The Ethical Essence of Leaderful Practice

Joseph A. Raelin
Northeastern University

In this article, the author introduces the leadership approach known as "leaderful practice," an alternative to the traditional trait-based approach of individual leadership. Leaderful practice is shown to sustain an ethical infrastructure based on democratic principles. It is democracy not in its representative sense, however, but in its endorsement of public engagement of all those affected by the activity and decision at hand. The article makes the ethical case for leaderful practice based on two paramount ethical behaviors: dialogue and meaning making, and on three virtues: authenticity, humility, and dignity. Leaderful participants not only pay heed to emancipatory processes but also attend to practices that preserve a sustainable future.

BACKGROUND FOR LEADERFUL PRACTICE

We are increasingly witness to a change in the very paradigm of leadership in the 21st Century, one in which there is growing appreciation for the need to unlock the capacity of all people to contribute. Perhaps we are finally ready to cast away our impulse for the individual hero without whom the group will founder to the partner who can nurture everyone's contribution? The point is that we can no longer rely on a band of subordinates to await their marching orders from detached bosses who have an illusory possession on problem fixes across the remote corners of the organization. We need organizations that can empower anyone who is capable and who has the willingness to assume leadership in the moment in his/her relationships with peers, team members, customers, suppliers, and other organizational partners.

There may be no choice. The international arena characterizing our organizations today, staffed by increasingly diverse and skillful people, can no longer be solely pulled together by bureaucratic authority. In fact, information, organized now for decision making in the form of distributed knowledge, is gradually breaking down bureaucracy. It is doing this by providing every organizational member with the necessary tools to not only run his or her immediate work function but to also see how that function connects to the rest of the organization, not to mention to complementary operations in allied institutions elsewhere. People have access to information that was once the exclusive domain of top management. As workers become more connected to one another, the entire enterprise is becoming much more interdependent than in the past. Salespeople are being encouraged to communicate customer preferences to systems designers. Nurses and dietitians are part of the same team. Expertise has become as much a function of the cross-functional unit operating together as intelligence professed by one single individual. In this environment, each worker is likely to possess knowledge that may far exceed that of his or her superiors.

Leadership in this more expansive view extends beyond the confines of the chief executive suite. Operating as part of self-directed teams or just as individual contributors, employees assume leadership when they have the relevant responsibility and expertise. As Bill Gore, founder of W. L. Gore, the maker of Gore-Tex, was given to say, "leadership is defined by what you do, not who you are."

The practice of involving everyone in leadership is so distinct from the conventional view of leadership that I have given it a new name to distinguish it from the archetype based on leadership's root definition as "being out in front." I call it "leaderful practice" (Raelin, 2003; 2010). Leaderful practice, in turn, is itself associated with a fundamental humanistic principle that can be simply stated as follows: When people who have a stake in a venture are given every chance to participate in and affect the venture, including its implementation, their commitment to the venture will be heightened. No matter what form the behavioral change may take - be it through participative management, total quality management, or organizational learning – the leaderful approach requires equal participation in leadership and decision making at all levels and in multiple decision processes.

In this way, the leaderful form of leadership sustains an ethical infrastructure as a democratic practice. It is consistent with democratic practice because of its encouragement of the equal contribution of all engaged actors within the public forum. It is not democracy in its representative sense but in its endorsement of public engagement of all those affected by the activity and decision at hand. It promotes discovery through free expression and direct participation by involved parties through their own exploratory, creative, and communal discourses. In this sense, it is as much concerned with the subjective and discourse ethics of individuals, facing at times an obstinate organization, as with an organizational or business ethics, seeking to manage the ethical behavior of organizational members.

