

In Praise of Leadership Disintegration

by
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Introduction

In North America, we're used to seeing flocks of Canada geese fly over, south in the fall and north in the spring. They always fly in the same formation or 'organizational structure'. The question is "Why is their organizational structure a 'V' formation?" If we use our familiar leadership assumptions, it's easy to assume that the one at the front point is the leader, the dominant "boss" leading all the others, who are simply following the stronger leader of the flock. But it doesn't seem to be that simple.

The lead goose isn't the "boss". In fact, they are equal - any one of the geese can be at the front. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 70% more flying range than would be possible if each bird flew on its own. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose takes its place and flies point. The flock is self-orienting. Just because the leader gets weary doesn't mean that the organization fails, another one takes a turn in that role. Each one has the capacity and capability to be the lead goose. Those at the back honk from behind to encourage and support those up front to keep up their speed.

It benefits each goose to stay in formation with those who are headed the same way. That way, they all win. Our old assumptions and constructs about leadership are similarly changing to fall in line.

The 'Leaderful Organization' of the Noughties

While it's not news that organizations are changing rapidly to keep up with their market changes, what is new is how their leadership requirements are changing to keep up. In the past, we have been fixated on the power of central leadership and honoured inspiring, charismatic individual leaders, typically with high egos and dominant personalities. Over the past few years, leadership theory has moved away from individual leadership qualities towards promoting teams and team leadership. We are now moving on yet again. This is now the era of short-term disintegrated leadership at the top, supported by a groundswell of strengthened leadership within the organization.

In this new world, the priorities have changed, personal leadership qualities based on ego and personality take a back seat to the up-front ability to manage information and coordinate virtual groups. In the new organizational world, leadership is not a stable position, it's a situation specific role - which leaders must be prepared to revolve into and out of. The emerging organizations of the 21st century are "leaderful organizations" with leaders trained and ready to step up to the plate, step aside or step back, as the situation requires.

In today's organizations, teams are not always neat face-to-face groups of individuals who report to one supervisor and work together as a 'team' in a stable environment. Today, different groups will be forming and reforming all the time in order to get the job done effectively. Groups are rarely static. Consulting and organizational project teams are good examples. Partnerships, mergers, alliances, 'coopetition', corporate projects, outsourcing, offshoring, adding new products, closing operations, downsizing, opening new operations, all and more can be happening in parallel at the same time, with different projects and organizational and cross-organizational teams established to deal with them.

In these organizations, managers often find themselves leading and managing people in cross-organizational/geography teams they don't know, who don't report to them and who they may never have even met! It's often not even clear who 'reports' to whom. Teams may be formed from employees from more than one company, and consultants or contractors, to focus on problems, and

then they split up and reform around different projects. A project managers' role on such a team is much more about communication, coordination and cooperation than the exercise of raw power.

In fast-paced change environments, hierarchies and even egos can simply get in the way if they are allowed to. There just isn't time to figure out the hierarchy, go up and down the right steps in the right political channels, or even to get permission before taking action, let alone to change the written rules and procedures and keep them up-to-date.

A good example of leadership disintegration is to be found in today's fast paced military units that have moved from a pyramid organizational hierarchy to a structure based on small groups, or modules, of specialists. I worked with one group of 60 people in the Canadian military who had the task of going in to the combat zone and quickly building or re-building airfields after a battle. Each member of the team was a specialist with their own equipment, but who was also cross-trained on other tasks. The team had a common mission, and each member of the group had a clearly defined role to play, knew what their job was, and accepted full accountability for their own work and for the achievement of the overall group's mission. Each group of specialists stayed together and worked together in the same team. Group consensus was the norm. In these groups, the task of the senior ranked person was not to give orders, they all knew what to do, but to make sure that the mission was clear, the right people and skills were in the group, they had what they needed to get the job done, that they were combat ready, and that the specific missions were achieved.

When required, the team was taken to their location by a Hercules aircraft. On a Canadian military Hercules there is always a Mission Commander who has final decision-making authority on issues concerning the aircraft and crew for that mission. It used to be that this was always the pilot, but these days that isn't always the case. Any of the seven person crew can be assigned as the Mission Commander for a mission. They are all trained to take on this role and take over if necessary. This seemed to me to represent the essence of disintegrated leadership. Leaders are trained, prepared and ready to step into the role as required. In the new military organization, leadership emerges, evolves, and revolves, just like in the geese formation.

And this isn't new to the military, in the First World War, this model enabled a force of Canadians in small groups to take the famous Vimy Ridge after the British and French had spent many years and thousands of lives launching wave after wave of mass battalions at the enemy. It wasn't that the Canadians were more skilled, better trained or had better equipment. They were just better organized around small groups that were allowed to make decisions close to the action.

The New Leadership Culture

The cultures that are emerging to respond to these organizational environments are called achievement cultures. In the achievement culture, like the flock of geese, the concepts of 'boss' and 'subordinate' have little meaning. In this culture, the leader's role is to articulate a clearly understood, well accepted and reinforced mission, a shared purpose, and clear values, to pull the team together to achieve the mission, properly equip the team - and then to let people get on with it. The role of the employee is to interpret these values and pursue them with skill, effectiveness, sincerity and integrity, both as an individual and as a team contributor. Authority and leadership in this culture are based on expertise and individual contribution to the mission, they are associated with the person and the context, and are not acquired simply as a result of holding a certain 'position' in the organizational hierarchy. In my experience, this is the preferred culture of North American employees today, particularly of the next generation.

The next generation, Generation Y, is now entering the workforce. These people will dictate the next leadership styles. A representative organizational structure for this new generation is the internet. The internet is the fastest growing organization in the world. It's also a good example of an achievement culture organization. In many ways, the internet blows away all the rules we learned about leadership and organizational structure in our business schools. The rules we have developed about what organizations need to make them successful - span of control, centralization, controlled access to

information and power, “one man, one boss”, clear task delegation, decisions down and information up, and single-point accountability, just don’t work to explain the success of the internet.

So where is the centre of the internet, where is the leadership that drives it? Using the internet, almost ½ million individuals make their living selling on eBay. If they were employees of the same company they would be in the top 5 largest private employers in the U.S. Yet they have no central leadership or command structure, controls or organizational hierarchy. It’s only possible because of the distributed power, shared rules, knowledge and information-based nature of the internet tool, and not because of the organizational hierarchy.

Command and control power structures and ways of working don’t work on the internet, and this is how Gen Ys think about the organizations that they work for. When they are on the internet they are the leaders, they are the centre of the organization that is their universe. This new generation doesn’t want to be ‘managed’. They want to lead themselves within a group of similar leaders. They want to know that they have an important job to do, that everyone around them also has an important role to play, that they are the right person for that job, and that they have the skills and the tools to get it done. At the same time they depend on each other. They are both independent and interdependent; and they have been trained to be productive and comfortable in that environment. For this generation, leadership is connected more to skills and capability than title and position. If the person in front falls down, it’s no disgrace, someone else with similar capability will fill in and carry on. Sound familiar?

Leaders emerge to take over situations where their attention and skills are needed. We consultants are familiar with this world. An individual consultant’s role on a project depends on the needs and skills of the group that forms to respond to the client’s problem. He or she may be a project manager at one time, a system specialist at another time, or a team member at another. As more organizations expand the use of teams and move people through various projects and secondments, employees are becoming more used to cultures of working on temporary project management teams and following more lateral or horizontal career paths.

Step Up, Step Aside or Step Back

Frequent leadership baton passing may sound like a strange model for an organization design but it’s being applied more frequently in organization structures. Apart from the military, I have seen many situations where this type of structure is appropriate, including emergency rooms, organizational project teams, airplane cockpits, ships bridges, kitchens, orchestras, fire and police and correctional facilities, IT service organizations and fast customer response teams.

I have begun to use this model as a basis for an organizational structure design in situations where groups of specialists (interdisciplinary action teams,) come together in a situation in which:

- Change is frequent
- People have not worked together before, (and may have never even met)
- There are no long-term relationships established
- The team is facing an immediate and complex task, with an unpredictable outcome
- The individual team members share a mutual dependency for a successful outcome
- There is no clear need for a single leader
- There is a shifting reality and situation, or virtual team.

Disintegrated leadership doesn’t mean less leadership. It means more. The history of ‘great groups’ shows that teams driving successful change always have a strong leadership influence to motivate and guide them. This is the powerful role of “leader from the front” that will continue to be so important.

Role switching is the true meaning of situational leadership. The situation, the time, the organizational context and the permission to lead, all determine the type of leadership and the roles required. As the pace of change picks up, these can change quickly. It’s the situation and the group that invents the type

of leadership that it needs, not the other way round. In successful teams, the group shapes the leader and the leader shapes the group. This is a tough lesson for tough leaders who can't easily stand up, stand down or stand aside as the situation requires.

In summary, as the leader of an effective team, knowing when to step up, step back or step aside is the order of the day. All three of these are honourable leadership roles, it's just a question of timing. Knowing when to take which position takes skill, courage and grace. The next generation now moving into leadership positions understands this and levers it well. Those who do not will be left behind.

Conclusion

Like just about everything else in the new organizational world, our concepts of leadership have changed to the point where we need to reassess our assumptions. Today, leaders do not function in a stable, self-contained, skill based environment dominated by their inspiration or physical presence, but in a knowledge based environment dominated by distant information systems, other groups and other leaders. In this organizational world, leadership is more about individual contact, networking and relationship building than wielding organizational bouquets and barbed wire to motivate unmotivated employees. It's not black and white, right or wrong anymore. Its not just servant leadership pushing from behind, its not just hard assed front-end leadership, its not just standing aside and letting someone else take over – its all three.

Here's some things you can do.

1. Don't make the assumption that people are only leaders or only followers. All employees need to be trained how to be good leaders and good followers.
2. Review the organizational performance evaluation and reward system. If the lead goose is the only one evaluated on the flock getting to a specific destination and gets 3-5 times the rewards of the other geese for getting there; while the others are evaluated on how fast or far they can fly, or how long they've been in the flock, the shared leadership approach is just not sustainable. However often or loudly the leader calls the flock a "team", it isn't, and the flock know it. Performance measures and rewards need to be shared consistent with the shared responsibility and contribution.
3. Recognize that the leadership role in the new organizational environment has also changed and is changing dramatically. Be prepared to let the circumstances determine the leadership role needed.
4. Lead yourself first, then your team, and then your organization. This means that you need to know yourself, your skills and capabilities, to learn about the circumstances when you need to step up and grasp the leadership baton and take over, and when you need to step back and get out of the way. Do you know when to play which role? Do you have the courage to switch from one role to another? Do you know what needs to be put into place in your organization to make sure that the right person picks up the leadership baton and knows when to pass it on at the right time? Your next career move may depend on it.

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