

Leadership as Connection:

A Radical Approach

By Lucira Jane Nebelung



This article makes no apologies. We have a point of view that we offer to human resource leaders: The fundamentals of effective leadership are centered on who we are as people, not on our HR systems and programs. Moreover, these fundamentals will make all the difference in effectively navigating our uncertain future in the next decade.

Two themes underpin our discussion of these fundamentals. The first is that the most effective leaders hold a clear purpose and intention for leading, and they act on that intention in ways that others can understand and feel. Our second is that, despite what we all know about the oft-made distinction between leading and managing (Kotter, 1990), there is a tendency to manage rather than lead when the situation calls for leadership. We see a missing or forgotten factor—an intention for the well-being and highest potential of others—that bridges the gap between leadership models that are familiar to us and the leadership needs of the next 10 years and beyond. By shifting our focus back to a few fundamental things, such as leader purpose and intention, we are better able to move through the turbulence that we confront and the complexity of the systems that we cannot control.

New Rules for Leading

The first decade of the 21st century has shown us the extent to which the business game has changed and the enormous size of the challenges faced by business leaders who have to balance short-term profits with sustainability-focused decision making and organizational practices. Whether we have caused and/or failed to respond in a timely or careful way to catastrophes, such as the explosion of Deepwater Horizon and the ensuing oil spill, crises such as the global economic meltdown, or natural disasters such as the Haitian earthquake, Indonesian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina, it's time for *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956) to meet *The Art of Loving* (Fromm, 1956). Both were best-selling classics and, while you may think the material is dated, after nearly 55 years they remain in print because their messages continue to resonate with us as competing paradigms of leadership.

The transactional mindset and focus on compliance and conformity of people as objects in *The Organization Man* were crafted around a mechanistic view of organization, prevalent at that time. Executives were seen as managers of a mechanistic, top-down

structure of power and authority, comforted in the idea that someone was in-control and had the power to keep our world intact. In today's business world of complex matrices and networks spanning the globe, we know this approach no longer works.

Yet, the mindset of *The Organization Man*, with its focus on top-down, expert leaders continue to color our assumptions about leadership and organization today. How is it possible in this 21st century for us to know so much about what it takes to energize, engage and generate excellence in others, but find so many people feeling disregarded, disrespected or just plain ignored by their leaders?

Radical 'One Thing'

We all know leaders with special, intangible characteristics that enable them to make transformational changes with enduring results. They are able to render seemingly impossible turnarounds, or pioneer game-changing products, services and strategies, even in the most difficult business environments. There, also, are those who quietly lead their organizations to solid results year after year, as Jim Collins described in *Good to Great* (2001). We see a common competency

in these leaders that is greatly needed in the turmoil of the next 10 years and beyond. *They are able to generate relationships and connections that result in creation, change and collective (organizational) success.* We call this a “radical approach to leading.”

In describing leaders, we use the word “radical” in two ways. The first use is the predominant meaning of the word as “unconventional,” “extreme” or “uncompromising.” The second use comes from the etymology of the word as meaning “going to the origins, essentials” or “fundamental.” Our view of leading is both unconventional and fundamental to the effectiveness of leaders.

Evolving Views on Leadership

In the late 1970s three views of leadership emerged to play a major role in subsequent and current leadership models. Abraham Zaleznick (1977) first made the distinction between leadership and management that was later expanded on by Kotter (1990). Robert Greenleaf (1977) wrote the seminal essay on Servant Leadership, and James MacGregor Burns (1978) first made the dis-



inction between Transformational and Transactional Leadership. It appears that most, if not all, of our more recent research on leadership are related to these three views.

During the 1990s, in looking for the balance between getting sustainable versus quick results, researchers started breaking the taboos regarding the soft aspects of leading, and introduced emotions as significant to a leader's effectiveness. Daniel Goleman helped develop the concept of Emotional Intelligence (1995) and subsequently demonstrated the critical importance of Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management, along with other specific leadership styles related to the achievement of business results (2000). Jim Collins (2001) wrote about Level 5 Leadership from his research described in *Good to Great*. He identified the distinguishing characteristics—deep personal humility and intense professional will—of leaders in 11 out of the 1,435 companies that achieved and sustained stock returns three times the market's for 15 years after a major transition.