THE FOUR C'S OF LEADERFUL PRACTICE

Before delving further into the ethical essence of leaderful practice, it may be helpful initially to categorize it more clinically. There are four perspectives that are critical in establishing a leaderful practice. The four perspectives call on leaders to be concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate (see Figure 1). These so-called four c's may be contrasted with four tenets that have long been associated in the West with what we might simply refer to as the traditional model. Most of us have grown up with this, call it, implicit model, suggesting that its meaning is so widely accepted that there is no need to questions its prevailing connotation. In other words, its qualities have become commensurate with leadership itself. Here, then, are my nominations for the tenets that best characterize the Western historical tradition of leadership.

a. Leadership is serial. Once one achieves the office of leadership, that position is retained at least for the duration of the term of office. Only when one completes his or her term, or vacates or is forced to leave the office, does leadership thereupon transfer to the next leader. Leaders are thus always in a position of leadership and do not cede the honor to anyone else. Further, once acquiring power, most leaders attempt to sustain or increase it. Giving up or sharing power with others would be seen as abdicating one's responsibility.

b. Leadership is individual. That a leader is individual signifies its solitary role. There is only one leader of an enterprise and normally this person is designated as the authority or the position leader. It would weaken or minimally confuse leadership to talk about having more than a single leader or sharing leadership because no one would have the final say in making decisions and directing actions.

c. Leadership is controlling. The conventional leader believes it is his or her ultimate duty to direct the enterprise and engender the commitment of all the employees of the organization. To ensure smooth coordination of functions, the leader is the spokesperson for the enterprise. The subordinate's role is to follow the guidance of the leader and to help him or her successfully accomplish the mission.

d. Leadership is dispassionate. Although the leader recognizes that people have feelings, the leader's function is to make the tough decisions for the enterprise in a dispassionate manner. Tough decisions may result in not satisfying (or may even hurt) particular stakeholders, including employees, but accomplishing the mission of the enterprise must come first. Leaders are also the authoritative source when facing problems in the operation and tend to exude a confidence that they are in charge and that subordinates can rely upon them to handle any challenge facing the enterprise.

Leaderful practice offers an alternative approach to this traditional model, which tends to paint the leader with heroic imagery. Where has the heroic paradigm come from? We might go far back to the historical root of the concept of leadership itself. The Anglo-Saxon *lédan* – for leadership - has the meaning of "going forth" or "standing out in front." Moving up to the Nineteenth Century, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle insisted that the one certainty that defines history is what "Great Men" have accomplished. Perhaps this is why the pull toward the heroic model of leadership has persisted even though there is so much verbiage extended toward the need to include other members of the organization within the leadership umbrella. Though the value of democratic leadership may be advocated, the drive to have a charismatic leader whom we can love and who can save us sneaks back into our consciousness just as we prepare to assert our own worth and independence. Part of the reason for this is that many of our Western cultures appear to value individualism while preaching teamwork. Whatever the walk of life, be it a corporate setting, a sports team, or an opera, there tends to be a focus on the star performer even when he or she may be entirely dependent upon the team to achieve prominence.

Having reviewed the traditional model, we are now ready to view the contrasting tenets of leaderful practice captured in Figure 1 as the four c's. The first perspective, that leaders be concurrent, stipulates that there can be more than one leader operating at the same time in an organization, so leaders willingly and naturally share power with others. Indeed, power can be increased by everyone working together. Since leaders perform a variety of responsibilities in an organization, it may be counterproductive to insist that there be only one leader operating at any one time and that this person stay in power until replaced serially by the next authority. For example, an administrative assistant, who "knows the ropes" and can help people figure out who is knowledgeable about a particular function, may at times be just as important to the operation as the position leader. Furthermore, this position leader does not "stand down" or give up his or her leadership as members of the group turn their attention to the administrative assistant. The two of them as well as many others can offer their leadership at the same time.

Leaderful practice is not only concurrent, but is also collective. Since a group can have more than one leader operating at a time, we can conclude that people might be operating as leaders together; in other words, that leadership is a plural not just an individual phenomenon. The collective view purports that leadership does not derive from individual influence; rather, it emanates from the process of people working together for a common purpose. It attends to the activity of people in interaction as they seek to enhance, amend, or alter a given practice. The entity to which these people relate is not solely dependent on one individual to mobilize action or make decisions on behalf of others. They are involved together in practice. I include in this assertion the role of the position leader. This "authority" may have formal power conferred on him or her by the organization, but formal authority is not necessarily the most valuable to the operation. Decisions are made by whoever has the relevant responsibility. Leadership may thus emerge from multiple members of the organization especially when important needs arise, such as preparing for a strategic intervention, creating meaning for the group, or proposing a change in operations. Although someone may initiate an activity, others may become involved and share leadership with the initiator.

