

# Perspectives on Leadership

*From the  
Science of  
Management  
to Its  
Spiritual  
Heart*

Gilbert W. Fairholm

PERSPECTIVES  
ON  
LEADERSHIP

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# Preface

Leading others is not easy. Senge says the leader bears an almost sacred duty to create conditions that enable people to grow and have happy and productive lives (Senge, 1990). The new leadership ideas put forward in the last 10–15 years begin to define this kind of leadership dealing with followers' core values. Yet, most established authors and some practitioners are locked into traditional thinking and have largely ignored these ideas. Nevertheless, the real leaders among us think in these terms and practice this kind of leadership, and they have done so for generations.

The problem is that theorists and practitioners have developed a mind-set that defines one kind of “leadership truth” and excludes any other alternatives. Any ideas about leadership that differ from this mind-set are generally rejected out of hand. Indeed, we do not easily move out of one reality into another. What we now believe to be true, given our particular experience, often seems to be the only truth. Some outside force must trigger reevaluating and rethinking. That triggering force to intellectual growth may be a new idea, a new situation, a new value, a new boss or some other significant emotional event—like a new book.

In the meantime, while theory tries to catch up with practice, leaders lead, writers write and trainers train, and the real basis of leadership continues to elude us. Certainly past leadership models have identified some critical elements of the leader's task. None fully describes current

leader practice or guides beginning leaders in understanding and executing this role.

Leadership is an idea in motion. Our understanding of this most basic and widespread organizational relationship has been recast several times over the 100 years of modern management. Analysis of this stream of ideas points up several core ideas around which researchers and writers have developed elaborate structures to define and describe the leadership environment.

Thus, for much of this century, leadership has meant the technology of management. In this view leaders are those at the head of the firm, in authority and responsible for accomplishing its work. Some reserve the idea of leadership to mean only good management: the superlative qualities and actions of a few excellent organization heads. A few writers define leadership in change terms: meaning the task of instituting meaningful change and, more recently, the job of reconstructing the nature and character of the corporation and its workers.

Which of these models, if any, is the correct one to delineate the leadership process and environment is unclear. Some recent work adds ideas to the mix that begin to explore the impact on leading others on the basis of the leaders' and followers' innate values. Our core values define us and determine the goals we seek and the methods we will use to attain them. This research and our observation of literally thousands of leaders in our collective experience suggest that *everybody has values, and these values trigger our behavior!* Leadership takes place in a situation pregnant with values.

The power of our values in shaping our individual and collective lives is obvious. We all respond to the force of our deeply held values. Unfortunately, this truth did not find its way into past leadership models. But, given the importance of leadership in today's world, we cannot ignore this powerful way to think about the leadership process. Following this line of thinking holds promise of helping us understand more fully the leader-follower relationship and the environment in which it takes place. But, to make it work for us asks us to open our minds to new ways to think about, practice and measure leadership action.

Leadership is not merely insuring that rules and procedures are carried out efficiently. Surely it includes this productivity element. But it is more than that. It also deals with people in relationships. This view opens tremendous possibilities for personal growth and for being a positive influence in helping group members and those in the larger society change their lives for the better. For the purpose of leadership is to change lives!

By their actions, through the programs they manage and their personal behavior, leaders act to create a culture of individual progress and growth. Only in this activity is leadership enduring. It changes

people, allows them to be different, better, than they were before our leadership. This is the essence of leadership—helping others to develop and mature and in the process maturing ourselves.

The leader is a servant first and then a boss. Many of the problems we have as leaders result because we tend to reverse this order of things. That is, we concentrate overmuch on bossing our followers—making them do what we want—instead of serving them by helping them be the best they can be in their jobs and otherwise. True leadership and service cannot be separated (Greenleaf, 1977). This is the message of leadership through the ages. The great leaders have always served their followers first and then led them into a new, better, more productive life.

