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Preparing for Leaderful Practice

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Learn to let go.

A number of alternative methods for managing **teams** have been proposed and placed into practice in recent years that rely on the full participation of all **team** members, both in the planning and in the implementation of **team goals**. Referred to by a sundry of names, such as self-directed work **teams** or empowered **teams**, such teams claim to accomplish their tasks far more effectively than conventional **teams**. That is because they make use of the leadership of everyone rather than forcing members into a dependence, awaiting orders from the official **team** supervisor. In conventional leadership, there's one leader, and his or her job is to direct the enterprise and engender the commitment of **team** members by rewarding them for doing the job assigned.

The practice of involving everyone in leadership, that leadership can be a collective property, merits a name to distinguish it from the archetype of leadership based on its root definition as the "person out in front." I call leadership as a collective property, "leaderful practice." It is based on four critical tenets that I refer to as "the four Cs." The leadership of **teams**, and of organizations, can be

- collective
- concurrent
- collaborative
- compassionate.

Collective leadership means that everyone in the group can serve as a leader; the **team** isn't dependent on one individual to take over.

Concurrent leadership means that not only can many members serve as leaders, but also they can do it at the same time. No one, not even a supervisor, has to stand down when any **team** member is making his or her contribution as a leader.

Collaborative leadership means that everyone is in control of and can speak for the entire team. All members pitch in to accomplish the work of the **team**. Together, they engage in a mutual dialogue to determine what needs to be done and how to do it. Compassionate leadership means that **team** members commit to preserving the dignity of every individual on the **team**, considering each when a decision is made or action taken.

Leaderful **team** designs, characterised by the four Cs, are thought to produce effective outcomes because they engage everyone in mutual action. Everyone's talent is allowed to shine through and contribute to **team goals**. People can bring their whole selves to work and feel at home contributing to the greater good.

In this age when work has become so widely distributed, networked, and often virtual, we can't wait for **team** members to check with the official leader or headquarters before taking action. In most cases, **team** members have the information at their disposal to make better decisions on the matter at hand than their bosses. Nowadays, **teams** are typically assembled with people who have solid educational backgrounds and unique, but complementary, skills. Consequently, they shouldn't be held back by supervisors who may have far less expertise than the **team** members have. Rather, **teams** should be encouraged to work and lead together as necessary.

Though there may be many advantages to it, taking the leaderful approach isn't likely to occur naturally. **Teams** don't necessarily stand around waiting for members to suddenly mobilize into leaderful behavior. **Team** leadership needs to be developed; **team** members need to feel confident they can develop the ability to engage in leaderful practice. How do we get there? I call the process, letting go.

Self-awareness first

I'd like to make the case that we should start the process of leaderful development with the individual. Because **team** leadership most likely will require a change in people's outlook, especially regarding questions of control and participation, it may need initiators who are comfortable in their inner worlds. Change may need to start with a reflective stance, which asks people to pause sufficiently to gain some self-awareness of their actions. They need to ask themselves such questions as,

- Who am I?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- What impact am I hoping to have on the people around me, my community, or my society?
- Am I willing to share control with others?
- Do I believe in the capabilities of my associates?
- Am I willing to accept honest feedback on any experiments I wish to undertake in my leadership?
- Am I prepared to learn from my mistakes and examine my assumptions?
- Can I show my own vulnerability and admit to others that I may not have all of the answers?

Asking such questions requires courage. Becoming leaderful, then, starts with doing work on oneself, especially learning how to let go. Iva Wilson, former president of Philips Display Components Company and co-author of *The Power of Collaborative Leadership*, explains this inner struggle as follows:

"You can't do this work without devolving power. So while you're trying to make that transition, there are going to be difficult moments for both yourself and the organization until you reframe and are truly seen as a leader who isn't using power in the old ways. This is where the need for collaboration comes in because you will need other people to make this transition successfully. As a leader, you have to be humble and accept that you don't have all of the answers. But knowing when not to act so that things will come out better than if you did act is difficult. I wish I had more practice in realizing that we're not the center of the universe. We become so self-centered — not in self-interest, necessarily — in believing that we alone can do it.

Beginning

Leaderful practice begins with a personal awareness of our own limitations. Many of us in line positions learn to operate on what Prasad Kaipa of SelfCorp refers to as "autopilot," a set of mental models that represents a stable view of reality. Executives can learn to rely on patterns that got them there in the first place. But if those behavioral patterns gradually lead to ineffective performance, we may lose our ability to bring them to a level of awareness.

In our efforts to achieve success, many of us forget who we are. We live in a world of images, self-interest, and control. We need to be awakened. Our world can become more fulfilling when we're guided

by authenticity, compassion, trust, and openness. We need to awake from the autopilot of success and achievement in order to rediscover our selves.

