

**LEADERS LEADING LEADERS®:**  
***The Art of Peak Performance***  
**by J. Jeffrey Spahn**

In order to step up to the unprecedented levels of productivity demanded by today's markets, cutting edge executives are expanding their vision of leadership from an individual leader leading followers to a team of leaders leading each other. As one executive puts it "...where each of us leads the rest of us."

A fundamentally new model of leadership is appearing. This approach builds upon the old, yet maintains a set of distinctive and in some cases contradictory assumptions. A plethora of articles and books are making considerable progress in the advancement of thinking about the challenge of leadership. However, nearly all of them are restrained by an old paradigm of leadership that serves its purpose and has its place, yet must give way to a new paradigm if we are to exploit our possibilities.

Leaders increasingly face the challenge of leading other leaders whether in an executive team, cross-functioning task force, alliance, partnership, or merger/acquisition. In fact, research indicates that high functioning teams experience fluid leadership. This leading of leaders evokes models of mutual leadership where every member participates as a leader.

After assuming a top executive position with a world-renowned financial institution Scott paused to reflect upon his past and current leadership experience. *"As a CEO, I constantly experienced the truth of the adage of too many chefs in the kitchen. The executive team was a group of highly independent and highly intelligent men and women who spent much of their time trying to out-do each other. Meanwhile, I was intent on getting them all to agree with me. Currently I have a team who are all stars in their own right. Now I see each of them as a chef with their own expertise, say, one in red*

*meats, others in poultry, seafood, appetizers or desserts. By learning how to lead each other we create an environment where each leader asserts their own unique individuality, respects the offering of other leaders and surrenders to the guiding vision of creating an optimal experience for the customer. We are performing like never before. The difference is astounding!"*

Prevalent leadership theory and practice assumes that there is one chef in the kitchen. For instance, when asked in an interview what it takes to be a leader, Gary Wills, author of *Certain Trumpets*, simply replied, "Followers." Certainly this has been the case and still holds true to some extent. However, in the age of flattening organizations, disseminated information and spiraling change and complexity many chefs work in the corporate kitchen. Assumption that "leaders lead only followers and that only individuals lead" has now become misleading.

This article introduces a unique model of leadership built upon the premises that:

- Leaders lead leaders, not just followers, and
- Optimal productivity requires mutual leadership.

Creating an environment that evokes the energy, intelligence and creativity that is greater than the sum of the parts has quickly moved from a luxury to a priority. Evoking this power catalyzes collective leadership where each participant becomes simultaneously leader and follower. The question here goes beyond, "How to get the team to own my point of view?" to "How to generate superior results by incorporating the ideas and skills of all team members?" Living this question transcends the struggle for individual dominance and the need to constantly mediate tension. According to those who have tried it releases and channels energy, captures the strategic insight of the entire team and generates passion.

Many leaders intend to be collaborative, but are not able to make the necessary distinction between leading leaders and leading followers. More importantly, they lack the necessary mindset, competencies, and methodology for practicing collective leadership. As a result, they become mired in a bog of mindless consensus. An example:

*The CEO of a historic marketing firm spends weeks preparing to present his plan for turning the company around to his executive team. Upon completing his speech, he leans into his high backed leather chair with a familiar look of satisfaction on his face and simply asks, "What do you think?" A collection of nodding heads assures him that he is on the right track. After a couple of clarifying questions there follow a round of hearty handshakes and reassuring pats on the back as the team breaks for drinks and a festive dinner. Eight months later the same CEO pulls aside, one of his most trusted executives and says, "What's going on? I thought everybody was on board with the turn around plan, but everybody is going in their own direction!"*

Like many executives, this CEO acted upon the assumption that he was leading followers. Leaders lead followers by giving directives or winning others to their position. Actually, his executive team was a collection of leaders. Leading leaders as though they were followers can sabotage effectiveness.

Other leaders revert back to the habits of chain of command. The same example: *"After drawing upon the expertise of a variety of expensive consultants and hours of preparation, the CEO finishes presenting his point of view about the strategy for completing a vital project facing the executive team. Now with an unconscious look of satisfaction on his face he leans back in his custom-made high back leather chair and says, "Well, what do you think?... I*

*want everybody to feel free to express any dissenting views by saying 'I quit'."*

Most executives are far too sophisticated to be so blunt. Yet, isn't the message the same? Or has it only become veiled with good manners like the invisible electronic fence designed to restrain while maintaining the appearance of freedom of expression. What are the costs of these invisible barriers?