# Introduction

What makes a leader? What is leadership? What do leaders do? After 100 years of modern study, these remain cogent questions. Many writers have offered either general or specific answers over the years, but the discussion continues unabated. We have not yet resolved these questions to the satisfaction of most, and the search for acceptable answers continues.

*Understanding the role and function of leadership is the single most important intellectual task of this generation, and leading is the most needed skill. The reason is simple. Leaders play a major role in helping us shape our life. Leaders define business and its practice. They determine the character of society. They define our teams, groups and communities. They set and administer government policy. In all walks of life, leaders' behaviors set the course others follow and determine the measures used to account for group actions.*

Success in the new millennium, as in the past, will depend on how well leaders understand their roles, the leadership process and their own values and vision as well as those of their groups. Their behaviors set the course others follow and determine the values and other measures used to account for group actions.

Understanding leadership is, like all of the important aspects of life, a thing of the mind more than an objective reality. Traditionally, leadership has been thought of in terms of the heads, or chief officers of organizations, regardless of the tasks or functions they may perform. It is easy to think about leaders and leadership in terms of authority

and headship and to talk about leadership as management. Some leaders are charged with insuring that a program of activities is carried out, assignments made and reports prepared and delivered on time (Mintzberg, 1973).

In reality, these tasks more accurately define a managerial role, which is only a part of the total task of leadership. But, given the nature of modern society—an exploding information base, global markets, rapidly changing product demands, a diverse and demanding population and a labor pool composed of knowledge workers—traditional management will no longer work. We need a new type of chief executive officer (CEO), a team leader, a coach, a builder instead of a controlling manager. A new way to think about the role of the leader, a new kind of leadership, is needed.

## THE LEADERSHIP MIND-SET

The stumbling blocks to understanding what leadership really is are, in part, due to the way we structure ideas and thinking. We simply have not yet developed thought processes to picture leadership as a distinct activity taking place in a specific environmental context. Available textbooks reflect a mind-set established over 100 years ago, one that places science, order and control (e.g., management) at the center of any definition of leadership.

Nevertheless, in the last decades of this century, leadership for some people has come to refer to the task of setting and replacing the values guiding the corporation and its people. Some current writers see it in terms of trust. For them, leaders create trust cultures. A few people are combining much of this current discussion and concluding that the task is spiritual, a function of the leader's concern for the whole person, the inner sense of spirituality felt by individual leaders and by group members. These writers counsel that leadership begins with understanding the leader's core self, for that core self establishes what is good and true and beautiful for them and other group members.

Each of these ideas describe a mind-set, or point of view, a personal reality, we might adopt as a way to make sense of the dynamic interactive process called leadership. Regardless of the focus, the mind-set we adopt orders our thinking and makes understanding easier. While in a given reality—whether we see it as management, values setting, trust building or a spiritual focus—we can understand leadership only in terms of the parameters of that point of view. Unless something extraordinary happens, we cannot accept other points of view as credible. Practically speaking, each of us is locked into our current reality and need heroic measures to move out of it.



## ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP

The idea that individuals develop unique ways of looking at the world and use this mind-set to define and measure their life is, of course, not a new one. This idea is, for example, central to the idea of cultural difference. Certainly cultural differences in member behavior are obvious to even the casual observer. People of different national (or ethnic, or religious, or corporate, or civic) backgrounds behave differently, measure success differently and value material and intellectual things differently.

As we move through life, we change those around us and are changed by them in direct relationship to our personal cultural viewpoint about any key idea, including leadership. Our own intellectual journey toward leadership may mirror the path others follow. Our individual perception of what leaders do is given meaning in the context of our unique present and past experiences as both leader and led. Accepting as valid any other understanding of leadership than our customary one is, obviously, beyond our experience and very difficult.

Leadership is objective. It is. We can see it in our lives and the lives of those around us. It is a part of every social situation in which we participate or observe as a spectator. However, each of us sees leadership differently. Both our definition and our measure of its utility is unique to us. Each of us applies what we perceive leadership to be from the perspective of our unique experience. We form a mind-set that guides our thinking and defines our reality.