Consider a team temporarily stymied in its attempt to solve a problem. Feeling disconsolate, members wonder if they will ever find a solution. Suddenly, some member offers an idea, perhaps not a mainstream idea, but one that has an immediate appeal, which engages everyone's imagination. Soon, others begin throwing out additional thoughts and tactics to build on the original idea. For a time, there is almost a breathless quality to the team's functioning as it becomes absorbed in this all-encompassing solution

process. The team is experiencing collective leadership; it is not dependent on any one member, not the position leader, not the idea initiator; everyone is participating. Further, the collective nature of leadership illustrated here incorporates the critical components of learning and meaning making. Team members used their conversation to invent new ways to attack a problem and collectively made sense together from what once was a state of "not-knowing."
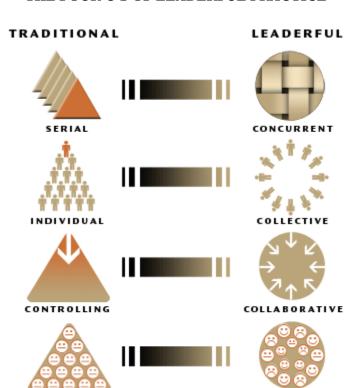
FIGURE 1
THE FOUR C'S OF LEADERFUL PRACTICE

Note - Courtesy: The Leaderful Institute [http://leaderful.org/]

Leaderful practice is also collaborative. All members of the organization participate affirmatively without fear in the affairs of the organization that affect them. They may advocate a point of view that they believe can contribute to the common good of the organization. Although they might be assertive at times, they are equally sensitive to the views and feelings of others and consider their viewpoints to be equally valid. They thus seek to engage in a public dialogue in which they willingly open their beliefs and values to the scrutiny of others. It is through dialogue that collaborative leaders co-create the enterprise. They also understand the difference between collaborating as a pretense versus becoming fully involved. In pretentious involvement, one quickly discovers that all the critical decisions seem to be made when one is absent. Collaborative leaders realize that everyone counts - every opinion and contribution sincerely matter.

Finally, leaderful managers are compassionate. By demonstrating compassion, one extends unadulterated commitment to preserving the dignity of others. Stakeholders' views are incorporated before making a decision for the entire enterprise. Rather than have one key individual make decisions dispassionately for the good of the enterprise, each member of the organization is valued, regardless of his

or her background or social standing, and all viewpoints are solicited regardless whether they conform to current thought processes. In practicing compassion, leaders take the stance of a learner who sees the adaptability of the organization as dependent upon the contribution of others. Members of the organization, not necessarily the position leader, handle problems as they arise. Compassionate leaders recognize that values are intrinsically interconnected with leadership and that there is no higher value than democratic participation. The endowment of participation extends to the wider organization affected by the actions of a given organization. If building a new corporate complex will affect the existing ecology or serenity of a neighboring property, the compassionate leader will include the neighbors in deliberations concerning the construction.

THE ETHICAL CASE FOR LEADERFUL PRACTICE

We have already suggested that the ethical case for leaderful practice can hinge on its democratic infrastructure. This case, however, may strike some readers as dubious since democracy can be viewed as a political form of organization that may serve a functional or even ideological mission without any imputation of its ethical content. Other forms, such as bureaucracy and its hierarchical coordination principle, may be superior as a means of organization while appealing to subordinates who have no interest in managing or in participating in leadership. Hierarchy, it could be argued, is not only more efficient but it is a natural approach given the apathy of most constituents, especially public citizens, not to mention their technical incompetence when it comes to complex matters involving decision making.