Throughout the last decade, other key voices in the study of leadership have come forward to tap into the importance of connection, emotion and values-based expression of leadership. These include Bennis and Thomas, *Crucible of Leadership* (2002); Bill George, *Authentic Leadership* (2003); Robert Quinn, *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It*, (2004); Boyatzis and McKee, *Resonant Leadership*, (2005); and recently, Kouzes and Posner's Five Practice Model, described in *The Leadership Challenge*, recently updated in 2008.

Three consistent themes on the nature of leadership appear in all these models: relationship/connection, interiority or inner states, and change/creation (results). Effective leaders generate, from within themselves, relationships and connections that result in creation, change and collective (organizational) success.

Love as the Essence of the Radical Leader

Given that organizations are essentially structured networks or systems of relationships, we might explore the possibility that the “resonance” described in “primal leadership” (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2001) is actually an intention of “love.” This is not romantic attraction or affection. We define “love” here as a leader intention of wanting

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the best for all concerned: employees, shareholders, customers, community and society (including the environment). What makes a leader “radical” is *also* having a clear intention about his or her own decisions and actions, thereby connecting inner state and external behaviors—in other words, bridging the gap between “the walk and the talk”—to take actions that achieve the well-being of all.

The business value of this is convincingly demonstrated in the book *Firms of Endearment* (Sisodia, Wolfe and Sheth, 2007). By striving to “endear themselves to all stakeholders” (customers, employees, partners (vendors/suppliers), investors and society) equally, the 28 companies they studied produced a cumulative 10-year return of 1,026 percent, compared to 331 percent for the 11 companies in Collins' Good to Great and 122 percent for the S&P (p. 137-8).

In the foreword to Bill O'Brien's book, *Character at Work* (2008), Peter Senge says that “Bill served as architect of one of the most dramatic, sustained corporate revivals that I know of.” O'Brien was marketing VP and then CEO of Hanover Insurance from 1969 through 1991. In 1970, Hanover was essentially bankrupt. Senge describes how Hanover went from the bottom and grew to the point that it was ranked in the top quartile in profitability and growth in its industry during the 1980s, the only company that had not also been in the top quartile in the 1970s. Interestingly, O'Brien saw “love,” defined as a “predisposition toward helping another person to become complete,” as essential to generating results and creativity, and that “this is the primary responsibility for everyone within our purview (as leaders).” For O'Brien “love” is an internalized intention in the practice of what he calls generative leadership and the source of Hanover's turnaround success.

We see love as the *underpinning*, a conscious-stated intention that underlies *all* actions and behaviors; it is not a separate factor in a leadership model. Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving* provides one such comprehensive perspective. He offers specifics on the nature of love that are consistent with each of the

leadership models referenced earlier and evident in the Hanover turnaround. Fromm views love as an “interpersonal creative capacity,” and describes four components of love that are interdependent, interior states or ways of being. These components are Care, Understanding, Respect and Responsiveness.

Care is the active concern about the well-being and growth of all. This is to care *about* oneself and others. This relates to being generative. This is not to “take care of,” which can take away or restrict one's autonomy, as in “let me take care of that for you.” The opposite is apathy or indifference.

Understanding is seeing deeply into whom we are; our uniqueness and what we bring. This is actively seeking and learning about, knowing and *valuing* what we and others offer and truly want and need. The opposite is ignorance or unawareness.

Respect is granting freedom to be who we are and grow *in our own way* without judgment, the autonomy for full expression and generating possibility. It enables and allows the drive to self-realization. The opposite is control or disregard. We note that, as part of the prevailing mindset, respect can also mean/imply “to obey,” as in “respect your elders,” but that's not what we mean.

Responsiveness is active sensitivity and conscious response to fulfillment: our innate needs for relationship, purposeful contribution, self-determination and growth (Nebelung, 2001). It is about being present with relaxed alertness to oneself and others. The opposite is withdrawal or lack of engagement.