How can executives realize the benefits of involving more people in leadership without falling prey to:

- The malaise of getting everybody's input, but delaying or avoiding tough choices,
- The anarchy of *too many chefs in the kitchen*, or
- The bog of mindless consensus?

Following the presentation of a process and a key personal competency for leading leaders, this article offers a decision-making model for mutual leadership that addresses this question.

### **A Method for Leading Leaders**

The foundation of *our* vision for the art of collective leadership is a communication technology called Intrachange™, which is rooted in the ancient practice of dialogue. It activates real partnership where each participant is simultaneously leader and follower. The purpose of directives, debates and most discussions is to control behavior, convince or bring others around to a prescribed point of view. Genuine dialogue seeks only to discover and allow the insight and energy that emerges to lead the team or organization forward. By using particular competencies, guidelines, balances, stages, moves and decision-making models, one can create a context for leading and following at the same time.

You know what it means to lead. You know how to follow. Can you lead *and* follow

concurrently? Doing so remains challenging because most of our acquired maps for relating-whether at home, school, church or work - follow the hierarchical pattern with clear distinctions between leaders and followers. Generating conversations where everyone participates as a leader and follower resembles the activity of putting a puzzle together without the benefit of a completed picture.

Imagine your team engaged in putting a puzzle together. Each member has 4-5 pieces turned upside down. First, everyone takes their pieces and turns them right side up. Then they identify the color and shape, push them into the center and let go. As this happens everyone watches to see how the pieces connect. After some frustration, pieces start to come together. Gradually, if they stay with it, something greater than the sum of the parts begins to appear. Eventually the picture becomes clear. The puzzle is solved.

Genuine dialogue follows a similar pattern. The pieces you bring to this puzzle consist of your current thinking and feeling on the business issue under consideration. You recognize these thoughts and feelings, and then offer them as equal, different and vital pieces of the conversation. As others do the same, you look for connections and patterns. Eventually something greater than the sum of the parts appears. Martin Buber, a dialogue philosopher and practitioner, says that when two or more people consistently speak authentically to each other, a word or idea appears between them. As executive teams create a common understanding, an energy emerges that leads the team forward. This leadership moves not just from the top down, or from the bottom up, but from the center, the creative between, out.

Leaders lead followers by presenting a predetermined picture of the future puzzle. Given the rapidity of change in today's world, it has become increasingly difficult for leaders to do this. Leaders lead leaders

by consistently creating an environment which allows a picture of the puzzle to emerge.

### **Displaying: A Competency for Leading Leaders**

Many executive conversations fall short of their potential for these reasons:

- Some participants attempt to “win” the conversation by convincing others
- Others withdraw and conceal their thinking and feeling.

The first set of executives assume a role of superiority and try to impose their ideas upon others. In the context of assembling a puzzle, this would be similar to one party saying “my piece is the whole puzzle”. The second set of leaders assumes a role of inferiority and hides their genuine thoughts and feelings. This would be like one of the people assembling the puzzle taking a piece and hiding it in their pocket. In both instances, the puzzle does not get solved. When executives take these positions while exploring business issues the conversation erupts or stalls.

Executives can avoid these obstacles by learning to “display” their thinking and feeling. Displaying involves forcefully expressing one's position with the purpose of contributing their piece of the conversational puzzle, not to win the debate or define the outcome. Doing so involves, as with assembling the puzzle, identifying one's current thoughts and feelings, expressing them, or putting them out there, and welcoming the opinions of others as equal, different and vital pieces of the emerging conversation. When executives display they assume equality. Some executives become free from their need to dominate. Others overcome their fear of self-expression. A vital conversation ensues.

An internal consultant with a Fortune 500 chemical company connected me with an executive who wanted assistance in presenting her Vision 2000 plan. She explained to me that the vision was set, but that she wanted as open a dialogue as possible to achieve a high degree of ownership about how to implement the vision. We decided to work together and she agreed to send me any memos and communication sent to her executive team. Upon receiving a couple of memos that referred to her excitement over her Vision 2000 and persuasively presented ideas for implementing the plan, I began to question if this executive was really ready to open dialogue. These memos were red flags because if she was not ready to let go of the outcome of how to implement the vision and already trying to persuade her team to her point of view, then she could easily sabotage the dialogue and not even know it.