In defense of the democratic approach of public engagement, there has been strong support through the years of the equally efficient outcomes produced from democratic or participative management, especially under particular conditions, such as when corporate strategies stress the value of quality as a differentiator (Cabrera, Ortega, & Cabrera, 2003). Furthermore, apathy among employees or citizens is not intrinsic to human nature; in fact, it is likely conditioned by trying to survive in overly bureaucratic paternalistic cultures. Even if bureaucracy were superior to democracy as a means to structure organizations, it would suffer in comparison were it to be set against the loss of promoting cooperative relations among people and of providing corporate staff or public citizens the opportunity to control their own lives and fulfill their human capacity for making sound judgments.

Perhaps Alvin Gouldner (1955) said it best when challenging those who called for the inevitability of hierarchical bureaucracy:

> Instead of explaining how democratic patterns may, to some extent, be fortified and extended, they warn us that democracy cannot be perfect. …Instead of assuming responsibilities as realistic clinicians, striving to further democratic potentialities whenever they can, many social scientists have become morticians, all too eager to bury men's hopes (p. 507).

My initial claim for the ethical case above was noted as being based on the principle of democratic practice. This principle may also lead to a range of ethical behaviors among which are two that will be explored in more detail here: dialogue and meaning making. The first, dialogue, can be characterized as constituting conversations that begin with a stance of nonjudgmental inquiry toward the other. At the same time, speakers commit to submitting their own ideas and views to critical scrutiny. Lastly, participants to dialogue entertain the view that something new or unique might arise from a mutual inquiry that could reconstruct the participants' view of reality.

Dialogue, then, emphasizes the value of listening in human behavior to produce harmonious yet pluralist communities. Listeners, no matter their station in life, defer in deep respect to the contribution of the speaker. They also listen to the content and rhythm of speakers in group settings. They listen with a critical ear to things that are unsaid as much as what are said. When it is their turn to talk, they speak from the heart and solicit inquiry regarding their own viewpoints and suppositions. They become willing to face their own vulnerability that they may lose control, that their initial suppositions may turn out wrong,

or that no solution may be found. By suspending any preconceptions, conversants attempt to reduce the dreaded condition of fear in the group that someone's ideas might be ridiculed or rejected without open-hearted consideration. People acknowledge their positions and power so that no one may come to manipulate or dampen the expression of others. They point out issues arrived at through false reasoning, through hidden assumptions, or through suppression of overlooked or hidden voices. In finding their own voice, they "speak up" in ways not merely sanctioned by privileged social authorities but also because of their self-identified interests and commitments to their community. The resulting dialogue can be characterized as a creative interaction among multiple and contradictory voices that can come to terms with their natural differences.

The second ethical behavior that emanates directly from leaderful practice's democratic orientation is that of meaning making. In classic leadership we are often led to believe that a critical function is that of setting the vision for the organization. But this approach presupposes that the vision is in the mind of the leader rather than emergent from the members of the community who are active participants in their own collective affairs. Rather than rely on individual visionaries, leaderful practice calls on meaning makers, wherever they may "sit" in the organization, to offer meaning to the community, especially when it may face contested terrain or periods of uncertainty or insecurity. These meaning makers are not interested in leadership as a means of ego fulfillment, nor, consistent with especially Eastern philosophical traditions, are they seeking to push to make things happen in the world. Rather, they allow a process to unfold. They see themselves as providing a service to their community, speaking modestly mainly to shed light and create harmony, valuing discernment over impulsion, and looking for synergy among those engaged. Often in the sheer act of framing the reality that is observed, the meaning maker consolidates the prevailing wisdom of the collective community. In the ensuing conversation, there is likely to be deep exploration of ethical dilemmas, recognition of insights based upon alternative framings, empathic awareness based on public and concurrent reflection in practice, and appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process.

Democratic principles can also lead to particular virtues that have been long characterized as promoting ethical practices. Let's consider three such virtues: authenticity, humility, and dignity. When it comes to authenticity, I contend that leaderful practice can inspire genuineness among community members so that they can bring their whole person to work. Employees don't need to fragment their work and their personal selves. Many if not most of our important social relationships are formed at work, and these connections, when embedded in the organization as part of our social capital, can, as noted in the SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management) Foundation's *Retaining Talent* report (Allen, 2008), produce higher commitment and even retention. Consider the successful tomato processing company, Morning Star, located in California's San Joaquin Valley (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Dedicated to an organizational philosophy of self-management, employees at Morning Star design their own roles but also notably make a set of commitments to their peers. These commitments are captured in so-called "colleague letters of understanding" (CLOUs), which are widely communicated to clarify each person's obligations to his or her team members.

