rules. But they also know when the rules do and don't apply. They think critically. A chef can improvise, experiment and take risks. A chef looks beyond the recipe, beyond the dish, and even beyond *the meal* to create something bigger: a holistic *experience* that takes into account multiple interests, not the least of which is the wildly varying wishes of individual diners and the constantly shifting pressures of the back-breaking restaurant industry.

A cook can be trained. Provide the right recipes and enough repetition, and skill will develop.

But chefs are different. They are *made*—not by studying more recipes, but through a combination of real-world cooking, serving thousands of meals, and cultivating an uncanny acumen for delighting a notoriously fickle market.

And of course, they must have the basics down cold. That's the baseline.

See where this metaphor is going?

## THE LEARNING COMPONENT

Today, you can train an *enabling* and *forceful* leader. Plenty of good programs ("recipes") are available that can build skills from delegation to performance feedback, to conducting a performance review, to running a meeting. Many of these programs are built on the well-established theory of "behavior modeling education." But remember, we want our cooks to evolve

into chefs, helping them to develop as people, increasing their capacity to think, and engaging them in deep dialogue about complex issues.

A traditional behavioral modeling approach doesn't produce chefs. New competencies require new methodologies.

Remember Roy, Lillian and Ken? They were wonderfully equipped ... as "cooks." But the vast majority of today's middle or junior managers have little or no exposure to the types of learning experiences that would nurture transformative leadership.

They need learning initiatives that focus on deeper competency development by modeling complex, real-world contexts in which learners can experiment, reflect, and take new courses of actions based on increasingly deeper sets of awareness. This is the approach of action learning. Action learning provides the depth of development that can only come with rich experience, time for experimentation, and support of coaches and mentors. If your goal truly is *transformation*, action learning is a path that promises rich rewards.

Action learning is a methodology connected to the broader learning theory of transformative learning. Transformative learning's roots reach back to the research and adult learning literature of Jack Mezirow in the 1970s. Mezirow was concerned with the ways in which people reflect upon and reframe their experiences, which leads to new thinking and assumptions, which in turn leads to different behaviors and actions. Or, in simpler terms, *when you think differently, you act differently.*

In the research done by Mezirow and others, it was often thought that the catalyst for transformative learning was a "disorienting dilemma." That is, radically and abruptly transformed circumstances (such as those caused by a relocation, a new job with added pressure, or a new boss, for example) reveal to the learner the ways in which he or she is ill-equipped to deal with this changing reality, and leaves little choice but to examine assumptions about how the world works. The person is then open to more workable alternatives to relieve the tension.

For many people, even a simple work transition such as a promotion to a leadership position can be quite a disorienting shock, and necessitates new ways of thinking about themselves and their roles. In terms of learning, this is fertile ground.

In action learning, the disorienting dilemma is carefully constrained and presented to the learner in a "safer" environment in which the penalties for experimentation and mistakes are diminished. In effect, the learner is forced to consider new ways of thinking about and acting within complex situations.

Approaches such as *discovery learning*, which build on the principles of action learning and incorporate game techniques, visuals, simulations and more to enhance learning, have emerged as powerful ways to change perspectives and deliver critical thinking skills and insights.

So what's the downside? That depends on your expectations. If you're looking for consistent cookbook behaviors, action or discovery learning may not be the way to go. Rather, you'll end up with a culture

of people making decisions, diverging from the norm and trying things in new ways. Whether this is bad news depends on your interests. If you seek to maintain autocratic control, obviously this could be a problem. If you are one of those with the courage to unleash a culture of leadership and innovation, then herein lies a path rich with possibility.

It's worth affirming once again that "cookbook" leadership is critical. For example, there is no value in making everyone figure out the best way to conduct interviews. There are proven recipes for developing skills to accomplish this important responsibility.

But compare that with the higher leadership accountability of "influencing the business." To develop that accountability, people need a deeper and holistic understanding of the broader picture, critical thinking skills and permission to experiment with new beliefs, assumptions and behaviors. In other words, transformation needs to take place. You can't be sure what will emerge, but there's a good chance it will lead to a better understanding than what many organizations have now.

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## MAKING IT HAPPEN: LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE BASELINE

If you're still crossing your fingers in hopes that a behavior modeling approach will emerge that consistently produces comprehensive and effective leadership behavior, this is your reality check. It isn't going to happen. You can't reproduce your desired image of the perfect leader every time, as you would a Bolognese sauce. And why would you want to, when the promise of deep leadership is surprise, innovation, aspiration, barely confinable chaos, and business results that extend beyond your own capacity for vision?

Lillian, Roy and Ken knew the way. They could repeat the core skills with accuracy every time. They helped to build a culture of precision, accuracy and assertiveness.

Good job.

Now comes the hard part: encouraging learners in experimentation, reflection, personal growth, and –potentially –wildly divergent ways of thinking and acting. Are you up for the challenge?

Hurry. The water is boiling.

## Traditional Leadership Behaviors

*Best learned by modeling, traditional coaching and mentoring ("Cookbook" approaches)*

- Set and articulate goals
- Hire and fire
- Drive measurable results
- Delegate
- Make day to day decisions
- Provide performance feedback
- Coach for improved performance
- Praise and reward performance
- Create an open and supportive climate
- Listen and respond to employee needs

## Additional Types of Accountabilities Required of Leaders in the Last 10 Years

*Require new understandings, more self-direction, work experience and learning how to learn, discovery, or transformative learning strategies*

- Set and maintain momentum toward a vision
- Think critically and strategically, not just locally
- Be a team leader and team player
- Create and maintain a high-performance culture
- Choose and develop talent for the organization
- Be self-aware and self-regulating
- Be a continuous and self-directed learner
- Use collaboration, but be decisive as needed
- Be innovative and creative in thinking and acting
- Lead change successfully
- Influence the business beyond one's "turf"

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