

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF LEADERSHIP: LEADERSHIP AS COMMUNICATIVE LEARNING

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This handbook is about women and leadership in an age of information revolution. We focus on women because (a) they constitute a majority of the world's population, (b) they have been largely excluded from the processes that have shaped our lives in the past, and (c) they must play a far more significant role in these processes in the future if we are to create a better world for ourselves and for our children. We focus on leadership because as leaders women can influence and steer the future toward the ideals that we seek—freedom, equality, justice, plenty, and peace for all. We focus on information technology because it is the driving force that shapes the structure as well as the boundaries of economic development, social justice, and individual freedom in the twenty-first century.

Women, Information, and Empowerment

Women's Access to Power Is Limited

Women have become far more active in the affairs of their societies over the past several decades, but they are still far from where they should be both in the private and public spheres. Women's participation in managerial and administrative posts is around 33 percent in the developed world, 15 percent in Africa, and 13 percent in Asia and the Pacific.¹ In Africa and Asia this percentage—small as it is—reflects a doubling of the numbers in the last twenty years. Women's participation in higher levels of economic decision making remains minuscule, even in the West. Of the 1,000 most valuable publicly owned companies in the United States in the year 2000, only three have women CEOs.² In most places in the world, work is segregated by sex. Women tend to be in clerical, sales, and domestic services and men in manufacturing and transport. Women work—on average and across the world—more hours than men each week, but their work is often unpaid and unaccounted for. Where women do the same work as men, they are paid 30 to 40 percent less than men. In the United Nations system, women hold only nine percent of the top management jobs and 21 percent of senior management positions, but 48 percent of the junior professional civil service slots.³ Governments have so far been little inclined to accommodate women's vocational needs.

¹ United Nations, *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics*, New York: United Nations, p. 130.

² From "A Start-Up of Her Own," by Marci McDonald, *U.S. News & World Report*, May 15, 2000.

³ United Nations, *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics*, New York: United Nations, p. 167.

Gender disparity does not result from any single historical condition such as social habits, religion, economic relations, or the laws; rather, it springs from a spectrum of causes. Most women are aware of the complexity of the social order that so unjustly deprives them of the opportunity to realize their life potential. Just as importantly, they are aware that they are a part of that order. Many women now realize that their problem is not simply how to contend with men, but also how to re-imagine and help reconstruct a social order that has entrapped both men and women. In the twenty-first century, women will increasingly have to take on the burden of defining what a good and humane life looks like, and work to achieve it as they become players in a world that is increasingly integrated and complex. We know that in some societies—for example, in Scandinavia—where a critical mass of women has entered the political arena,⁴ gender relations and, as a consequence, social relations generally, have become significantly fairer and more egalitarian. To play their role properly, women everywhere must become far more involved in the affairs of their respective societies. Women must become empowered.

A Formal International Consensus Exists on the Need for Women's Empowerment

We now have a formal international consensus on the need for empowering women. This consensus, reached at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), is reflected in the *Beijing Platform for Action*. The document states:

The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development. A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. . . . The Platform for Action emphasizes that women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together and in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world. It respects and values the full diversity of women's situations and conditions and recognizes that some women face particular barriers to their empowerment.⁵

⁴ In 1995 the Swedish cabinet became the first to have an equal number of men and women as members. Since then, changed policies in social welfare, environment and military expenditure, for example, have reflected the new deployment of political forces.

⁵ "Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women," *Covenant for the New Millennium: The Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action* (Beijing, September 4-15, 1995), Santa Rosa, California: Free Hand Books, 1996, pp. 7-8.

Information Technology Drives the Evolving World Order

The communications revolution is changing the nature of power. Information and knowledge have become pillars of modern capability, controlling both the means and relations of production. Modern communication—mastering time—has drastically reduced distance making everyone potential neighbors. Information technology has made communicating globally almost as easy as conversing locally, forcing governments and companies to reorient themselves to the requirements of global competition. Nation states are being pressured by the conflicting demands of global competition and local justice. The new paradigm, broadly called globalization, suggests new forms of relationship and power. No one can tell with assurance whether the evolving situation harbors good or ill for the human race. We may be sure, however, that unless we harness the evolving technology, the future, potentially so bright, will happen to us darkly without our knowledge, input, or acquiescence. Because of these modern information technologies' empowering properties, the twenty-first century will offer women new opportunities but only if women prepare to take advantage of them.