Unfortunately, some of the popular guidance on leadership prescribes a particularized impersonal role that needs to be adopted once in a leadership position. Focusing on developing the self for leadership, the book, *Discovering the Leader in You* (King, Altman, & Lee, 2011), warns prospective leaders that they are no longer "one of the gang." The authors caution leaders to be prepared to lose their long-lasting, genuinely comfortable relationships. They further advise that the higher you climb in an organization, the more you need to tightly control your feelings and your words. "You may want to relax and joke around…. but even in relaxed situations, people are keenly aware of what you say and how you behave. You must always be aware of your image."

Not only do we want the members of our community to express themselves, we want them to *be* themselves. Further, the experience of work need not be a deviation from our personal development nor from our rightful personal enjoyment of life. Work can be fun and personally enlightening. There is already ample gamesmanship that seems expected in our discussions with external constituencies, though we may wish these relationships also to develop to a point of greater authenticity. Most of us,

consequently, prefer a relatively high level of authenticity among members of our immediate communities. As employees in organizations feel more authentic, they feel more liberated to be all that they can be. They become, as Gilbert Fairholm (1998) likes to put it, "thinking contributors, not just physical extensions of the managers' capacities, ideas and creativity" (p. 153).

We can all benefit from spending more time to get to know our colleagues compassionately - to consider them well beyond the organizational role that they may happen to perform. Consider this story that former CEO, Max De Pree of Herman Miller, likes to tell about his father, D.J., the founder of the company (De Pree, 2004). D.J. De Pree would visit the family of any key employee who passed away. He would go to their house and spend time in the living room typically in awkward conversation. One day the millwright died and he went to the home of his widow. In this instance, she asked D.J. if she could read some poetry aloud. He agreed, so she read some selected pieces of beautiful poetry. When she finished, the young De Pree commented on how poignant the poetry was and asked who wrote it. She replied that her husband, the millwright, was the poet. To this day, Max and many others at Herman Miller are still wondering whether this man was a poet who did millwright's work or whether he was a millwright who happened to write poetry.

As a collective approach, leaderful practice expresses a humility that seeks to serve others, that does not seek power for its own sake. People learn to count on others because they have learned that each member, even the weakest, will be kept in mind when decisions are made. Most of us resonate to those who are trustful and who display their humanness. Those who try to sway others with glib speeches are eventually exposed. One doesn't need speech writers when speaking from the heart.

A great example of someone who engendered trust in people through humility is that of Ken Melrose, who at one point took over as president of the near-bankrupt Toro Company (Cashman, 2000). The company's headcount was slashed from 4200 employees to 1800. The entire management team had been terminated except for Melrose. Morale was at an all-time low. He decided to address the remaining employees all together. Here's how he put it:

> We're in a very severe crisis, and you're wondering what went wrong. Well, management has let you down, and the entire management team is gone except for me. If you have to blame someone, then blame me. If you want to be part of the solution, then join me, and we'll bring this company back from the ashes (pp. 181-182).

Melrose's personal appeal to his community (to call it a speech would appear to devalue it) led to a cultural transformation at Toro. In four years the company returned to solid health in large measure due to what we might call Ken Melrose's leaderful practice.

The virtue of human dignity also enters the equation of leaderful ethics. When one commits to honoring the dignity of every involved person in the organization, no decision can be made without considering each such person and one comes to realize that one's contribution is indeed dependent upon others. There are no grand narratives and superimposed truths that govern each activity; rather, we find ourselves drawn to a dialogue about each other's values and commitments. We seek to understand one another and become astutely aware of others' and our own views of reality. Together we seek to create an enterprise that is bigger than what any one of us could have created on our own.

