

The Art of Chaordic Leadership - by Dee Hock

HERE was a time a few years back when for one brief moment the essence of leadership was crystal clear to me. Strangely, it was after leaving Visa and moving to a small, isolated ranch for a life of study and contemplation, raising a few cattle. I was attending to chores in the barn, comfortable and secure from the wind howling about the eaves and the roar of torrential rain on the tin roof. Through the din, I became aware of the faint, persistent bellowing of one of the cows. Awareness gradually rose that the bellowing was unusual.

Flashlight in hand, I plunged into the storm and worked my way across the pasture in the direction of the sound. On the far side, in the circle of light from the flash, I could make out Eunice, the huge, one-horned mother cow. Sheltered in the corral to await the imminent birth of her calf, she had somehow gotten out and sought a private place to give birth -- unfortunately, on the brink of a steep bank fifteen feet above a flooded creek which raged through a ravine choked with poison oak and wild blackberry vines.

I raced to the spot and saw from trampled ground and smashed bushes what had happened. She had given birth. The calf, struggling to gain its feet, had slipped over the edge and plunged down the bank into the creek, then desperately tried to climb the sheer bank to get free of the water. Eunice had done all that she could, racing up and down the bank, bellowing and searching in vain for a way down. By the time I responded to her cries, the calf had been swept downstream beneath tangled vines and brambles.

Grabbing at limbs and bushes, I half fell, half stumbled down the sheer bank into the creek. Pushed by the rushing, icy water, I worked my way under and through the thickets and brambles. In a bend of the creek a hundred feet downstream, I spotted the exhausted calf fighting to keep its head above water. By the time I arrived, it had given up and was submerged. I pulled it onto a shelf of rocks beneath the mass of tangled growth and began pumping its ribs trying to eject water and assist its breathing. It was a magnificent, dark-red, bull calf, the hair on its flank a mass of curls, its soft hoofs torn and bleeding from efforts to climb the bank. It revived a little and began to kick and struggle. Pocketing the flashlight I managed to heave it across my shoulders and began a struggle upstream to the place where I had entered, and might have a chance to climb out.

WHAT does a one-horned mother cow have to do with leadership? The answer requires a bit of reflection. Let's begin with a few words about words. Words are only secondarily the means by which we communicate; they're primarily the means by which we think. One can scarcely think or talk of organizations or management these days without coming across what leading thinkers from many disciplines believe will be the principal science of the next century: the understanding of autocatalytic, nonlinear, complex, adaptive systems, usually referred to as "complexity."

The word is much too vague to describe such systems. After searching various lexicons in vain for a more suitable word, it seemed simpler to construct one. Since such systems, perhaps even life itself, are believed to arise and thrive on the edge of chaos with just enough order to give them pattern, I borrowed the first syllable of each, combined them and chaord (kayord) emerged.

By *chaord*, I mean any self-organizing, self governing, adaptive, nonlinear, complex organism, organization, community or system, whether physical, biological or social, the behavior of which harmoniously blends characteristics of both chaos and order. Loosely translated to business, it can be thought of as an organization that harmoniously blends characteristics of competition and cooperation; or from the perspective of education, an organization that seamlessly blends theoretical and experiential learning. As I learned from the formation and operation of Visa, an early archetype of such organizations, they require a much different consciousness about the leader/follower dichotomy.

Leader presumes follower. Follower presumes choice. One who is coerced to the purposes, objectives, or preferences of another is not a follower in any true sense of the word, but an object of manipulation. Nor is the relationship materially altered if both parties voluntarily accept the dominance of one by the other. A true leader cannot be bound to lead. A true follower cannot be bound to follow. The moment they are bound they are no longer leader or follower. If the behavior of either is compelled, whether by force, economic necessity, or contractual arrangement, the relationship is altered to one of superior/subordinate, manager/employee, master/servant, or owner/slave. All such relationships are materially different from leader/follower.