The integration of all four factors enables *leading as love*. Care, Understanding, Respect and Responsiveness are not behaviors or a series of actions; they are integrated and internalized within us as an intention of love that governs how we relate as leaders. Conversely, if our inner states and actions as leaders are the opposite, characterized by apathy/indifference, ignorance/unawareness, control/disregard or withdrawal/lack of engagement, this is the resonance that we will

create, and it will be reflected and seen in the organization.

This is not about being soft. What needs emphasis is that individual and group accountabilities do not go away. When love is defined as the basis for organizational relationships, there is a mutual commitment among people for results, which means that one is bound to tell the truth and does not avoid conflict. Accountability and meeting commitments are an integral part and a natural outgrowth of organizational relationships characterized by love.

Example: Cox Communications Arizona

The turnaround of Cox Communications of Arizona is very consistent with our argument that when leading as love is an intention, it can result in sustainable business success. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* post and through personal communication, transformational leadership consultant, Cleve Stevens (May 6, 2010; August 13 & 16, 2010), describes how Cox went from failure to success. Stevens consulted with Cox on the turnaround.

In 2000, Steve Rizley took over as CEO of this largely failing operation. He held the unshakeable belief that people do grow and change. He also had a solid personal intent to create a cohesive leadership team that would define and then bring the organization to its fullest potential. Rizley began by doing the painful work: replacing leaders who did not share Rizley's philosophy of caring for the organization and its people, or who chose not to engage in clarifying where the organization should go.

By 2004, Cox was ready for Stevens' transformational leadership approach, which provided a common language and framework for change and was based in four tenets (love (care), growth, contribution and meaning). Stevens says that these were non-negotiable for leaders and were actively utilized in running the business. They became the principles that guided the development of the vision, the development of the leaders as individuals and a team, as well as business decisions.

Becoming a cohesive team required intense and uncomfortable individual and group work at the top two leadership levels. This involved frequent, ongoing examination of where they were relative to the vision. These leaders challenged each other and confronted

how they were thinking, feeling and acting (or not) according to the vision.

The intention was that Cox would make a difference in people's lives; that everyone would benefit (employees, customers, community) because Cox Communications touched them. Excellence and accomplishment were interwoven with caring and growth. In making these intentions, these leaders recognized that if they were dedicated to the process of growing others, they must simultaneously be dedicated to the process of growing themselves. They created a collective identity about what it meant to be a leader in Cox and established practices that reinforced their growth experience.

For example, each leader had a "buddy" (an intense, confrontive, deeply caring relationship) that would keep them honest. They built a collective identity, a singular purpose that enabled them to confront the difficulties of being a team dedicated to their own and each other's growth. "Serving people" was central to and explicit in this vision, which outlined how Cox leaders would create caring (love), growth, meaning and contribution at the deepest and highest levels. Their intention was to achieve the vision of Cox Arizona as the exemplar for the industry in excellence, productivity and results.

The vision was not communicated until all executives both embraced and internalized the collective intention and demonstrated fierce commitment to it and their accountabilities. The depth of this individual commitment was partially gauged by reviewing business and HR policies, practices and procedures through the lens of the vision and changing them so they were consistent, which led to organizational alignment. Commitment also was gauged through observation of their direct interactions with each other. At one point, one member of the executive team was not engaging fully. By collectively acting toward this individual with unwavering, aggressive caring, and by continuously reaching out to him as a person and not forcing compliance, the executive team brought him into relationship, giving him a sense of belonging and ultimately attaining his uncompromising commitment.

Cox wanted to win and financial results were seen as a direct measure of its achievement and success in caring about and growing people. The company believed that caring about and fulfilling employee, customer and community needs are the cornerstones of a profitable busi-

ness. From 2004 to 2007, in just more than two years, it experienced explosive growth, nearly doubling revenues from \$700 million to \$1.3 billion. In 2009, Cox Arizona generated \$1.6 billion in revenues. Potential was realized when a purpose-based, clear intent moved to focused action.

