From Machiavelli to Quantum Physics: A Self-Reflection on Leadership

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Defining Leadership

I have spent the past 13 weeks exploring the concept of leadership and the role of a leader in an organizational setting. My first impression was that defining leadership would be a rather easy. There is a plentitude of information on the topic and history has provided us with a full spectrum of leaders. Yet, even with all this information, the concept of leadership remains controversial. A dichotomy still exists between those who endorse a Machiavellian model and those who support a more democratic approach to leadership. To add to this controversy, there are the numerous opinions regarding the characteristics of a good leader. What I had previously deemed to be a simple task had become increasingly more difficult. I wondered, is it possible to broadly define the concept of leadership while at the same time offer specific characteristics of good leaders?

My previous papers have addressed many of these characteristics. I have written about how leaders use their knowledge, power and authority to motivate and influence the behaviors of others. I have explored the idea of organizational learning. In doing so, I have used examples including my parents, a local school superintendent, a builder/developer in Washington, D.C., present and past presidents, and organizations such as Apple, Inc. and the U.S. Department of Education. As I re-read my essays, I have been able to trace my own path of defining a good leader. With a particular focus on leaders in education, I have come to believe that the old paradigms of leadership are no longer adequate or effective in this new millennium. The goal then, of this final paper is to provide an explanation of what is needed to be an effective educational leader in the 21st century and how I hope to effectively contribute as a leader in my field.

As I contemplated how I would approach this final paper, I stumbled across a quote from Peter Drucker, who is considered by many the father of modern management philosophies. To distinguish between the concepts of management and leadership, Drucker once said, "Management is doing the right things; leadership is doing what is right". The simplicity of this quote struck me since I have struggled to delineate these two terms. With this quote in mind, I have re-examined the readings from this course to identify what I believe are attributes of a good leader. There are many questions to address. Is being a good leader a matter of telling and embodying the right story at the right time to the right audience as Gardner (1995) has stated? Is it becoming less systematic and more systemic as Senge (2006) has argued? Or, perhaps good leadership is what Wheatley (2005) describes as an ability to foster relationships in an environment where humans have the ability to self-organize and where change is unpredictable and inevitable. In this final analysis and synthesis of these leadership philosophies, I hope to answer the question, so what? What do I hope to gain from this doctoral program that will make me an effective leader in the field of world language education?

From Machiavelli to Quantum Physics

The New Prince and Me

The first look at leadership in this course came with the reading of Machiavelli's (2005) *The Prince.* Written originally in the early 16th century, the book serves as a guide through the process of gaining and sustaining power and authority. Devoid of any democratic processes or recognition of equitable group leadership, the Machiavellian model includes the use of coercion, manipulation, and deceit. Doing what is right according to Machiavelli sometimes includes sacrificing the needs of others for one's personal gain. The general theme is that one must create his or her own destiny by seizing opportunities even if it means that others may mentally or

physically suffer in the process. Machiavellian leaders provide few if any options for others to voice their opinions against them. The most evident problem with this model is the use of manipulation and coercion. If leadership is doing what is right, then how is it that such an oppressive, authoritarian approach has had such longevity? To answer this question, I began with a self reflection.

A Cognitive Lens

The first two influential leaders in my life were my parents. Examining their leadership styles through Gardner's (1995) cognitive lens, I now understand how they used information to guide the behaviors of their children. Gardner says that exemplary leaders are able to connect to those they hope to lead by telling and embodying the right stories at the right time. Using Gardner's terms, my mother is more of a direct leader and my late father was more of an indirect leader. My mother, who can be Machiavellian at times, has used her stories to connect with her children and to influence their behaviors. For example, she has told the story about how she was once caught telling a lie to my grandparents. She explained to us how she hurt them by not being honest and how re-gaining their trust was very difficult. We connected to these stories and for the most part, we were happy under her leadership. Conversely, my father did not use storytelling to directly influence our thoughts and actions. Instead, he indirectly influenced our behaviors by the values he exemplified. Instead of telling stories about honesty and integrity, he never lied to us and he loyally fulfilled his responsibilities throughout his entire life.