Induced behavior is the essence of leader/follower. Compelled behavior is the essence of all the other relational concepts. Where

behavior is compelled, there you will find tyranny, however benign. Where behavior is induced, there you will find leadership, however powerful. Leadership does not necessarily imply constructive, ethical, open conduct. It is entirely possible to induce destructive, malign, devious behavior, and to do so by corrupt means. Therefore, a clear, constructive purpose and compelling ethical principles evoked from and shared by all participants should be the essence of every relationship in every institution.

A vital question is how to insure that those who lead are constructive, ethical, open, and honest. The answer is to follow those who behave in that manner. It comes down to both individual and collective sense of where and how people choose to be led. In a very real sense, followers lead by choosing where to be led. Where an organizational community will be led is inseparable from the shared values and beliefs of its members.

True leaders are those who epitomize the general sense of the community -- who symbolize, legitimize and strengthen behavior in accordance with the sense of the community -- who enable its shared purpose, values and beliefs to emerge and be transmitted. A true leader's behavior is induced by the behavior of every individual choosing where to be led.

The important thing to remember is that true leadership and induced behavior have an inherent tendency to the good, while tyranny (dominator management) and compelled behavior have an inherent tendency to evil.

OVER the years, I have had long discussions with thousands of people throughout many different organizations about management: aspirations to it, dissatisfaction with it, or confusion about it. To avoid ambiguity, I always ask each person to describe the single most important responsibility of any manager. The incredibly diverse responses always have one thing in common: they are downward-looking. Management inevitably is viewed as exercise of authority -- with selecting employees, motivating them, training them, appraising them, organizing them, directing them, controlling them. That perception is mistaken.

Management inevitably is viewed as exercise of authority -- but that perception is mistaken.

The first and paramount responsibility of anyone who purports to manage is to manage self: one's own integrity, character, ethics, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words, and acts. It is a complex, unending, incredibly difficult, oft-shunned task. We spend little time and rarely excel at management of self precisely because it is so much more difficult than prescribing and controlling the behavior of others. However, without management of self no one is fit for authority no matter how much they acquire, for the more authority they acquire the more dangerous they become. It is the management of self that should occupy 50 percent of our time and the best of our ability. And when we do that, the ethical, moral and spiritual elements of management are inescapable.

Asked to identify the second responsibility of any manager, again people produce a bewildering variety of opinions, again downward-looking. Another mistake. The second responsibility is to manage those who have authority over us: bosses, supervisors, directors, regulators, ad infinitum. Without their consent and support, how can we follow conviction, exercise judgment, use creative ability, achieve constructive results or create conditions by which others can do the same? Managing superiors is essential. Devoting 25 percent of our time and ability to that effort is not too much.

Asked for the third responsibility, people become uncertain. Yet, their thoughts remain on subordinates. Mistaken again. The third responsibility is to manage one's peers -- those over whom we have no authority and who have no authority over us -- associates, competitors, suppliers, customers -- one's entire environment if you will. Without their respect and confidence little or nothing can be accomplished. Our environment and peers can make a small heaven or hell of our life. Is it not wise to devote at least 20 percent of our time, energy, and ingenuity to managing them?

Asked for the fourth responsibility, people have difficulty coming up with an answer, for they are now troubled by thinking downward. However, if one has attended to self, superiors, and peers there is nothing else left. Obviously, the fourth responsibility is to manage those over whom we have authority. The common response is that all one's time will be consumed managing self, superiors and peers. There will be no time to manage subordinates. Exactly! One need only select decent people, introduce them to the concept, induce them to practice it, and enjoy the process. If those over whom we have authority properly manage themselves, manage us, manage their peers, and replicate the process with those they employ, what is there to do but

see they are properly recognized, rewarded -- and stay out of their way?

It is not making better people of others that leadership is about. In today's world effective leadership is *chaordic*. It's about making a better person of self. Income, power and position have nothing to do with that. In fact, they often interfere with it.