In a coaching session, we reviewed the above material. We explored whether she was really ready to display her thinking and look for the larger picture to emerge. After three hours she became aware of the impact of her memos and realized that she needed a different approach if she wanted to have an open dialogue.

In subsequent memos and during the conversation she consistently relayed the following message:

*As you all know, where we need to be by the year 2000 is set. However, how we are going to get there is not. Instead of trying to convince all of you of my ideas for implementing the vision I want to open a dialogue where each of us displays his or her ideas and then we watch for what wants to emerge that is greater than the sum of the parts.*

The idea that surfaced in the afternoon of the second day of dialogue was that, *the material flow is boss*. This fundamental paradigm shift of authority from the

tradition hierarchy to the process and ultimately to the customers, was right in line with Vision 2000 and shaped the plan for implementation.

Let's reexamine the earlier story of the CEO designing a new product design strategy. Instead of imposing his ideas or reaching mindless consensus he later assumed the mindset of a leader leading leaders and said to his team, *"You all know how crucial rolling out this new product is for our company. In the past, I have presented a plan for your approval. This approach has worked pretty well at times. However, pretty well is not good enough any more. I now believe that together we could design an excellent plan and position ourselves to implement it with quality and quickness. I will start this conversation with some initial thoughts, as a piece of a puzzle if you will, then invite each of you to offer your perspectives and together we can look for the larger picture that wants to emerge."*

Out of the ensuing conversation, this team created three "posts in the ground" that now serve as criteria for the team's choices. As one team member put it, "Now we are in sync." Another said, "Decisions come much easier and quicker now. We trust each other more and all own the posts in the ground. So far, it is amazing how free we are to express our differences and still discover consensus. That's much more productive than in fighting and power struggles." The key feature is not the uniqueness of their criteria for decisions, but discovering them together, thus increasing commitment and the velocity of execution.

The aforementioned executive led leaders by displaying his intelligence. The following leads leaders by displaying his ignorance: *As a Vice President of a leading consulting firm, Paul increasingly complains that we teach our clients how to communicate, but we do not practice it ourselves. On a Friday, he is called into the CEO's office and learns that the current president was leaving. Now it is his turn to run the organization and to*

*stop his complaining. He calls his spouse and asks her to meet him at the airport. After relaying the story she says, "Congratulations." He responds "But I don't know what to do! What will I tell the team on Monday?" Sunday night as Paul puts it "A light went off!" Monday morning he tells the team the above story and then says " We are going to stay with our guiding principle of creating jubilant customers but, beyond that I don't know what to do. However, together I think we can figure this out." From here ensues the insight and energy to implement a strategy that propelled this once floundering division into #1 for four straight years. While breaking all previously held records Paul most remembers, "We had a lot of fun."*

### **A Decision-Making Model for Leading Leaders**

Earlier it was suggested that some leaders resist being more collaborative because it is not apparent how this way of leading blends with the legitimate need for directive leadership. Furthermore, it is unclear how decisions can be made in a timely fashion.

During lunch break with a senior vice president of global marketing of a world-renowned manufacturing company and his team, the CEO calls to say that he needs a decision by the end of the day. How might the executive proceed? This executive said the following.

*Before we get the conversation started, let me be clear about our decision-making process. As many of you know a decision about this needs to be made by 5:00 pm today. Here's how we are going to proceed. I have asked Helen to give us a 15 minute update on the situation. Following this, we will spend the next three hours in dialogue where we display our feeling and thinking. If we haven't come to a consensus about moving forward by 3:00 pm, we will then have a discussion by naming the various options along with the pros and cons of each. If no consensus occurs by 4:00 pm, I*

*will spend the remaining hour deliberating over the collective input of the team and make a decision.*

The executive accessed collective input and declared a clear intent. Had the team not been consulted, vital information may have been missed and the team members slighted. If the intent was not clear and the team understood that this was to be a joint decision, and it was not, then trust is undermined. If practiced regularly this could easily result in the team feeling disrespected. With the leader being clear on intent and calling for both dialogue and discussion, then making a unilateral choice, we have an example of leadership that:

- Integrates the need for open dialogue and tough timely decisions,
- Generates consistent consensus derived from debate,
- Discerns when to lead with command and when to lead with consensus, and
- Allows the collective will to surface.

