Learning Leadership

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Successful leadership and adaptation feed on the opportunity to learn. Good leaders never slack off learning, they make it conscious, and they take every opportunity to apply it. They even write about and publish their learning experiences. Go to any popular bookstore and check out the management, leadership, and business sections. Of roughly 500 different titles, approximately two-thirds of them will represent significant learning by a leader.

What Is a Leader?

I lean toward Kevin Cashman's perspective. A leader adds something to the organization and is authentic in behavior and contribution. Cashman advises leaders that to be effective, they must first be effective with themselves.[1] To be effective with themselves, leaders must first know themselves. This is "authenticity" or the integration of the link between what the leader says and does. Finally, leaders must create something of value. They must add to the organization. That is, others in the organization must perceive the leader to have a clear purpose and direction. To find clear purpose and direction, Cashman recommends a process of observation. "The things that you regard as important surround you every day. Open your eyes and observe how you spend your time. Study and observe the people whom you admire."[2]

In Robert Rosen's *Leading People*, the leader is someone who constantly questions assumptions about self and the business, and who continually seeks new perspectives to increase the organization's capacity. Leaders also continually learn from others—both healthy and unhealthy people—and they integrate that learning into their thinking and relationships. Further, they enable others to learn.[3] Both Cashman and Rosen strongly link the leader's development to everything the leader has been exposed to; that is, leaders develop well before they achieve the hierarchical designation of *leader*. Leader is or ought to be synonymous with *learner*.

Warren Bennis echoes this sentiment in *On Becoming a Leader*. He analyzed the leadership learning basics employed by a variety of recognized, successful leaders and found four lessons applicable to the learning leader. One, you are your own best teacher. Two, accept responsibility for what you do and what you learn. Blame no one else. Three, you can learn anything you want to learn, and four, true understanding comes from reflecting on your experience.[4]

How Do Leaders Learn Most Effectively?

Effective learning links more to where it brings us than to the time or effort it has taken us to learn. Effective learning catalyzes a discharge of pure mental energy. Traditional linear learning processes do not help us understand the pure energy gained from learning. Traditional learning processes do not account for the learner's "high," achieved with the shift of perspective. Take this example: the head of an organization asks, "What can I do to motivate my people?" He or she receives as a response, "Seems to me, your people were motivated when they came to you. They wanted a job, didn't they? *What have you done in the meantime to mess that up*?"[5] With this last question, the leader learns much more than would be provided by a simple, structured review of listening and thinking skills. With one response, the leader learned to shift his or her entire perspective. The line, "What have you done to mess that up?" in effect becomes a guiding stimulus to learning. This stimulus helps the leader recall the value of examining situations through different prisms and applying what's learned—a stimulus to continued self-directed learning.

Malcolm Knowles's conceptualization of andragogy or learning for adults is more effective than is traditional linear learning processes in examining learning for leaders. Andragogy assumes that mature learners are much more self-directed than are children. This self-directed learning includes collaboration and support among learners, resource people, and peers,[6] but the responsibility for learning lies squarely with the learner. Research based on Knowles's work supports the idea that self-directed learners select from nonlinear (also known as limited available) alternatives in their current environment. In short, they take their learning as opportunities present themselves. As they mature, they also *make* their learning opportunities. Mature leaders learn in the ambiguous, nonlinear, and challenging twenty-first century where they must integrate people, technology, and speed into their own and supporting organizational outcomes. They would certainly appear to profit greatly from the exercise of self-directed learning. Such learning is highly consistent with the Cashman, Rosen, and Bennis leader lessons described in the last section.

Another perspective on self-directed learning comes from the American psychotherapist, Carl Rogers (1902–1987). A founder of humanistic psychology, he developed client-centered therapy and personal encounter groups in which the client directs the focus and pace of each session. He was one of the first to simplify psychological concepts and did so to return to ordinary people some sovereignty over their own experience. In effect, his work concentrates on the "simple" process of mutual understanding.[7] Carl Rogers's personal reflections on learning demonstrate one man's comprehension and acceptance of the idea that he is interested only in learn-

ing things that matter, or that have some significant influence on his own behavior.[8] His experience as a teacher left him largely with the sense that the outcomes of teaching were either hurtful or unimportant. He observed his students taking away more from his *example* than from his teaching.

Rogers's inferences about learning as a self-directed activity effectively reframed teaching in a way that gives central importance to the learner. What Rogers learned also effectively frames the learning role of leaders. Rogers elicits self-discovery in others by modeling the process and by refusing to become defensive about it when criticized. He speaks his views, emphasizing their "merely personal" nature. At the same time he invites and elicits the reaction of others. He seeks to be thought provoking but always to be reflective. He defined his own growth as a leader of educators in terms of learning things that matter or that had a significant influence on his own behavior. Ken Blanchard's 1997 book, *Managing by Values,* describes these same behaviors as part of the development experience of his protagonist.[9] Reflection and learning from experience undergird the examples of the book, as they do in all Blanchard's "One-Minute Manager" publications. Finally, Bellingham and Cohen in their book, *Leadership Myths and Realities*, debunk the idea that leaders develop people.[10] They say the reality is that good leaders create an environment that nurtures personal development in others. The leader creates the environment in which others can learn using the same self-directed and reflective methods so powerful for a leader.