In undertaking the process of self-discovery, we need to appreciate the mixture of our life experiences that have led to our present way of being. Many of us may find that we need to find a true purpose to guide our everyday activities. We need to become more aware of any gaps between our behavior and our intentions. That requires an ability and a willingness to retrace our reasoning and our behavioral steps that lead to the actions that play out in our lives. It requires the courage to examine one's self independently and to open one's experiences to those of trusted others.

Kevin Cashman, in *Leadership From the Inside Out*, writes about the need to access our conscious beliefs — which are known to us — and our shadow beliefs. Shadow beliefs are manifestations of hidden, unexplored, or unresolved psychological dynamics. They're often constructed from secrets that we don't want to examine. Unfortunately, shadow beliefs, if left unexamined, can produce such ill effects as addictive behaviors, difficulty in relationships, imbalanced lifestyles, and health problems. Further, they often go undetected because they're associated with leadership behaviors that may be seen publicly as strengths.

Consider, for example, the trait of charm. Usually seen as a strength, some people may use charm as a means to succeed, no matter what, even if they have to manipulate others. Similarly, conscientiousness, though typically well regarded, can degenerate into compulsiveness and perfectionism. Unless the shadow beliefs underlying so-called strengths are surfaced, they may lead to consequences that can derail an otherwise productive and contented individual.

Fortunately, we don't need to undertake the process of self-discovery toward a more open, leaderful perspective on our own. We can and should reach out to colleagues to help work through experiments in leaderful practice. That means turning to others for unconditional support and honest feedback about our personal transformation. No one is immune from self-deception. We all believe that we practice what we preach. But without feedback from trusted others, our reflective processes will inevitably break down. We need to test ourselves persistently that we're behaving as we want to behave when it comes to our impact on others.

Feedback of that nature goes beyond the popular 360 degree feedback process. According to Cashman, we should focus instead on what he calls 720 degree feedback. In 360 feedback, we obtain impressions about our performance from immediate stakeholders — typically our boss, peers, staff, and sometimes customers. Cashman is concerned that such feedback only helps individuals learn how to create themselves in the image of others. It is "outer" 360 degree feedback that can help people learn how to adjust their outward manifestations towards others. But without "inner" 360 feedback, people might not come to appreciate what it is about their inner, authentic selves that may produce the behavior in question.

It isn't enough for someone to know that he or she may be viewed as a perfectionist; it's critical that the person learn that he or she has become obsessed with an overdriven will to succeed at all costs (perhaps driven by a need to surpass the achievements of a favored sibling).

Discovering our inner selves means unpeeling the external images we've learned to rely on to block our self-discovery. Those images may correspond to our everyday achievements or occasional stimulations, such as a bungee jump, that gives the false feeling that one is "alive." We need to look inside ourselves, often with the help of others, to find our real selves.

In *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton writes: "We are warmed by fire, not by the smoke of the fire. We are carried over the sea by ship, not by the wake of a ship. So too, what we are is sought in the depths of our own Being, not in our outward reflection of our own acts. We must find our real selves not in the froth stirred up by the impact of our Being upon the beings or things around us, but in our own Being, which is the principle of all our acts."

[From self-awareness to self-leadership](#)

Once you have a sense of personal mastery, you can work on mastering self-leadership. What is self-leadership, and how do you introduce it to yourself, let alone to a resistant boss or an apathetic membership? Charles Manz and Henry Sims, in their conception of "super leadership," say that self-leadership arises from personal, "behavior focused," and "cognitive focused" strategies.

The behaviors entail such strategies as self-observation, self-set **goals**, self-reward, and self-criticism. As an individual, it's important to first understand and observe oneself before advising others. People need to reward themselves for accomplishments in self-leadership and be willing to solicit feedback from others, even criticism, if they veer from self-direction. It's easy to become dependent on others in a paternalistic environment, for example.

Among the cognitive strategies, Manz and Sims advise people to actually talk to themselves and, in so doing, build natural rewards into tasks or become increasingly aware of their beliefs and assumptions. Natural rewards are intrinsic; consequently, they result from activities that can give people a sense of competence or self-control over their lives and work.

Having mastered a degree of self-leadership in themselves, leaders can begin to model self-leadership in others. They can encourage employees to experiment with the same behavioral and cognitive strategies — such as setting self-**goals** and using constructive rewards. It's important to note that self-leadership doesn't prescribe achieving individual **goals** at the expense of the **team**. People do learn to take care of themselves, but they also are encouraged to take care of each other. One of my former students, who had been a Peace Corps volunteer, suggested that the link between self-leadership and **team** leadership is through stewardship. People need to share their learning as a gesture of commitment to the greater good of the **team** of which they are a part.