Information Technology Is Complex and Hazardous

The technology that drives the new global economy is self-propelling, multi-faceted, and complex. It moves across borders. It takes new forms and capabilities as it grows, creating new conditions that demand corresponding adjustments on the part of individuals, communities, and nations. Individuals, groups, or nations that are more familiar with its structure and dynamics will be in a better position to reap its rewards. Those that are not familiar with the new information technology and are not participants in its use, making, or deployment will not be able to compete. The new technology, indifferent to human suffering, does not accommodate humane needs unless we harness it and make it do so. Because information technology creates power, it is inimical to human weakness. We will not overcome its negative effects by grumbling or pleading. What we must do is to discover ways and means of becoming competent enough to mold its powers to our uses. This is fundamentally a problem of education; however, to deal with it efficiently we need to approach it politically, that is, by providing the kind of leadership that builds communal consensus and leads to communal decisions.

Information Technology Offers the Potential for a Better Future for All

Information technology can help us gain the knowledge, leadership, and consensus we need to work toward the life we seek. The new information technology can be transferred relatively inexpensively to all parts of the world to support national and global policies that help disadvantaged individuals and communities become participants in the decisions that affect their lives. The twentieth century ushered in phenomenal advances in science and technology. As a result, the twenty-first century has the potential to bring extraordinary improvements in human life. Scientific advancement has given us the power to eradicate many life-threatening diseases, to prolong life, to change the nature of work, and to provide for a decent living for everyone. We now can create, accumulate, and transmit information and knowledge across the

globe at high speed and relatively very little cost. We can leapfrog the foundational problems that hindered so many developmental efforts in the past for want of timely communication and interaction.

The Need to Close the Digital Divide

We are, however, faced with an information divide—a digital divide—resulting from unequal access to information and knowledge and unequal capacity to use the information and knowledge for development, but also for gender freedom and equality. There are more computers in the United States than in the rest of the world combined.⁶ Women everywhere, but particularly in the developing countries, have less access to modern technology than do men.

We need to bring access not only to the poorer countries but more so within every country to the less advantaged segments of the population, chief among them women and girls. We need to bring the potential for the use of the Internet to all of the peoples of the world and that includes not only the hardware and training in the use of the machines, but also culture-relative, language-relevant, and community-created material. The marginalized and excluded peoples of the world must become not only consumers of information created elsewhere but creators of knowledge that they and others use. We all will be richer if we partake of the diversity of human experience and wisdom across the globe. If we meet the challenge of reaching out and including all, we will have a world where human beings will enjoy dignity, prosperity, equity, and justice. If we fail to meet this challenge, we will end up living in a world of which we cannot be proud.

Leadership and Learning Societies

Most of us live in societies that are hierarchically organized and command-oriented. The locus of command may be home, community, the political arena, or the economy. The structure of command nurtures and is nurtured by a culture of obedience that at once sustains and camouflages a pecking order by producing a system of authority. The role of authority is to legitimize command relations by creating consent. In the absence of authority, everyone in the command relationship becomes a potential bully or wimp. This cannot be the ideal relationship we seek. Rather, we look to a different kind of society where men and women turn to one another not as objects in social functions, where one commands and the other obeys, but as genuine communicating beings. We look at leadership in a learning society as a means of nurturing genuine beings who look to one another for community and meaning. Yet in order to move toward learning societies, we need to start from where we are.

For most of us the term leadership evokes energy, determination, and power used to achieve some worthy goal. One is a leader if one convinces others to do one's

⁶ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1999*, New York: Oxford, 1999, p. 62.

bidding. In this interpretation of the term individuals in authority are in a better position to lead. However, this is not always the case. We know from experience that many individuals who are in positions of authority—fathers, bosses, landowners, and professionals, for example—are not leaders. On the other hand, many of us have come across individuals who are not in any observable position of authority though we feel they are leaders because they influence their environment. Is leadership then a personal quality? Is it a trait that some people possess while others do not?