Top-level leaders tend to work "high-ground" problems often based in research and theory. Employees see these as largely unimportant problems. Much more critical to them are the "low-ground" problems that confuse and confound them daily and appear to defy solution. Top-level leaders without reflective, self-directed learning abilities may be tempted "to provide the solution to the problem." These leaders miss the point that truly effective learning is self-directed and reflective. They do not provide the example for employees to follow that would allow them to make connections between their daily problems and the higher-ground problems faced by leaders. In short, they don't allow their employees to become leaders and learners in their own right. Self-directed learning uses groups, personal relationships, and support of all kinds. Often, it launches the learner upon a fascinating yet perhaps frightening process, one in which the learner tries to understand an ever-changing reality. Meg Wheatley, in *Leadership and the New Science*, states that "Solutions, as quantum reality teaches, are a temporary event, specific to a context, developed through the relationship of persons and circumstances."[11] But in organizations an ever-changing reality is that for which organizations require leadership from all levels—and if leadership from all levels, then learnership at all levels.

It would be intuitively ridiculous to suppose that a self-directed learner learns only once. Indeed Peter Senge's work on the subject of learning organizations and their resulting improved bottom line says very clearly that learning is as continual as improvement in organizations.[12] Continual improvement, the battle cry of the twenty-first century, helps organizations adapt and grow in a rapidly changing world. In order for organizations to evolve, the leader must liberate the talents and spirits of his employees to gain capacity to grow. Capacity to grow, however, will only increase if the relationships and environment set by the leader allow people to learn, develop, and contribute. To sustain growth, people must be willing to renew themselves at all times—prompted by the behavior of the leader.

Studies on adult self-directed learning have found that adult learners follow numerous paths and varieties of strategies to learn on their own. In effect, they become opportunistic learners. Self-directed learners, although frequently learning in a collaborative environment such as their professions, careers, or organizations, have also been found to "represent a qualitative evolvement of a person's sense of cognitive definition and developmental readiness for ambiguous and non-defined actions."[13] Military environments speak often of readiness linked to the soldier, to equipment, to strategy. Seminal to readiness in these areas is the readiness of leaders at all levels to continue to learn. We talk about leaders leading leaders. We also need to actively participate as learners learning from leaders as learners.

Another interesting finding from studies on self-directed learning includes the three elements that characterize the autonomous or self-directed learner: independence, the ability to make choices, and the capacity to articulate the norms and limits of an activity. At large, the literature on leadership and leader development agrees that these characteristics factor heavily in the making of a good leader. Stephen Brookfield, well known in the field of critical-thinking research, found self-directed learning to be equated with the exhibition of critical reflection—another skill we value highly in leaders and learners.[14]

Self-directed learners, too, have been found more frequently to participate in collaborative activities such as teamwork, shared resources, and peer networks. To become an executive with the Federal Senior Executive Service (SES), leaders must demonstrate their abilities to work collaboratively, to lead people, influence the outcomes for their organizations, manage the resources, and lead change. Under the category of leading change, one significant component is continual learning. To enter the SES requires demonstrated attention to continual learning.

The arguments of educators notwithstanding, companies find the leader's role as a self-directed learner to be healthy for the bottom line—whether you measure it in profit-margin dollars or in mission accomplishment. Robert Slater's book, *Jack Welch and the GE Way,* relies heavily on examples of learning, learning made conscious, and learning applied.[15] In it, Jack Welch recommends "passionate lunacy" on the issue of quality, a topic that requires continuous learning by leaders at all levels. He came to the passionate lunacy perspective by assuming that he could attack the issue of quality by improving speed, increasing productivity, and getting employees and customers more involved in the company—the measures of success. What he got was a fast and agile company producing items that did not achieve quality goals. That real-

ization launched the "passionate lunacy" that in turn launched the highly regarded quality movement at GE.

Conscious Learning

To review so far, leaders must be learners. The best learners use the environment around them to learn, and the best are self-directed and reflective learners. Such individuals learn consciously, applying the kaleidoscope of memories, prejudices, hopes, habits, and emotions that constantly expand and enrich our lives. These do not aggregate as so many building blocks. Much like the actual sophisticated and intricate network of integrated cells and brain structure that comprise our ability to act consciously, we synthesize areas of learning to generate new meaning within a context.[16] Conscious learning often generates new business. For instance, the 24-hour day isn't news to the military, but to the economy at large it's a tremendous change. To the business leaders living in it, it's a challenge in managing time, sleep, and the business needs of the organization. It's even given rise to new services, such as a car-starting service for night-shift employees in St. Cloud, Minnesota, who encounter frozen car batteries when leaving work.[17] These new services demonstrate the benefits of conscious learning—finding and filling an unfilled need to make a profit!