We can conceive of our leadership mind-set in terms of increasingly complex levels of mental and emotional awareness. While we are in one reality we may understand less complex realities but not fully comprehend more complex ones. We may even think that that level of understanding is not even creditable. Thus, defining leadership is an intensely personal activity limited by our personal paradigms or our mental state of being, our unique mind-set.

The science of Virtual Reality is a useful metaphor, which helps us understand this notion of levels of awareness. Flowing out of the computer revolution, Virtual Reality hardware and software create a digital version of reality and project the individual into that environment. Virtual Reality is called virtual, because it appears to be real but is not. It is only a model of the real environment we live in, emphasizing only enough of its aspects to simulate the real thing.

Virtual Reality provides a way for people to visualize, manipulate and interact with simulated environments through artificial means. In Virtual Reality a “world” is created that exists entirely in the memory of a computer and in our perception as participants. Using the power

of computers, we are able to enter and interact within a fabricated environment that in many ways is real to us.

We all live every day in virtual environments defined, not by computers, but by our ideas and experience. Like a Virtual Reality computer, our cumulative experience creates a mind-set that lets us see our world more globally than does our local experience. But, at the same time, it creates a kind of prison that constrains our freedom of action. The mental environment we construct both frees us to function within its parameters and limits our ability to think beyond its borders. Over time, our virtual environment will change as our experience changes. But while we are in one virtual reality we may not be able to even accept the idea that other realities exist or that they may be more useful to us.

The idea of alternative environmental realities is supported not only by computer and information theory but also by both the social sciences and psychology. Several contemporary models serve to illustrate the intellectual support for this view.

### **Cultural Change**

Cultural differences in individual behavior are obvious to even the casual observer. Each of us filters our perceptions, our values and our experience through our unique culture. Part of the confusion and imprecision we see in the literature has to do with this personal cultural life filter through which we view leadership. As we move through life we change those around us and are changed by them. Our cultural biases are very often more important than the objective reality. Our individual perception of what leaders do is given meaning in the context of our cultural experiences as both leaders and followers of another's leadership. Accepting as valid any other understanding of leadership than our personal one is, obviously, beyond our own experience and impossible.

### **Paradigms**

A currently popular pattern for understanding our particular mind-set is that of paradigms. Basically a paradigm is a set of rules groups adopt, often implicitly, that define the boundaries of the acceptable. They tell us how to behave in order to be successful. Our paradigm provides a model for how problems are solved, people are to be treated and individual and group actions interpreted.

Credited with popularizing paradigms in business, Joel Barker (1992) defines a paradigm as a set of organizational realities, such as values, beliefs, traditional practices, methods, tools, attitudes and be-

haviors. Members of a social group construct paradigms to integrate their thoughts, actions and practices. A leadership paradigm consists of the rules and standards as well as the accepted examples of leadership practice, laws, theories, applications and work relationships in a corporation or team.

As individuals progress, they may shift from one leadership paradigm to another. An example of paradigm shifts in business is the shift from production by craftsmen to mass production. A more recent shift can be seen in the move from mass production to lean production. Managers who advocate mass production and those who advocate a lean production system, like that of Toyota, think and act differently. Their different practices, beliefs, values and assumptions define their different paradigms.

As people shift from one paradigm to another, their ideas, values and beliefs will change and so will their actions and practices. This shift may require reeducation and retraining about management thought and practice. When many people's beliefs and actions change in concert within a corporation or group, Barker (1992) refers to the transformation as a "paradigm shift."

The power of paradigms is that they affect our ability to see the world. Quite literally, what is obvious to one person may be totally invisible to another. Thus, those people who see leadership as position-based cannot accept that it is rational for leaders to occupy positions in the middle or lower reaches of the organization. Similarly, people who see leadership as management cannot accept that it is plausible for leaders to deal with their followers' spiritual sides as well as their skills.