What Leadership Is Not

One way to begin a discussion of leadership is to state what it is not. Let us begin with the obvious. Most of us would agree that leadership is not the same as the capacity to employ force or coercion. It is possible to force people to do what we want them to do by threatening them with some kind of deprivation or punishment. A father threatens to punish his son because the son has failed in one of his classes or neglected his chores around the house. A superior in the office threatens to withhold an employee's bonus unless the latter improves her performance. We may feel that these types of actions are negative reactions to circumstances that need not have occurred if leadership had been exercised. The father, for example, might not have needed to punish his son or the superior his subordinate if effective communication had been used to reach a better understanding.

These examples tell us that leadership is not the same as authority whether in legal form, such as a parent's authority over her offspring, or in traditional form, such as a superior's authority in a hierarchical organization. A father may demand a service from his son and the son may perform it simply because he feels that the father has the right to ask it. A subordinate usually acts according to a superior's directives as long as the directive falls within the purview of the superior's authority and therefore the subordinate feels that the superior has the right to issue the directive. This is what we usually mean by an exercise of legitimate authority. Legitimate authority has the advantage of rendering the use of force unnecessary, but it is also different from leadership.

We know from our everyday experience that certain individuals have a kind of personality that commands respect and compliance. They influence others by their charisma. Charisma, however, is also not the same as leadership. Charisma is an innate quality, possessed by few, denied to most. Leadership, on the other hand, is a property of communication, potentially available to everyone. Many individuals who are not charismatic, nevertheless, prove to be great leaders. Leadership, then, is neither force nor traditional, legal, or charismatic authority, though each of these concepts may be present in the leadership process. Individuals in command positions may or may not be leaders. Leadership situations, therefore, should be conceptually differentiated from command situations or command structures.

Leadership and Communication

To lead is to communicate. For leadership to exist, we need at least two people who in some way relate to each other. No one can lead in isolation. Leadership, therefore, is a form of communication. How one leads has a lot to do with how one communicates. In a hierarchical organization, the communication system is organized mostly vertically. So is leadership. The superior assigns tasks and shows the way; subordinates follow and report the results. This system superficially appears efficient, but it is not because it tends to perpetuate the sort of relationships that most of us would not condone.

Communication in a learning society follows a different pattern. It is not vertical, but horizontal. It is always two-way. It has nothing to do with force or authority. It rejects hierarchy. It is always demonstrated in the form of a dialogue. Everybody participates; everybody learns. The pattern of leadership in this system follows the pattern of communication. Everybody is at once a potential leader and follower, or rather, everyone is a leader working with other leaders to achieve a common understanding of the issue at hand, the options available, and the choices to be made. Everyone works toward a common meaning, a vision of life that all may share.

This notion of leadership may appear somewhat whimsical at first, but it is not. It may appear utopian because we are used to the hierarchical form of communication. Hierarchical communication is what most of us have known at home, in school, at work, and in places of worship. Because this is how we have been brought up, we must work diligently to break our old habits. Once we accept the possibility that we can learn and decide together, we will be on our way to a significantly different and more productive interrelationship creating a far better future.

Leadership in Learning Societies

Leadership is an influence process; it is about going somewhere. To go somewhere, one needs to have a goal, a vision. So leadership is about developing a vision. A vision is more than just setting a goal. It involves a picture of the good, an ideal, an idea of what the work we do would look like if we did it well. Leadership, therefore, cannot be aimless. It has to have direction or it is not leadership. But how do we go about defining the goal, setting the direction, launching implementation, and identifying the criteria for measuring success? Must the process follow the pyramid model?

Since we begin from social conditions attuned to vertical leadership, we need to talk about the leading ideas that can help us make the transformation to leadership in learning societies.

Organizing Learning Societies

Because horizontal leadership is based on give and take, the end is never quite settled until a community of vision and meaning is achieved. Ends and means are in flux and no end is important or sacred enough to justify all means. This does not mean that participants do not hold strongly to their opinions or do not think highly of

certain ends; rather, they approach the issue in a framework that is significantly different from the hierarchical model. The framework for leadership in learning societies may consist of the following components:

Organizational Fluidity: The organization of learning is fluid and changes as learning progresses. Leadership is realized as organization and learning interact—organization becoming learning and learning becoming organization. Learning, in such a setting, is not only transformation of thoughts and behavior, but also constant modification of relationships among members of the organization. In learning societies, organization is not a number of offices connected by arrows of authority, but living, orderly interaction among real human beings.