Executives do this by:

- Distinguishing between various modes of conversation,
- Being skilled in each mode,
- Knowing the best applications of each,
- Developing the capacity to lead the team into genuine dialogue, and
- Declaring intent and following through.

Good leaders discern when to lead with directives and when to lead with dialogue. Exceptional leaders create conditions that allow the collective will to emerge. Like a soulful jazz maestro, they artfully blend the sounds of directives, debate, discussion and dialogue orchestrating a symphony of

energy and insight that surpasses the sum of the parts.

### **Summary**

The terrain of leadership is shifting right before our eyes. Like pioneers, heretofore discovering a new world on horseback, leaders, teams and organizations have arrived on the shores of a boundless ocean and need another mode for moving forward. We cannot lead ourselves through the vast problems and possibilities of today with only the leadership models that got us here. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil, recent CEO of Alcoa Inc., declares that, "the potential for productivity gains in the U.S. economy is higher than we realize. If you look at the penetration of good ideas we're still at the 20% to 30% of what's possible."

This article presumes that in order to take full advantage of the technological changes and our inherent capacities as human beings we need to rethink and redesign the way we lead. Models of leadership assuming that leaders only lead followers and that only individuals lead fall short in a world that demands highly cross-functional teams to address spiraling complexity. Leaders face the challenge of building alliances among competitors, mergers between contrasting cultures, strategic and tactical decisions across divisions, all the while creating value multiplied, not just value added. Leaders are rising to the challenge by learning to lead leaders through consistently creating a context that allows the collective will to emerge. Doing so releases the commitment, insight, creativity, and energy that leads to the zone of optimal performance.

Some leaders appear to have a natural capacity for removing the fences and generating freewheeling conversations. Many leaders aspire to be more collaborative, but few actually practice it. Those that do, do so through the power and limits of their own personality. Experience reveals that executives leading with

collaborative conversations are the most open to acquiring a transferable method for spreading genuine dialogue throughout the organization. Learning to do so begins with acquiring a mindset, personal competencies and an explicit and transferable process for practicing the art of collective leadership.

### **Peak Performance and the Arts**

Historians assert that sometimes the arts express the collective unconscious of humanity and thereby lead to new ways of thinking and living. In this century two new art forms, improvisational theatre and jazz, pave the way for a new way of leading.

Contrary to popular understanding improvisation is not "performance without preparation." It is an art form that takes skill and practice to learn. Here, discipline and spontaneity, intent and instinct, are mutually enhancing. Action arises from acquired skills, what one is thinking and feeling in the moment and in response to other team members, not a preordained script or role.

Whether in improvisational theatre or jazz the distinctions of teacher/student and leader/follower disappear. It requires a radical mutuality, a deep trust and an acute sense of being in the present moment. Leadership acquires new meaning. Everyone is a leader. I can hear my improvisational theatre instructor saying, "Follow the follower," in other words, "lead the leader." Participants follow the follower and lead the leader simultaneously. Groups that practice the art of improvisation leadership experience flexibility, innovation and speed -- timely traits in a

business world of spiraling change,  
chaos and complexity.

### **Peak Performance and Sports**

The game of leadership is changing right before our eyes. The problem is that many leaders are playing the new game with the rules and techniques of the old game. In these games everyone positions themselves in relationship to the player with the ball because, in that moment, he or she leads.

The old game is akin to football. One person runs the team, usually a designated quarterback. This leader gives the play that directs everybody else. As the leader, the quarterback distributes the ball or decides who holds the power. In order to succeed there needs to be a clear distinction between leader and follower. Only one person calls the plays and not everyone can handle the ball. In the business context, this is best identified as a working group, not a team. The leader primarily defines the nature and characteristics of this group.

The new game is akin to basketball. A basketball offense is at its best when there is good ball movement, so that everyone gets their hands on the ball. In reflecting upon the Bulls dynasty one Chicago journalist noted that Phil Jackson should be inducted into the hall of fame for teaching Michael Jordan how to pass. When the ball changes hands leadership becomes fluid. All the players function as leaders and followers. In the business context research indicates that highly effective teams operate this way. The member of the team best suited for the task at hand assumes the leadership. The group as a whole, not any one person, defines the nature and characteristics of the team.

Great leaders can play football and basketball, but increasingly play more basketball. They know the best time to play either one and tell everyone which game is on.