Barker (1992) contends that paradigm shifts open new conceptual territories. His research suggests that members imbued with the values and mores of the prevailing group culture do not often shift paradigms. The most likely person to change a paradigm is an outsider, someone who is not imbued with the prevailing paradigm. Paradigm shifters are the outsiders that homogeneous societies fear. Yet, in the fundamental and profound change that the innovators (outsiders) bring is the ability to solve problems that had been deemed unsolvable within the old paradigm.

Leadership is, among other things, a task of shifting the group's paradigm.

### States of Being

Another interesting way to think about our leadership relationships with each other and the world is in terms of the work of Clare W. Graves (1970). Graves did not deal directly with leadership, but he did build

an interpersonal relationships model that emphasized the power of individual values and personal perception, or point of view, in shaping our thought and action. Applying it to leadership promises to increase our collective understanding of leadership theory and practice.

According to Graves's theory, the human being can be thought of as an open system able to take from the environment and give back to it. He says we perceive the world based on the inputs we receive as open systems. He defined eight levels of human existence (or virtual environments), which are related in a hierarchy. His descriptions of each state of existence are beside the present point. What is important is that he concludes that the level of existence we are in determines our values and therefore our actions, our relationships and our measures of success for self and for others.

A person in a given level uses the mind-set of that level to solve problems and choose his course of action in relationships with others. His preferences for a style of leadership are appropriate to that reality. If he were in another level, he would act differently and use different values to judge the appropriateness of his own behavior and that of his fellows. The process of growth is a continual evolution into progressively higher levels of psychological existence. Growth is marked by progressive subordination of older lower-order behavioral systems to newer higher-level behavioral systems. People normally pass through each stage sequentially from lower to next higher to next higher and so on.

As healthy adults we move from one level to another level as our circumstances change. We do not automatically move from one level of existence to progressively higher levels. Some people arrive in one stage and cannot move to another. Some stay in one level for a time and regress to a lower order. Regardless of the level, when we are in a given level we have only the degree of freedom to think about an issue allowed by that level.

## **LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP**

We all see leadership differently depending on our current level of psychological existence, our current paradigm, our current virtual environment. Other viewpoints than those descriptive of our current reality will be seen as wrong, incorrect, perhaps even inconceivable to us. We only grow to another level as our environmental circumstances change. That is, we will not move away from an understanding of leadership as mere headship or as managerial control until we accept that there may be other ways to think about and value the leadership task.

Different people can view a given example of leadership differently. That is, leadership may be the same—practiced in the same way for the same results, using the same technologies—but depending on how we look at it, we may see it in vastly different lights. How we see it depends on the reality we are in.

That has been my experience, and I dare say that of others. Over the years, I have passed through at least five levels of understanding about what leaders do and the leadership process. Initially my view of leadership was technical, scientific, procedural, and managerial. Later, I came to see leadership as only a function of excellent managerial performance. Still later, as I observed leaders getting others to do what they wanted done, without exercising control, my focus turned to the idea that leadership was a process of getting followers to share the leader's vision and values.

More recently, I expanded that idea to include the concept of leadership as a task of creating cultures that support high levels of interactive mutual trust. Neither shared values nor trust cultures seem to explain leader success. It is clear to me now that leadership is the job of transforming the core nature and character of the leader, the corporation and its workers. In this mind-set I can accept the kernel of truth in each of the other states of being. They all have value. Each contributes to and supports the progressively higher levels. All point to leadership as a function of spirit.

Which of these states of being, which virtual environment, you, the reader, bring to leadership will depend on your past experiences and cumulative wisdom. Only time will tell which is the authentic truth. However, each virtual environment incrementally adds to our collective insight about the leadership task. Reading about those leadership virtual environments that seem extreme, or even ridiculous, may be interesting and educational. Gaining the knowledge may even be an event sufficient to move you to another state, another virtual reality relative to leadership.