Orderly Distribution of Power: To achieve organization as learning and learning as organization, it is necessary to disperse power in an orderly manner. To delete arrows of authority does not mean chaos. It means, rather, that order is generated by interacting individuals who hold attitudes, sensibilities and skills that favor dialogue and promote community of meaning among contributing participants.

Mutual Respect: Leadership in learning societies depends on the ability of participants to converse with one another as equal and whole human beings. Horizontal leadership places a premium on conversing individuals who respect one another and one another's opinions—even when they differ.

Voluntary Assent: In a learning organization, authority does not evaporate. It exists and plays an important role in achieving the common vision. However, it is based on voluntary assent, not a set of rules or threat of force. It is not mandated; rather, it emerges as dialogue proceeds.

Systems Thinking: A learning organization is aware of the relationships among the parts as well as the relationship between the parts and the whole. It develops systems thinking. Participants know that their identity and their actions achieve full meaning only when viewed as part of a larger whole. Systems awareness gives the dialogue a strategic dimension. It relates objectives to resources within the context of changing time and space.

Learning societies may be organized in various settings, including formal organizations. Indeed, most successful leaders within formal organizations use communication skills that correspond to the characteristics outlined above. The goal is to align formal relationships with the processes that lead to learning societies.

The Ethic of Leadership in Learning Societies

We have already emphasized that leadership is not force, authority, or command. Rather, it reflects a way of relating and dealing with others in a given frame of reference. In order to exercise leadership in a learning society, we need to establish a suitable framework for it. The framework would include the points we mentioned above. However, setting up such a framework presupposes that attitudes, traits and dispositions already exist which will help produce and sustain the framework,

when in fact these attitudes, traits and dispositions must be learned. They are part of the process of organizing learning as leadership or, conversely, leadership as learning. This process and its outcome is called “the ethic of leadership” in learning societies.

Let us begin with a simple observation. Some individuals believe that people are basically lazy and unless forced or manipulated they will neither work nor produce results. Other individuals believe that people are by nature creative and productive and want to work. What they need is a friendly environment where impediments and obstacles do not block their creativity. This is more than a difference of style. It is two contradictory ways of looking at the world. The first outlook produces command structures within a hierarchical order. The second is more at home in environments that encourage dialogue and communication. Clearly, our learning organization must encourage personal traits that produce the second outlook if we are to cultivate the ethic of leadership in learning societies. How do we encourage the second outlook? What are the components of the ethic of leadership that we seek?

Attitudes Toward Others: The attitudes we hold toward others are important. We must learn to see others as genuine, whole human beings intent on doing good. We must think that they want to learn to become better individuals, and to work not primarily for rewards or glory, but to achieve the vision that their work inspires. More than anything, they wish to be recognized as whole and complete human beings. Our attitude may not determine what in fact other people are like. But it does suggest what sort of person we are or wish to become. We need to transcend ourselves, to achieve self-mastery, to become humble, open, teachable and flexible.

Commitment to Values: We must nurture the right values and commit to them. By right values we mean ideals that take us beyond ourselves to a belief in the possibility that we can work together to make the world a better place in which to live. Commitment to values gives meaning to our cooperative work beyond the immediate activity by connecting the outcome of our work to a higher and more encompassing purpose. It enables us to stand for something beyond ourselves.

Sensitivity to the Needs of Others: The ethic of leadership in learning societies demands not only that we serve others, but more importantly that we want to serve others. This is sometimes called servant-leadership.⁷ But just wishing to serve others is not enough. We must learn how to become sensitive to the needs of others. We need to develop the ability to empathize, to place ourselves in other people's shoes, to see the world through their eyes. To do these we need to overcome our prejudices and antipathies, avoid harsh judgments, learn not to impose our ideas on others, accept diversity, control our anger, weigh the positive in others, recognize talent, and forgive.

⁷ See Larry C. Spears, ed., *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant Leadership*, New York: John Wiley, 1998.

Measuring Achievement as Development of Human Potential: The ethic of leadership in learning societies places a high value on achievement. However, it considers a job well done only when the framework suited to leadership as learning is strengthened. It measures achievement and productivity in terms of the added value for developing human potential. It stresses trust and assumes that generating authenticity, sincerity, and enthusiasm in participating members is the best way of raising productivity.