The obvious question then always erupts. How do you manage superiors, bosses, regulators, associates, customers? The answer is equally obvious. You cannot. But can you understand them? Can you persuade them? Can you motivate them? Can you disturb them, influence them, forgive them? *Can you set them an example?* Eventually the proper word emerges. Can you lead them?

Of course you can, provided only that you have properly led yourself. There are no rules and regulations so rigorous, no organization so hierarchical, no bosses so abusive that they can prevent us from behaving this way. No individual and no organization, short of killing us, can prevent such use of our energy, ability, and ingenuity. They may make it more difficult, but they can't prevent it. The real power is ours, not theirs, provided only that we can work our way around the killing.

IT is easy to test this chaordic concept of leadership. Reflect a moment on group endeavors of which you are an observer rather than participant. If your interest runs to ballet, you can undoubtedly recall when the corps seemed to rise above the individual ability of each dancer and achieve a magical, seemingly effortless performance. If your interest runs to sports, the same phenomenon is apparent: teams whose performance transcends the ability of individuals. The same can be observed in the symphony, the theater, in fact, every group endeavor, including business and government.

Every choreographer, conductor, and coach -- or for that matter, corporation president -- has tried to distill the essence of such performance. Countless others have tried to explain and produce a mechanistic, measurably controlled process that will cause the phenomenon. It has never been done and it never will be. It is easily observed, universally admired, and occasionally experienced. It happens, but cannot be deliberately done. It is rarely long sustained

but can be repeated. *It arises from the relationships and interaction of those from which it is composed.* Some organizations seem consistently able to do so, just as some leaders seem able to cause it to happen with consistency, even within different organizations.

To be precise, one cannot speak of leaders who *cause* organizations to achieve superlative performance, for no one can *cause* it to happen. Leaders can only recognize and modify conditions which prevent it; perceive and articulate a sense of community, a vision of the future, a body of principle to which people can become passionately committed, then encourage and enable them to discover and bring forth the extraordinary capabilities that lie trapped in everyone struggling to get out.

Without question, the most abundant, least expensive, most under-utilized, and constantly abused resource in the world is human ingenuity. The source of that abuse is mechanistic, Industrial Age, dominator concepts of organization and the management practices they spawn.

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In the deepest sense, distinction between leaders and followers is meaningless. In every moment of life, we are simultaneously leading and following. There is never a time when our knowledge, judgment and wisdom are not more useful and applicable than that of another. There is never a time when the knowledge, judgment and wisdom of another are not more useful and applicable than ours. At any time that "other" may be superior, subordinate, or peer.

Everyone was born a leader. Who can deny that from the moment of birth they were leading parents, siblings, and companions? Watch a baby cry and the parents jump. We were all born leaders; that is, until we were sent to school and taught to be managed and to manage. People are not "things" to be manipulated, labeled, boxed, bought, and sold. Above all else, they are not "human resources." We are entire human beings, containing the whole of the evolving universe, limitless until we are limited, whether by self or others. We must examine the concept of leading and following with new eyes. We must examine the concept of superior and subordinate with increasing skepticism. We must examine the concept of management and labor with new beliefs. And we must examine the nature of organizations that demand such distinctions with an entirely different consciousness.

It is true leadership -- leadership by everyone -- chaordic leadership, in, up, around, and down that this world so badly needs, and industrial age, dominator management that it so sadly gets.

BUT what about Eunice, the one-horned cow? A frantic thirty minutes after shouldering the calf, I arrived, shaking, bruised and bleeding from cuts and scratches, at the bottom of the cut bank where the calf had tumbled in. Legs braced against the force of the rushing water, I paused to recover breath and strength before trying to clamber out. Suddenly, over the sound of pulse pounding in my ears, the rushing water, shrieking wind and pelting rain, from directly overhead came a furious, heart-stopping roar. In stark terror, I let go the calf's front legs and fumbled for the flashlight. Another earth-shaking roar, then another. The light came on as I swung the beam in the direction of the sound.