Every learner recognizes intuitively the experiences of learning. Often these experiences link back to emotions and prejudices. To be most effective, learning must also be conscious—that is, you must know what you have learned. To do that, Rogers found it necessary to drop his own defensiveness and to try to understand the experience the way it seems or feels to another person—also a requirement of critical thinking. If we have consciously learned, we have an attitude supportive of learning and reflect critically upon our prejudices, hopes, habits, and emotions. Conscious learning, of course, assumes the freedom to learn as well as the ability to navigate between the external and the internal worlds.

Carl Gustav Jung always insisted that psychoanalysis was a branch of education. Consider these words in light of organizations and traditional leader versus employee roles—roles that we recognize to be deadly to organizational health! *Education is the self-learning process; training is what others make you do.* Taken into another context, leadership is a self-learning process; employeeship is what others make you do. The job titles people give themselves are good indicators that they actively engage in the self-learning process. These include Princess of Persuasion (aka director of sales and marketing); Chief Lizard Wrangler (aka associate general council/manager); and Manager of Mischief (aka manager of marketing and communications).

J. Kermit Campbell, president and chief executive officer of Herman Miller, Inc., which has a worldwide reputation for modern furniture design and was featured in Max DuPrees's *Leadership Is an Art*, applied several of his own learnings to help employees grow. One, help employees get over being afraid of the new freedom to contribute—for example, go out and meet each one. Two, demonstrate that you don't have all the answers and are willing to join with employees in taking risks—for example, accept and share your imperfections;

and, finally, nurture employees—for example, Campbell uses management coaches to help employees facilitate their projects. He says the inability to admit weakness or ignorance gets in the way of taking risks and growing on the job. Campbell calls this liberating the human spirit. Not all stories of learning have happy endings and learning doesn't guarantee success. In 1995 Campbell resigned from his position. The company's profitability had been down, causing Campbell to cut key executives. This was too much for the midwest company that had never experienced such changes. Says Campbell of this experience, "Maybe next time I will be less patient with those in management who were uncooperative or incapable of making changes fast enough."[18] Even in this setback, Campbell reflects on what he can learn from the situation.

In effect, we should be allowing our employees to take the opportunities to educate themselves. This implies that they have the freedom to think both reflectively and critically. For instance, a recent benchmarking study of highly successful, nationally known business schools showed clearly that success in placement of graduates linked strongly to a school and workplace partnership.[19] The students were required to work real problems within the environment of the organization and they received a grade for their efforts. This is an example of the interdependent learning that adults favor. No wonder this method is gaining in popularity. It allows adult learners free range to practice thinking skills, especially critical thinking, while getting credit for learning.

Learning Applied

Learners must recognize and practice critical thinking. Much more than logical analysis, critical thinking involves calling into question many of our underlying assumptions, habitual ways of thinking and acting, and being ready to act differently on the basis of what we've learned. Critical thinking is evident every time employees (who think of themselves as leaders!) challenge the effectiveness of a certain process or technique and every time managers readily jettison outmoded organization designs or norms. Critical thinking is not criticizing. Critical thinking is a core activity of self-directed learning, assuming openness, innovation, and a future of possibilities. In Rogers's terms, critical thinking gives central importance to the learner. Above all, critical thinking is a conscious process. The outcomes of both critical thinking and learning ought to be a change in the assumptions of yourself and the world (in other words, perspective) and a corresponding change in behavior and relationships—both consciously derived.

We trace our English language roots of the word *learn* back to Gothic and Saxon times where words expressed learning in these concepts: to become awake, to become whole, to become unbound, to become full, to trace out. The word *lead* traces its roots back to Icelandic, Swedish, German, and Italian languages. The concepts expressed were a process: to pass or move along, to glide along, to undergo, endure, suffer, and to accompany or go on the way with.[20] The leader recognizes the experiential nature of these words as part of the leader's learning process. The leader also recognizes the personal responsibility inherent in these concepts.

Leaders as learners increasingly are becoming more critical to organizations as the workplace becomes flatter and more dependent on every available bit of knowledge capital. A substantial key to success is knowing your people, your business, and yourself, and learning from and working with the complexities revealed. If learning is an art, then leading while learning is performance art. The legitimacy of both learning and leading rests more on accomplishing desired outcomes than the "correct" method of getting there. To accommodate the ever-changing realities of organizational life, leaders must be learners—exceptional leaders who are also exceptional learners give their organizations the edge in today's ultra-competitive environment.

Notes

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4. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1989), 56.

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6. S. B. Merriam and R. S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1991), 46.

7. C. Hampden-Turner, *Maps of the Mind: Charts and Concepts of the Mind and its Labyrinths* (New York: Collier Books, a division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 116.

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12. Merriam and Caffarella, 215.

13. P. Senge et al, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1994).

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19. Ursula Lohmann, "Army Management Staff College," *Best Practices in Leadership Development Handbook* (Lexington, Mass.: Linkage Press, 1999), 72–74.

20. W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 333–34.