Patience and Perseverance: The ethic of leadership in learning societies emphasizes endurance. One cannot learn, teach, or train without endurance. To achieve the right attitude for leadership in learning societies we must learn to face hardship and to grow through adversity. Courage, patience, dedication, perseverance—these are some of the qualities needed for success as a leader.

Teamwork: The ethic of leadership in learning societies demands that we work, communicate, and grow as a team. Teamwork is the nature of learning organizations. Teamwork involves respect for others, appreciation of diversity, and generosity at the individual level, and the ability to resolve conflict, bring people together in decision-making and decision-implementation, and build teams at the organization level. But it is more. It is within the team that we learn the essentials of leadership in learning societies.

Team Learning: The educational function of teamwork for learning organizations is to help participants develop appropriate mental models that help them build shared meaning through team learning. Mental models are “the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world.”⁸ They act as prisms through which we see the world. They are the foundation of our cultural outlook connecting our facts, values, and affections. Because we are products of cultures that have been historically hierarchical, most of us have mental models that are not friendly to the presuppositions of learning organizations. We therefore need to develop and where necessary change these models. However, changing mental models is not easy because they are entrenched deep in our psyches and are not always consciously thought out and analyzed. Good teamwork should help us dislodge them from our unconscious and bring them to our consciousness so that we can analyze and if necessary change or adjust them. Team learning involves the sort of dialogue that helps produce synergy—that is, coordination, unity, and a sense of cooperation that makes the whole larger than the sum of the parts. Synergy, of course, does not mean that everybody agrees on everything. It means that because members have learned to value and respect each other they can contribute to the process that will produce a result which all can appreciate as their own.

⁸ Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994, p. 235. For a fuller discussion, also see Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership by Joseph Jaworski*, San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 1998, and *Learning to Lead: A Workbook on Becoming a Leader*, Cambridge: Perseus, 1997.

A Framework for Leadership in Learning Societies

What has been discussed so far may be summarized as a framework for developing leadership in learning societies. Leadership as learning is:

Gender-Inclusive: Ideally, men and women become partners in defining, working for, and achieving goals that benefit all. A purpose of this handbook is to demonstrate that such a partnership is possible and must be attempted if we are to succeed in achieving the social, economic, and political frameworks that help us reach the goals of a good, dynamic, and fruitful life. It also shows us that most everyone can be a leader if the concept is formulated constructively. Thus, although this handbook focuses on women, it is useful for men as well. Indeed, it will be most successful when men also participate in giving it shape and substance.

Communicative: Individuals talk to each other about matters they consider important. Such communication is meaningful. Everyone has something to contribute and every instance of contribution becomes an instance of leadership. A purpose of this handbook is to show that it is possible to convert an amorphous gathering into a communicative society by investing it with meaning and that the process defines and determines the parameters of leadership.

Purposeful: A major function of a communicative society is to define and elaborate a purpose. To define and elaborate a purpose is to engage in a learning process. At the same time, it is engaging in exercising power. The form that the process of defining purpose takes tells us much about the political characteristics of the communicative society. It tells us whether it is democratic or authoritarian, egalitarian or elitist. A purpose of this handbook is to distinguish between the two processes of defining purpose.

Democratic and Egalitarian: In a communicative, participatory society, participants respect and value each other as whole human beings. The process by which individuals' respect for each other unfolds as they define goals also defines the nature and quality of leadership. A purpose of this handbook is to help us move toward democratic and egalitarian forms of defining our goals, even when our cultures tend toward elitism and authoritarianism.

Means-Sensitive: "The ends do not justify the means" is a well-known principle of ethical behavior across the world. This principle means that ethical people do not use unethical means to achieve goals regardless of their importance or immediacy. On the other hand, a close relationship exists between ends and means; realistic goals cannot be selected without also making a full and honest accounting of the human or material resources actually or potentially available for realizing them. Not making a full and honest accounting of the means at our disposal leads us to look for unrealistic goals.

Best Realized in a “Learning Society”: We do not mean to define precisely what a “learning society” is in this handbook. We may say, in a general way, that a learning society is a framework for developing “leadership as learning” and it has, as a minimum, the characteristics outlined above. How these characteristics are shaped will depend largely on the culture of the society where developing and exercising such leadership is attempted.

A major function of this handbook is to invite us to look attentively and creatively at leadership as learning and the possibilities the concept produces for women. This concept of leadership in relation to learning is weaved into our sessions throughout the handbook.