There are several key things about Cox that are consistent with Hanover Insurance. First, as O'Brien (2008) says, "Transformational cultural achievements require the replacement of an inferior value for a higher one." In both Cox and Hanover, one of the higher values was that of love. For both organizations, these were not negotiable, and they could not be compromised.

The second is, as O'Brien puts it, "A value is only a value when it is voluntarily chosen." This caused O'Brien as CEO to oppose the Board when it asked for measures and consequences around the values. Neither O'Brien, nor Rizley, believed in forcing compliance. People were free to engage or not, and some chose to leave. Finally, O'Brien was "adamant that no real change could start to occur unless new ideas were internalized and eventually became a transparent part of the organization's own way of doing things." Rizley's focus on caring about employees, clients and community demonstrated the same thing.

In addition to Cox Arizona, there are a few companies that actively use "love" as their leadership intention. Southwest Airlines' founder Herb Kelleher is legendary for this. The airline's Mission Statement and Commitment to employees states: "Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer." Another company that comes close is W. L. Gore with four relationship principles that actually guide its operation:

- Fairness to each other and everyone with whom we come in contact
- Freedom to encourage, help, and allow other associates to grow in knowledge, skill, and scope of responsibility
- The ability to make one's own commitments and keep them
- Consultation with other associates before undertaking actions that could impact the reputation of the company.

For these and a few, select, other companies, putting people and creative realization first is the key to their success.



Focus on Leading, Not Managing

We believe that the majority of leaders have not integrated the criticality of relationships into their practices because their focus has been on managing (controlling) complexity. We also think that, with the degree and volume of change facing us over the next 10 years, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to manage our way to growth and profitability. We cannot manage the people side of change. At best, we can manage change with respect to the installation of technology, etc., but when it comes to people, “change management” is an oxymoron.

In the examples given, the inner state of leaders creates the resonance; we cannot buy resonance by reinforcing behaviors. It must come voluntarily from within. And as both O’Brien and Rizley demonstrated, this inner state must and can be voluntarily chosen by creating an environment of caring relationships (love) among the leaders. This kind of environment inherently develops leaders because of the accountabilities provided by the commitment to relate as love. If we are to effectively engage the turbulence of our times, it is time to consciously and actively make choices about how we relate, how we lead people, and what and how we manage.

Conclusion

We have argued that when leaders come from an internalized intention of love, seeking fulfillment and what’s best for all, everyone feels it and its potential is reflected in the organization’s governance, processes, management practices, culture (resonance) and success. This resonance takes the organization beyond any expected results.

Most recently, we have had an opportunity to witness the intention and action of love in the 2010 Chilean Mining incident. Shift foreman, Luis Urzua, first demonstrated “leading as love” by enabling his men to endure the first two harrowing weeks on two days worth of rations. What could have been yet another mining disaster became a story of triumph over unbearable circumstances, because of the specific things Urzua, his team, and many others from around the world, did to ensure the safety, emotional health and physical health of the miners through their long ordeal underground.

We might say that love is the business of leading; if you aren’t willing to love, you have no business being a leader. As a challenge, put on a critical eye for the next 24 hours: How many of your company’s practices and your own interactions and the interactions you observe are based in love that fosters creative realization? How many are based in and/or generate control and/or fear? What do you see happening and with what results? Choose an instance where the company experienced unexpected, extraordinary results. What were the dynamics? Perhaps you will catch clear glimpses of Care, Understanding, Respect and Responsiveness at play—in other words, leading as love. P&S

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Lucira Jane Nebelung is EVP of Stakeholder Relationship Enhancement with Blue Owl Corporation, a SaaS company specializing in Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM). She partners with Blue Owl’s clients on implementation, aligning people with company purpose through leadership, management and employee learning and change practices. She is also on the faculty of the Graduate Institute/Center for Leadership Studies – Masters of Arts of Organizational Leadership (MAOL). She welcomes all comments and can be reached at: LJNebelung@BlueOwlCo.com