While there is a kind of evolutionary order to our understanding, each leadership virtual reality has adherents today. They can be ranked hierarchically along a continuum from managerial control to spiritual holism. The five virtual environments include the following:

Leadership as Management

Leadership as Excellent (Good) Management

Values Leadership

Trust Cultural Leadership

Spiritual (Whole-Soul) Leadership.

## **Leadership as Management**

Management is a role heads of organizations assume involving control over others' behaviors and actions. People who accept this conception of leadership truth center on the leader's management role. It conjures up ideas like controlling interpersonal relations, making decisions, aligning individual member actions and perceptions with corporate goals, planning, budgeting and directing the effort of the several followers engaged in the work. The manager role involves leaders in insuring that group activity is timed, controlled and predictable.

Since Frederick W. Taylor defined Scientific Management in 1911, many people have focused on the "hard sciences" techniques in describing both leadership and management. We have imposed a hard science behavioral focus on all human activities, including management activities. The effort has been to make leadership a science: controlled, precise, predictable. This science-focus has dictated leadership theory, method and practice—if not in the real world, surely in the literature.

Chronologically, leadership as management is the first modern virtual environment about leadership. It has been tested in controlled as well as real-world situations. Its utility is evaluated daily. It has been found wanting in some important respects. Presently available hard science leadership models are not satisfactory. They define leadership in substantially the same terms used to define management, adding to the confusion, rather than clarifying these two ideas. And they raise about as many questions as they answer.

## **Leadership as Excellent (Good) Management**

Accepting the pull of the quality movement, another virtual environment emphasizes high-quality, excellent management as the real function of leadership. Today's excellent leaders do all that managers do with a quality focus that gives confidence to the rest of the organization. They have a positive attitude stemming from a belief in high-quality individual and group activity. They are catalysts—bringing out the best in workers, fostering worker innovation and igniting creativity. The quality movement changes the leader's perception of the follower core's character, provides a single focus for collective action and enlarges the domain of the leader.

A focus on quality is a focus on just one aspect of the managerial task. While a helpful way to look at managerial work, it does not deal directly with what many are beginning to define as better, more comprehensive approaches to understanding leadership. It does, however, introduce the careful reader to some of the core values that have

guided leaders throughout time, like quality, concern for excellence, stakeholder development and values of integrity, caring, creativity and service. These form a basis for a more current theory.

### Values Leadership

Breaking new ground in our journey to the truth about leadership is the idea that leaders set and enforce values for the group. The key idea in this virtual environment is simple: everybody has values, and these values trigger their behavior. If the leader wants to lead others, he or she must first insure that the group shares values in common and that these values provide both the goals (the group vision) and the measures of group and individual success.

This new conception of leadership proposes a kind of leadership rooted in the reality of human nature and conduct. It accepts the idea that individual and group action is values-driven. Its purposes rank individual change and development as equal to group productivity. It is worldwide in its application. In America its central characteristic is reliance on a few founding values that celebrate the individual. Values leadership moves beyond science to philosophy. It introduces a new leadership technology and new skills that are different in material ways from those that managers must acquire.

The virtual environment of values leadership makes full use of this truism. The leadership that will work today—and has always worked best in the past—is leadership based on shared values. The idea of values-based leadership is not new. The problem is we have not *thought* of our leadership in values terms. So the *idea* of values leadership is “new,” while the *practice* is much more common.

### Trust Cultural Leadership

Just as values shape the culture, so too does the culture shape leadership. The style of leadership leaders adopt (though not necessarily consciously) grows out of their ideas and feelings about the nature of man. A logical extension of the virtual environment of values leadership is the idea that the leader’s task is to build a culture of shared values where people can come to trust each other enough to work together. Leadership is both an individual and a collective activity. Full understanding of leadership takes place only in cultures characterized by shared values and goals. Only in harmonious cultures can leaders impact their followers in assured ways.