Here's a relevant passage from that student's journal:

"It would have been easy for my farmers to simply learn and enact the projects that we were working on and not to share their knowledge with others. However, every one of my farmers actively sought out others with whom to share their new knowledge. They did this, not for me, but rather because they understood why I was there working with them, and they believed in the value of the project. They knew that the more far-reaching the project, the more far-reaching the benefits for all."

Personal self-leadership skills may well be necessary before **teams** are prepared for **team** leadership in which the official supervisor hands over responsibility to the **team**. Many people have heard of the unusual experiment in leadership that has characterized the W. L. Gore company, the maker of Gore-Tex. Gore calls itself "an unmanaged company" because it has no hierarchy, no structure, and no titles except for what's required for incorporation purposes. Its founder, Bill Gore, was proud at one point to declare that "leadership is defined by what you do, not who you are."

It comes as no surprise that at Gore in annual surveys conducted by the HR department, more than 50 percent of associates, as they're called, answer "yes" to the question, Are you a leader? At any point, company associates can start up a project by recruiting members until a **team**, and even an entire plant, is formed. A company like Gore can work only when everyone is willing to take responsibility for his or her behavior as a self-leader, someone who can manage himself or herself and at the same time contribute to the success of the company as a whole.

[From self-leadership to team leadership](#)

The link between self- and **team** leadership is enhanced as members see that their teammates become willing to take responsibility for their actions, including soliciting feedback regarding contributions they make to the overall **team** effort. **Teams** also see the power of collaborative action, acknowledging the generative potential in teamwork. People can do together what they may not see themselves capable of doing as individuals.

Consider these words from another student journal: "Through reflection, I came to the conclusion that my

personal lens of viewing a piece of data is more helpful when combined with the lenses of other teammates. I realized that my lens is a limitation if used in isolation, but a strength if used with others."

There's a case depicted by Maureen Duncan Fisher and Kimball Fisher, in the May/June 1998 *At Work*, of a hospital unit **team** that having put up with a heavy-handed supervisor for 15 years, got a chance to try out a self-directed **team** approach when the supervisor left. They chose as their **team** leader someone who had substantial interpersonal skills and was considered to be much kinder and gentler. Originally, the **team** was excited about performing some of the administrative functions that had previously been handled by the former manager. The new **team** leader now worked along with other staff in the unit sharing administrative responsibilities. Over time, however, the **team** members began to push a lot of the shared responsibilities back onto the **team** leader. They reverted to their old ways and began insisting that the new **team** leader take on many of the responsibilities of the former manager.

What happened to the self-directed **team** concept?

That case reinforces the developmental premise that began the article. **Teams** don't adopt **team** leadership overnight. One way to begin is to have the official supervisor suggest to the community that leadership can be shared as long as everyone is willing to pitch in to cover the leadership of the **team**. That person would have to convince **team** members that he or she isn't abdicating leadership by that assertion. Given the relative degree of experience with democratic **teams**, the members may or may not agree with the leaderful offer of sharing leadership.

In self-directed **teams**, the members need to agree how to approach the whole job. Thus, each participates in the planning, implementation, and measurement of the entire task or service. In the early stages, the supervisor may need to perform some of the standard functions associated with conventional leadership — such as calling meetings, setting an agenda, coordinating tasks and schedules, and the like. Soon thereafter, the supervisory role can make the transition to a facilitation role. The supervisor may start by raising awareness of the natural dynamics of groups and organizations so that **team** members realize the challenge, but also the benefit of developing the **team** mutually. **Teams** will vary in how quickly they can make the transition to **team** leadership, based on such variables as the foreknowledge that members have of each other, their degree of sophistication regarding working in groups, and their collective orientation and interest. Some people don't like working with others, preferring to do things on their own. Other **team** members may seek or compete for social status within the group so that they have such privileges as the command of air time, the prerogative to confirm or dispute others' views, or the right to initiate and direct conversations.

The most typical interventions of facilitation during the transition stage are to help members build trust towards each other, display interest and flexibility regarding the decisions they make on their own, and coach **team** members on interpersonal skills if needed. In some cases, the supervisor won't have to intervene excessively to foster leaderful adoption.

Robert Lussier and Christopher Achua, in their book *Leadership: Theory, Application, Skill Development*, report on a critical event at Valena Scientific, in which it took a facilitator just two days to bring a small group of scientists and technicians together who had been at odds about a particular manufacturing process. What the facilitator accomplished was to get the scientists to talk across their traditional disciplines, share their vision for the key project they were all working on, and develop a consensus on the proper approach to the process in question.

