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Leadership and Followership

I have come to recognize my personal experiences of leadership and followership are quite complex.

In the four frames of Bolman and Deal, I would admit that I am pretty firmly in the symbolic and political frames. (2003) I am primarily interested in how conflict is managed, not in how it is avoided. However, I also recognize that I have in the past relied on all four frames while I was in a position of leadership in organizations. I have tended to look for structural ways to organize and re-organize to improve the function and flow of organizations. I have also been concerned about the emotional state and personal development of my colleagues. Enmeshed in political battles, I have certainly been engaged in looking for paths of power and ways to leverage those in organizations. Finally, I have been all about vision and creating vocations instead of merely paychecks.

Access to these four frames at appropriate times seems to be a meta-skill that resides not so much in any specific frame, but as an awareness of all the frames and the relative usefulness of each in on the ground situations. This meta-skill is something that has been present through my study of dialogue and I think relates very much to my concept of leadership and of transformative leadership.

In mediation training, I learned that the facilitator was to use specific strategies, from an array of conflict resolution styles. The goal was to model and encourage a collaborative style of conflict resolution, but the facilitation consciously avails of an appropriate resolution style for the current reality of the conflict. (Training Manual, n.d.)

William Isaacs speaks to what I've called a meta-skill when he suggests that dialogical leadership is a dynamic relationship between several strategies. (1999)

In my own study of dialogue, I have focused on what seems to be a strong relationship between two linked polarities. In dialogues, the urge to individuation is in a paradoxical relationship with the need for community. Further, the need to maintain order, structure and safety is in a paradoxical relationship with creativity and, what I've come to call, monkey-wrenching.

The relationship between individuation and community is introduced by LeShan. (2003)

The relationship between order and chaos comes in part from a recognition of the role that a facilitator plays in both supporting and enabling dialogue, but also that the facilitator becomes a blockade to dialogue. Thich Nhat Hanh points out that in the Buddhist tradition there is recognition that even the teachings eventually become a barrier to a deepening practice. (1992) The facilitator is both necessary, but can limit the ability of the group to move beyond the facilitator.

Monkey-wrenching is a term I use to describe creative tangential contribution to the group. There are other terms for this such as De Bono's idea of lateral thinking. (1973) Creativity, thinking outside the box, is a necessary balance to the rules and order that is just as necessary. Creativity and an openness to tangents is a specific antidote to group dysfunctions like Janis' Groupthink. (1972)

Tools like Polarity Management offer ways to address the competing usefulness of opposites, but fail to address the way in which constant conceptual movement is disturbing and perhaps even destructive. (Johnson, 1992) Being comfortable with the

shifting sands is something that does not come easily, even with much practice. While the practitioner may be consciously, intentionally developing and modeling a fluid and dynamic relationship with conceptual ground, the follower is like to reel and withdraw from the same activity.

I developed a conceptual model for the relationship between the two polarities of dialogue I mentioned above and as it developed I was inspired by the cyclical season and element model that Starhawk used to speak about group roles in Truth or Dare. (1990) These models are useful in many ways, but primarily they suggest an overarching theme about switching mental models. Much as the concepts of leadership mentioned above suggest that there is an important meta-skill in being willing, able and present through changing strategies, changing mental models seems to me to be a primary function of my notion of leadership. The leader must be able to exhume, examine, evaluate and then exchange mental models. Important corollaries are that it is insufficient to move from one mental model only to then become enmeshed in another, which is something that I have called being manic-depressive. There is a concept in Bohmian dialogue of suspension, which implies a backgrounding of one's own ideas, notions and judgement. I suggest the connection between this idea of suspension and the skills related to mental models.

(Bohm, 2004)

Here is where, for me, the distinction between leadership and followership begins to vanish. The polarity begins to collapse when I recognize that these skills are an important intentional practice that crosses boundaries of role and position. In this sense, the intentional practice of leadership is an intentional practice of followership. Further,

the intentional practice of both is a core personal area of growth that becomes for me a practice of spiritual leadership of the self.

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