Exhausted, thigh deep in swirling, icy water with sixty pounds of kicking calf draped around its neck, 175 pounds of *Homo Sapiens* stared in pure panic directly up into the blood-red eyes of three quarters of a ton of frantic mother cow convinced I was butchering her baby and a ton of enraged bull determined to save his family. In that brief instant, eye-to-eye with nearly two tons of bovine fury, the essence of management was simple and clear. First: manage myself and get mind, body, and emotions under control before they ceased to exist. Second: manage two tons of enraged, bovine superiors who most certainly had power over me. Third: manage my environment and find a way out of the ravine. Fourth, and by far the least important, manage my only subordinate, the kicking calf. And, oh, how I wished the calf knew the theory and had managed himself, his superiors and his environment, and not put the whole outfit into such an unholy mess in the first place.

As I stood eye to eye with two tons of bovine fury, the essence of management was clear.

What then happened in the middle of the night to Eunice, her calf and a panic stricken *Homo Sapiens* in a ditch need not be told, for that is not the point of the story. But for those who must find a moral in every story it is simply this: *If you keep your wits about you, you can learn everything you need to know about leadership from a one-horned cow.*

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On Chaordic Leadership

Many convictions about leadership have served me well over the years. Although each of these few examples could benefit from pages of explication, a few words may provide insight to chaordic leadership.

Power: True power is never used. If you use power, you never really had it.

Human Relations: First, last, and only principle -- when dealing with subordinates, repeat silently to yourself, "You are as great to you as I am to me, therefore, we are equal." When dealing with superiors, repeat silently to yourself, "I am as great to me as you are to you, therefore we are equal."

Criticism: Active critics are a great asset. Without the slightest expenditure of time or effort, we have our weakness and error made apparent and alternatives proposed. We need only listen carefully, dismiss that which arises from ignorance, ignore that which arises from envy or malice, and embrace that which has merit.

Compensation: Money motivates neither the best people, nor the best in people. It can rent the body and influence the mind but it cannot touch the heart or move the spirit; that is reserved for belief, principle, and ethics.

Ego, Envy, Avarice, and Ambition: Four beasts that inevitably devour their keeper. Harbor them at your peril, for although you expect to ride on their back, you will end up in their belly.

Position: Subordinates may owe a measure of obedience by virtue of

your position, but they owe no respect save that which you earn by your daily conduct. Without their respect, your authority is destructive.

Mistakes: Toothless little things, providing you can recognize them, admit them, correct them, learn from them, and rise above them. If not, they grow fangs and strike.

Accomplishment: Never confuse activity with productivity. It is not what goes in your end of the pipe that matters, but what comes out the other end. Everything but intense thought, judgment, and action is infected to some degree with meaningless activity. Think! Judge! Act! Free others to do the same!

Hiring: Never hire or promote in your own image. It is foolish to replicate your strength. It is stupid to replicate your weakness. Employ, trust, and reward those whose perspective, ability and judgment are radically different from your own and recognize that it requires uncommon humility, tolerance, and wisdom.

Creativity: The problem is never how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get old ones out. Every mind is a building filled with archaic furniture. Clean out a corner of your mind and creativity will instantly fill it.

Listening: While you can learn much by listening carefully to what people say, a great deal more is revealed by what they do not say. Listen as carefully to silence as to sound.

Judgment: Judgment is a muscle of the mind developed by use. You lose nothing by trusting it. If you trust it and it is bad, you will know quickly and can improve it. If you trust it and it is consistently good, you will succeed, and the sooner the better. If it is consistently good and you don't trust it, you will become the saddest of all creatures; one who could have succeeded but followed the poor judgment of others to failure.

Leadership: Lead yourself, lead your superiors, lead your peers and free your people to do the same. All else is trivia.