LEADERFUL ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Might the practice of leaderful behavior extend to the contemporary engrossment in sustainability, defined as the enhancement of the quality of human life while reflecting on our current actions and, in particular, acknowledging the carrying capacity of our supporting eco-systems? There seems to be a natural relationship between the elements of leaderful practice and sustainability, defined in this aforementioned way. In particular, discourse in a collective leadership practice would be governed by a critical personal reflection that recognizes the connection between our individual problems and the social context within which they are embedded. Once participants to dialogue make this connection, they

acquire the necessary intellectual humility, empathy, and courage to challenge standard ways of operating. They learn to consider data beyond their personal taken-for-granted assumptions and begin to explore the historical and social processes underlying enduring universal ethical principles. Sustainable outcomes are also shaped by sustainable practices characterized by emancipatory dialogue. Guided by such criteria as authenticity and fairness, participants warrant that their participatory efforts have a real potential to make a difference, that any dominant discourse will be challenged, and that the practice will be inclusive by incorporating participants from all affected institutions and from diverse backgrounds and points of view.

Dialogue as the cornerstone of communicative action within leaderful practice not only entertains democratic and emancipatory processes but pays heed to the effects of the practice under consideration so as to preserve a sustainable future. This is likely to occur because the outcome of any dialogue is often a new or unique way that had never been conceived prior to the collaborative engagement. As something new, it may be subject to more scrutiny than those positions or consequences already endorsed by members of the group. It may also contain consideration of some of our culture's deepest ethical quandaries, such as intolerance, poverty, gun control, abortion, or climate change. These matters do not resolve easily; rather, they are mired in complexity and even mystery requiring our deepest thinking and profound sensitivity to our fundamental human connections. Consensus on them will also face longstanding institutional pressures, especially by power elites who may try to manipulate the discourse. Nevertheless, by joining together in community, participants in social critique tend to have a better chance to resist oppression and other forms of inequitable social conditions than attempting to intervene on their own to alter extant social arrangements.

CONCLUSION

Since leaderful practice focuses on the group or on collective activity rather than on the traits of individual leaders, its ethical essence will commensurately focus far more on the consensual processes that encourage ongoing shared commitments among members of a community than on static ethical standards. The call to individual leaders to establish ethical guidelines to compel individual employees to observe particular behaviors may miss the mark because social relations are ever evolving and often penetrate into contexts that are unanticipated. But even worse, such objective ethical guidelines may end up requiring a conformity that may unwittingly dampen the free expression, creativity, and dignity of the very individuals whose humanity we wish to preserve. While the age-old paradox of individuality in the face of group acquiescence awaits an indeterminate resolution, I have called for a leaderful practice that privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of one another's experiences, feelings, and assumptions, especially those that have been overlooked. As we engage with one another, we invoke our mutual agency to make a difference in the world that honors our individual and collective needs.

REFERENCES

Allen, D. G. (2008). *Retaining Talent: A Guide to Analyzing and Managing Employee Turnover* (SHRM Foundation's Effective Practice Guidelines Series), Alexandria, VA: SHRM Foundation.
Cabrera, E. F., Ortega, J. & Cabrera, A. (2003). An Exploration of the Factors that Influence Employee Participation in Europe. *Journal of World Business*, 38, (1), 43-54.
Cashman, K. (2000). *Leadership from the Inside Out*, Provo, UT: Executive Excellence Publishing.
De Pree, M. (2004). *Leadership Is An Art*, New York: Crown Business.
Fairholm, G. W. (1998). *Perspectives on Leadership*, Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
Gouldner, A. (1955). The Metaphysical Pathos of Bureaucracy. *The American Political Science Review*, 49, (2), 496-507.
King, S. N., Altman, D. & Lee, R. J. (2011). *Discovering the Leader in You: How to Realize Your Leadership Potential*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Kirkpatrick, D. (2012). Self-Management's Success at Morning Star. *T+D*, 66, (10), 25-27.

Raelin, J. A. (2003). *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Raelin, J. A. (2010). *The Leaderful Fieldbook: Strategies and Activities for Developing Leadership in Everyone*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey.