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The Most Essential Attributes of a Leader

Over the last four months I have certainly grown tremendously in the area of leadership. Back home leadership is not something you study at school. So I guess I have always seen leadership as something you are born with; you either have it or you do not. The biggest thing I have learned here is that you can definitely educate and train yourself in being a leader and/or being a better leader if you are already one. This realization determines my place at the very beginning of the process of becoming a leader having plenty of material ahead of me to learn and practice. Probably I should start with identifying those aspects I have to master. I have decided to find convergences between all 5 authors we have studied throughout this class. The biggest surprise and realization for me was that regardless of the approach to leadership, from Machiavelli's hierarchies to Wheatley's flat organizations, all of them were referring to the same characteristics of a leader at different points. I find those converged attributes to be the most essential ones for an effective leader.

First, Gardner's definition of a leader is still the closest to my heart and my way of thinking. I absolutely agree with him that true leaders are "persons who, by word and/or by example markedly influence the behaviors, thoughts, and/or feelings of a significant number of their fellow human beings" (Gardner p. ix). So now let me show what features, I think, the leader should possess to follow this definition. While Gardner's 6 characteristics are very important, I believe they are more complex than he states (or most probably than how I understood them at the beginning). Here they are:

1. Multi-faceted knowledge which includes

   a. *Expertise*

   b. *Creation [learning in context which facilitates team learning] and sharing*

   c. *Mental models*

   d. *Self awareness [personal mastery and personal attending] and*

   e. *Reflection and communication skills*

  2. Story that means

   a. *Constructing a story*

   b. *Communicating it to unschooled mind*

   c. *Making it coherent*

  3. Setting an example by

   a. *Embodying your story*

   b. *Portraying moral purpose*

  4. Knowing and appreciating the audience by

   a. *Recognizing the diversity*

   b. *Relation building*

  5. Being able to see the big picture and be ready for a change (system thinking)

 Knowledge is the most important one to me. But while I agree with Gardner that technical expertise is very important because, according to his viewpoint, experts become leaders through demonstrating knowledge repeatedly, I see knowledge having more dimensions into it. First of all I agree with Fullan that additionally to intellectual brilliance the leaders should have emotional intelligence, "the ability to read the political and social environment, and landscape them (F p. 73). To me, emotional intelligence is the maturity of a leader that helps him/her to understand and appreciate diversity among the audience, is the ability to sense the atmosphere and to be more open to altering even something you strongly believe in based on the situation. Emotionally intelligent leaders feel the situation and are able to choose when to be disciplinarian and when to let it go depending on the context. To be more Machiavellian or to be more

Wheatley depending on the circumstances and organization: such balance I believe is a survival skill for a true leader.

While it's certainly possible to extend the expertise though learning in context and sharing knowledge (emotionally intelligent leaders are also ready for sharing), I feel like it is more important to have the knowledge of yourself first, self-awareness (Senge's personal mastery and Wheatley's personal attending). Personal mastery starts with clarifying the things that matter to us. At this point, as you will see later, I believe the leader is able to find his/her story, something he/she is passionate about.

So far I mentioned expertise and knowledge creation, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness as the necessary pieces of the knowledge required for each true leader to possess. However, the puzzle (called knowledge) is not complete yet. I came to realize that your mental models are very powerful; they can support or ruin everything. I will return to this idea later when I try to reflect on where I am and what I still need to learn. True leader should know how to recognize and work out the assumptions from his/her own mental models in the first place (Senge). As Gardener stated the leader should have "uncluttered mind", a perspective that is not distracted by the transitory events of the day" (p. 289). Otherwise, mental models can interfere with his/her story and the ability to work with the audience. Moreover, a true leader should also keep in mind mental models of his/her followers. It is a very difficult task to change somebody's mental models because people hold on to initial perceptions and do not want to let them go. To tell you the truth, I think it is people's nature to tend to leaps of abstraction (that is why the leader should first make sure he/she himself/herself doesn't do that). But the emotionally intelligent leader should be able to find strengths and ways to free people of wrong assumptions through communicating his/her story, through passion (I keep thinking about my work in Russia and how, hopefully, my passionate story about the people with disabilities can free Russian people from the assumption that they are useless) and get the best out of people. Once again it is

possible to achieve through reflections on the individual level and communications within the groups.

Sharing knowledge also comes from communication, which in its turn, by my strong belief, can add to the team learning. For example, if a leader provides his/her followers learning in context, "learning with the greatest payoff because it is more specific (customized to the situation) and because it is social (involves the group)" (F p. 126), it is the natural way to facilitate team learning (without maybe even calling it that). It's much more productive than having seminars or retreats with the team learning as a topic that are artificial and fruitless.

Story. If the leader awakes emotional responses from people many unbelievable results can be achieved. Touched and motivated people are able to do the impossible. The leader can most certainly touch people through the story. The story becomes leader's moral purpose and if it mobilizes everyone's sense of moral purpose, that provides people with motivation, the attraction to commit. But in order to achieve that the leader should make a story coherent and interpret events on the level for all his followers to understand ("unschooled mind"). I believe it's one of the most difficult tasks for the leader because on one hand, the leader has to learn more and more to be an expert and on the other side, the leader should be able to bring it down to people. Many leaders fail to achieve such balance. Story forms the vision and I believe that shared vision is the direct outcome of the purpose story that all people can relate to.

But having the story is not magic. First of all the leader should *set the example* by embodying the story into his/her life, practice what they preach publicly (Machiavelli, Gardner). That is where the moral purpose suggests sustained performance (Fullan). Actions speak louder than words and here I agree with Senge that the leadership springs from deep personal conviction. I don't believe anything can be achieved by moralizing (just try moralizing teenagers) but the true leader can inspire by example (remember Sakharov, he inspired people by setting an example of how a regular person could disagree with the governmental policies that
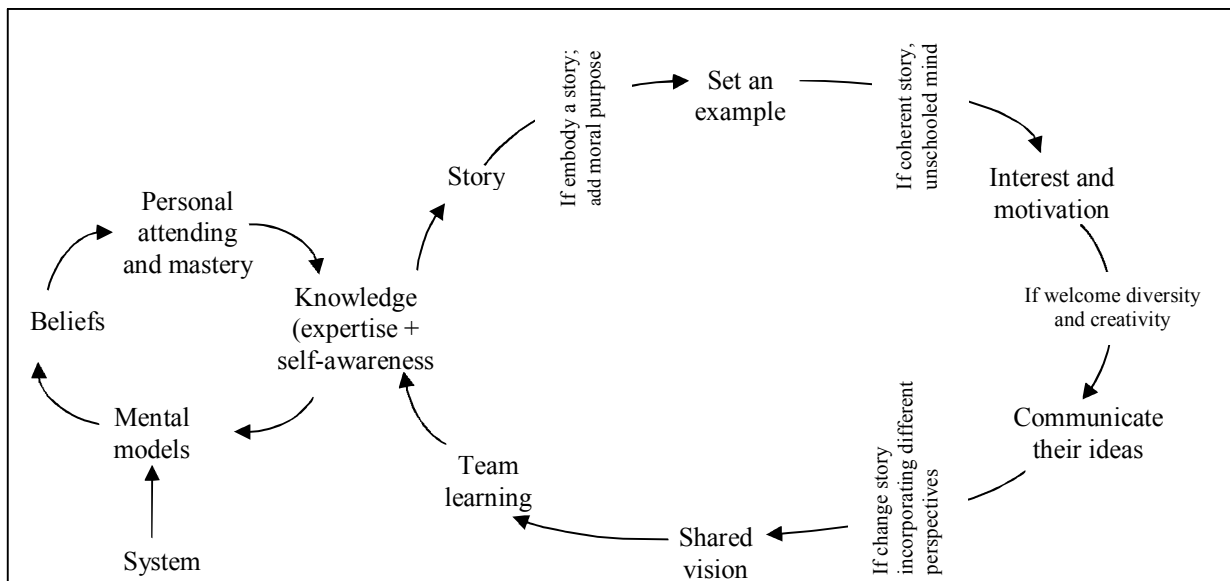
were destructive and dangerous). The leader can also be an example of personal mastery that will encourage people to develop their personal mastery because this way the leader shows that it is welcomed and valued. So I believe that in all aspects the true leader should first portray everything he/she looks for in his/her followers.

Effective leader always *knows his audience* (just like Machiavellian "know your people", Chapter 6)**.** Only that way the leader will be able to sense the wishes of the audience. More than that, if the leader sees the diversity of the audience and is open to it, the next goal for the leader is to bring it into unity, enhance the story with that diversity which will then increase follower's commitment to the story (it's amazing that the strength and power of unity among people that is now preached by everyone was recognized long time ago. I mean Machiavelli suggesting, "fostering the unity", Chapter 10). That means that the leader should create a climate where people are encouraged to contribute their diverse ideas and creativity. And of course the essential skill for the leader is the ability to listen to his/her audience and to hear it. Once again I believe that you can achieve Fullan's "soul at work" both individually and collectively through the story and through setting the example. People who care and commit to your story (after you made it coherent and set an example) will be more willing to give you their souls. If they embody the story, they want to be a part of it and then they will be willing to contribute. And all that depends on leader's knowledge of how to make it coherent and on emotional intelligence of how to combine the different perspectives of the diverse audience into one bigger and stronger story that now people not only can relate to but also see as their own story. I agree that understanding of people comes from interactions. More chances you have to interact, more open you are to diversity. Additionally, everything exists in the relationship to something else which brings us to the next point – system thinking.

The leader must be able to see the *big picture* and help people to see it. However, knowledge (meaning expertise) can interfere with the ability to see a big picture. More expertise

you get in one domain, less chances you have to see outside of it. It's like digging a hole: deeper you dig, less sky you can see. The leaders should be very careful and always keep that in mind. It's also important for the leader to be ready and open to change, both changing your story adding the diverse perspectives and the adjusting because the big picture/system/context has changed. Change is happening constantly and there is nothing you can do to stop it. A true leader knows how to adjust to a shift; he/she uses knowledge to adapt to it. Interestingly enough now I see that if you are open for a change and you appreciate the diversity of your audience; you will be able to see resistance as an opportunity, not a challenge (like Wheatley's fruitful opposition). However, I still think that people are not ready to see opposition being fruitful because for many years they were taught that it was wrong. But even people like me know that there will be resistance no matter what, and it's better to get something good out of it rather than just resistance and throwing sand in the wheels. With that said, it is very important to remember in this rapidly changing culture that seems not to cherish anything that have been done before that "embracing change doesn't mean abandoning a core of value" (Senge p. 349).

So all that is a system. Let me try to explain how all these attributes work together.

Story

Set an example

If embody a story; add moral purpose

If coherent story, unschooled mind

Interest and motivation

Personal attending and mastery

Knowledge (expertise + self-awareness

Beliefs

Mental models

System

Team learning

Shared vision

If welcome diversity and creativity

Communicate their ideas

If change story incorporating different perspectives

Everything starts with our mental models representing our beliefs. There is nothing a leader can do before he/she knows himself/herself. Knowing ourselves will help us get rid of

wrong assumptions and tell us where we need more expertise. Knowledge (meaning expertise and knowing yourself) will first contribute to finding our story and also will help to become more aware of our mental models. If we add embodiment and moral purpose to our story, we will set an example to the followers. While being an example if we find the way to make our story coherent and bring it to the level of unschooled mind, people we'll get interested and motivated to follow us. If people are motivated to follow us and we provide them with the opportunity to develop relationships with each other and us where diversity and creativity are welcomed, people will communicate their ideas to us. If we find the ability to change our story incorporating people's different perspectives, it will become a shared vision that everybody is committed to. The shared vision will facilitate team learning naturally which will contribute even more to the knowledge. And all that should be seen in a big picture because the system can influence our behaviors and mental models and that way touch every component.

My place in this system. One of the points I find interesting and promising is the possibility of combining direct and indirect leadership in the effective manner. The reason I find that intriguing is because I really hope to provide indirect leadership in this country through my work and expertise and hopefully to engage more in direct leadership in Russia trying to change the situation for people with disabilities. Most certainly my approach to leadership will be different depending on what country I am in. But before all that there are many aspects I need to learn and work on during my program here.

As I have mentioned before I'm at the very beginning of the path of becoming a leader. The first thing for me to do is to acquire more knowledge on all levels. Most definitely, I have to search out for more expertise through my coursework and research but more importantly I have to deal with my mental models. It's very difficult because like Wheatley said "we don't notice anything except those things that confirm what we already think and who we already are" (p 236). My mental models that form my beliefs influence me and prevent me from accepting flat

leadership approach. Even if I don't have to accept it I feel like I need to be more open to the idea of empowering people rather than controlling them because otherwise I will never become an effective leader. The reason for my resistance is in the mental image of teachers letting students go home before the school is over if the principal is not in the building (as you can guess that is the example from Russia). I don't see those people doing a good work without control. But what upsets me is that when I take my mental models and try them against to real world in US (Wilson's practical results) I see the same situation. In the school in North Carolina too many teachers used any opportunity to go home and not work and it was not really about the leadership because we had a great principal (that was not just my opinion). I know it is probably not always like that but having those examples in mind, it is pretty difficult to speculate about shared vision, team learning and commitment or control for that matter. So the first task for me is to spend more time reflecting and learning more about myself, test my assumptions even more against the reality and try to prove myself wrong. Reading and learning more about these new views on the leadership will also help me cope with change better.

I have my story for Russia (that all students can learn). Although this story is not new for US, I just want to put a different twist on it. I feel very passionate about the benefits of technology for students with disabilities, specifically learning disabilities but all I see here is that teachers use technology to cover any free time or so they don't have to teach those students. It doesn't work that way. However, I know that I do not have enough knowledge to take my story to people/teachers. So, once again, I have to work more on knowledge creation (hopefully through my research) and more than that on knowledge sharing (through different collaboration projects) to support my story. I have already started thinking about how to bring my Russian story down to people and my story here could benefit from that as well. I would love to have a plan and maybe even try to achieve that by the end of this program. My story forms my vision so the next goal for me is to start looking for people with the similar vision (so called networking). I

was lucky enough to find a group of people who shared my way of thinking and beliefs from the very beginning but I would still like to extend this circle of people connected by the shared vision even further. And the last thing would be to find time for reflections, learning, reading, and practicing more.

BUT there are still things that I find hard to understand and tolerate at this time and probably I should keep an eye on them and try to figure them out because we can and should use our knowledge to adapt to change (see above). There is still a big deal to me about the good timing and luck in leadership. Additionally, I agree with Gardner that all the leaders will meet obstacles on their way they can't overcome because it's hard to consider everything and we are only human and we cannot be perfect. You could say but if there is no blame it is OK to make mistakes. I am afraid it is against the human nature not to blame somebody when something bad happens. Have you ever noticed that when people cannot find anybody to blame, they blame God? They just have to blame somebody and it is hard to change (if not even impossible). I believe that people are not ready for fruitful oppositions and the example when our classmate confronts her boss and everybody in the class suggests that she will loose her job proves me right. It is interesting but while I was reading Wheatley's "people are not machines", I thought the same thing: exactly, people are not machines; they have feelings unfortunately including such feelings as too much ambition, jealousy and covetousness. I still have to find the way to learn and understand how those work in the new leadership.

As for the flat organization, here I agree with Wheatley, we have to start with raising our kids this way. Then maybe the next generation will be able to fully embrace and follow this approach. I think it is pretty difficult to change people's minds when they are already fully developed and used to something. Certainly, you can practice all the mentioned above things and get some results but it will not be to its full capacity.

Senge is saying that you can't force people into personal mastery, shared vision or team learning. Ironically (ironically because I always find something wrong with that way of thinking), that is exactly how I feel. Because I have not yet experienced flatter approaches to leadership I resist them. I accept that shared vision, commitment, and team learning can be better, more productive but from my experience so far they are always forced (my friend who works in the pharmaceutical company tells me how he hates those retreats where they supposedly build team learning). Additionally, as majority of our authors mention, we need people who really care about the place they work at and who have ideas. I tend to think it is possible only in case if everybody has their dream jobs or at least dream professions, meaning they received education they wanted, not the one they could afford. What to do about those people who hate their jobs not even because they do not have power but because they want to do something else? How to fit them into Senge's or Wheatley's systems?

I probably overlooked some points but these are the ones that caught my attention and these I see as primary at this point of time. At the end, there will still be leaders and followers/supporters. And the first goal for every leader is to convert followers into supporters; somebody who participates in the story not just mindlessly follows and to help them reach their potentials.

P.S. What I find to be very important for me is that by the end of this class I have learned that Wheatley's and Senge's approaches don't suggest that there are no leaders. They talk about leaders just having different roles. I still have a hard time tolerating some of their points but this realization makes it easier to see those approaches in a big picture, in a complex system.