Meredith Belbin, in *Management Teams*, believes that it's the responsibility of **team** members to oversee a variety of **team** roles — such as setting priorities, seeing that the **team** makes best use of its resources, advancing new ideas and strategies, fostering **team** spirit, and ensuring that the work gets finished. As **team** members begin to assume more of those roles and rely less on the supervisor, **team** leadership is within reach.

Not only is it important that **team** members share leadership roles, but also that they recognize that the roles should be emphasized relatively depending on the phases of the **team's** life. For example, members

with teambuilding skills tend to be valuable during the early stages of **team** development to help people learn to work through their differences and share their expectations openly.

The organizational context

Preparing an organization to embrace **team** leadership requires an effort at the organizational or system level, as well as the **team** and individual levels. The top management of the organization has to look deeply inside itself to determine whether it is prepared to turn the reins of power over to individuals and **teams**, especially when it comes to giving them access to the information and freedom they need to run their own affairs. Sufficient learning opportunities must be in place to ensure that the transition to a leaderful approach runs smoothly. Without true commitment, efforts at installing self-directed activities will surely fall flat.

One of my students, an investment banker, wrote about the tribulations at his firm to push self-directed work **teams**. Here's how he wryly framed his firm's efforts: "We have started out with very small groups, and the groups are tackling some of the firm's simpler quality issues. The idea of self-directed **teams** was rolled out a year ago, and there was and still is skepticism among senior management. My managing director asked, for example, why we had to ask the **teams** what needed to be done; he'd be more than happy to tell them exactly what needed to be done and how to do it."

At the supervisory level, facilitators of self-directed teams can exhibit a number of system-wide behaviors that can predispose **teams** to become more self-reliant. Perhaps the most important is to monitor the social and political environment affecting the **team** so as to run the necessary interference to ensure that the **team** can do its work. In some cases, that might mean acquiring the necessary material and information resources, obtaining support or clearance for the **team**, or providing technical assistance. As an example, consider a case presented in a paper given at the 2001 Academy of Management Annual Meeting by V. Urch Druskat and J. V Wheeler of a facilitator working through problems having to do with the development of a new piece of equipment. It takes place at a durable goods manufacturing plant in the U.S. Midwest:

After he (a **team** member) showed me different things, I said that I'd make some sketches of what I think he wanted, then talk to the first-shift person, the second-shift person, and the third-shift person and see what their ideas are. I also came in on the off shift. The following week, I brought in three sketches. I also wanted the other facilitators to take part, so I gave them a copy. And I asked them to choose one. The choice was unanimous.

It should be pointed out that the facilitator, who was highly rated by his **team**, subsequently took that information to the appropriate sources in the broader organization and obtained support for building the new piece of equipment.

Bradley Kirkman and Benson Rosen, in a study of some 100 **teams** in four different organizations, put forward a number of levers or steps that management, interested in a self-directed **team** environment, can take to ensure the likelihood of success of any **team** leadership venture.

The first step, boundary management, asks that the official supervisors of a **team** learn to stay out of the way once **team** members show they're capable of solving their own work-related problems. Step 2, procedures and systems, calls on **teams** to establish their own production and service **goals** and standards, including the handling of customer relations.

The third lever is HR management, perhaps the most difficult, as it calls on a **team** to determine its own compensation system, as well as such HR functions as hiring, appraisal, development, discipline, and discharge.

In addition to those success factors, here are some other principles of **team** leadership:

- Be sure that leaderful individuals and **teams** have the necessary resources — information or money — that will enable them to assume accountability for their empowered decision making.

Other resources can include support staff, physical space, equipment, and time to develop as a **team**.

- Add a learning component, in skills and attitudes, so that all parties will be prepared to assume shared responsibility. Once the **team** learns how to operate well, continue to reward it using financial and symbolic support.
- Be selective. Leaderful practice should be accorded to people who are most ready to assume the challenge. There's no "one size fits all" category; for each individual or **team**, the extension of shared power and authority must proceed case by case.
- Ensure that there's a commitment, especially on the part of management, to allow leaderful behavior to proceed without taking back control at the first misstep. Leaderful practice requires sustained trust. Managers must truly be interested in sharing power and decision making, and be willing to abide by the decisions of the **team** that has assumed responsibility.

Leaderful practice is an approach to management in organizations whose time has come. But it won't occur automatically in most cultures. It needs careful development. Begin by letting go.

See page 5 for an Executive Summary of this article

We should focus on 720 degree feedback.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Joe Raelin

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