People in this leadership virtual environment see the need for a unified, effective, harmonious culture characterized by mutual trust that

allows leadership to take place. Indeed, leadership can only take place within a context where both leaders and followers can be free to trust the purposes, actions and intent of others.

The trust culture virtual environment of leadership sees the leader's role as not so much a characteristic of the individual leader as a condition of the culture he or she creates. While leadership may be spontaneous at times, most often it is a result of specific planned actions to create an environment conducive to internal harmony around values and ideals the leader and follower share or come to share. Leadership becomes a task of both impacting followers individually and influencing them as groups through shared cultural visions, values and behavior patterns.

Trust is central to leadership in organizations because followers are people who *choose* to follow leaders. They are not forced to do so. The trust of followers lets leaders lead. It is the glue holding the organization and its programs and people together. Indeed, no organization can take place without interpersonal trust. And, leaders cannot ignore the powerful element of trust as they go about creating and managing their organization's culture and inducing stakeholders to behave in needed ways.

### **Spiritual (Whole-Soul) Leadership**

In the last decade of the twentieth century we can detect a new virtual environment that helps us understand leadership. A few people are combining much of the discussion of the past 15 or 20 years and concluding that leadership is a function of the leader's concern for the whole-soul, the inner self. They believe that leadership comes out of the leader's inner core spirit. This, not facts about personality or situation, determines what is right and good for them and for other organization members.

Even the casual observer can see some of the basis for this new way of thinking. Today people are hungry for meaning in their lives. They feel they have lost something, and they don't remember what it is they've lost. This has left a gaping hole in their lives. To fill this void, some are trying to blend their spiritual with their everyday work lives (Kantrowitz, 1994).

We have long known of the powerful, if implicit, impact of the spirit on decisions affecting our work. It is unmistakable, if only tangentially mentioned, in more and more public discussion. The reader may be aware, for example, of the "high touch" reaction to the introduction of high technology that John Naisbitt discussed as far back as 1982. The most recent pressures toward reinvention of the organization are



clearly partially intended to invent corporate structures that recognize and respond to human needs for self expression. Whether it is a fad or a sea-change, the discernable shift in America from leadership based on control over resources to concern for the whole person is apparent.

Evidence is amassing that suggests that there is a significant connection between a leader's (or worker's) ability to have a transformational effect on the organization and his or her disposition towards spirituality. In the author's research 84 percent of surveyed managers confirmed this link (Fairholm, 1997). The reasons are obvious. Leaders or members who have a clear sense of their own spirituality and that of their coworkers can have a greater transformational effect on the organization, its forms, structures and processes than a formal reorganization plan.

And too, we cannot separate the person's spirituality from his or her actions and disposition. As coworkers see our communications are laced with commonly held core spiritual values, our statements will strike a responsive chord in these others and foster mutual growth. Failure to communicate our spiritual self will result in loss. Spirituality is the source of our most powerful and personal values. When leader and led can share core spiritual values, such as trust, faith, honesty, justice, freedom and caring, in the workplace, a true metamorphosis occurs and the corporation can reach new creative heights.

Leaders need followers to lead, but they need enabled people who are able to flourish in an environment of interactive trust, shared vision and common values. Leaders who are comfortable with themselves as happy and strong and can convey these qualities to others. They can, in this way, be a part of the spirituality of others. When this bonding is present, leaders and group members can be very effective.

## SUMMARY

The reality we adopt to understand leadership is personal. It is selected as we experience leadership, and read about it and think about it. But the way we think, the point of view we develop out of our reading and experience, both illuminates and shades our understanding. Five mental models, or virtual environments, mark the 100-year progress of intellectual thought to full understanding of leadership. Each model is true in the sense that it helps describe some part of the leadership task. Each lays out a logical, rational pattern of leader action. But it is only together that they define the full picture.

Perhaps each of us has to move through each virtual leadership environment, accepting one for a while before we are ready to experience