I have addressed the role of my parents because I believe that my leadership style has as much to do with my early life experiences as it has to do with such courses as the Leadership Seminar. As much as I dislike the Machiavellian model, I must admit that I possess a degree of his leadership attributes. I am aware of how my decisions might affect others but I also know that

my rationality can become clouded by my deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices. How can I fully understand the individuals that I seek to lead if I do not acknowledge what Senge (2006) terms my own *mental models?*

Defined as how we perceive the behaviors of others, mental models can be simple generalizations about a particular group or they can include more complex ideas as to why individuals act in a certain way (Senge, 2006). The idea of mental models explains why two people can view the same situation yet interpret it completely differently (Senge, 2006; Wheatley, 2005). I believe that when we fail to examine our own mental models, we are unable to acknowledge that there are multiple lenses for viewing one reality. We are unable to fully understand the system or organization and the people who connect to it. The result is that we tend to lead systematically. We do the right things, but we don't necessarily do what is right.

From Systematic to Systemic

Machiavelli's model is very systematic. Leaders that follow this model, such as Margaret Thatcher, create a system and they adhere to it, often at their own expense. As Gardner (1995) notes, Thatcher "followed her own dictates without even taking into account the views of others; at the end of her tenure in office, political failures were largely self-inflicted" (p. 325). Thatcher's system was based on one view of reality. She believed that socialism had demoralized British citizens and the way to restore confidence in them and in their country was through the privatization of industry (Gardner, 1995). Thatcher was successful in restoring confidence in her fellow citizens, but when they used that confidence to challenge her policies, she refused to acknowledge them. Senge (2006) would offer that Thatcher's past solutions eventually became the cause of her future problems. For a leader, the difference between success and failure is often the difference between managing systematically and thinking systemically.

Systemic thinking, according to Senge (2006) requires a shift in how we think and in how we view our world. It requires us to see "patterns of change rather than static snapshots" (Senge, 2006, p. 68). These snapshots often represent the symptoms, rather than the problem itself. The question of how we are to solve complex problems by only addressing the symptoms is answered by the many disconnected programs and policies that do little to address the real systemic issue. The most effective systems thinkers are those that are able to view the whole system using a variety of lenses. Although Gardner (1995) did not focus on the concept of systems thinking in his quest to identify the attributes of good leaders, he does provide two cases of this type of leadership in that of George C. Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr.

As systems thinkers, both King and Marshall were able to see more than individual symptoms. King knew that the system for achieving equality in America was flawed and that creating more programs would treat the symptoms rather than fix the system. He understood that without changing the system, racial equality would take far longer than it should. In a similar manner, Marshall's vision for strengthening and modernizing the military was based on his acute knowledge of the problems within the system as well as his observations and conversations with officers in the field. For King and Marshall, doing what was right no longer meant doing the right things under a system that no longer worked.

I admire both of these men, not only for their systems thinking abilities, but because they acknowledged the importance of gaining more than just compliance from those they sought to lead. They recognized the importance of building relationships with individuals in order to gain their commitment for a systemic change. To build these relationships, I believe they were aware of their own mental models. King knew that he had more opportunities and privileges than most African Americans of his time. He was educated, but he refused to use that education to become

part of a broken system. Marshall was aware that endorsing a certain political party would have helped him to advance his career. But he also knew that politics could corrupt a military leader's decision-making process. He chose to remain non-partisan as a way to build a relationship with both political parties.

Clearly, these men shared certain leadership attributes which I have intentionally chosen to highlight. First, a good leader influences the behaviors of others by building relationships, not by using coercion or manipulation. Before building these relationships, good leaders must be able to reflect on their experiences and mental models to better understand the people they wish to lead. Leading in any system includes the ability to solve complex problems. To do so, a leader must have the ability to think systemically. This is much more difficult than employing a Machiavellian-systematic model that addresses only the symptoms. It requires a leader to have the skills to identify what Senge (2006) calls *high leverage variables*, or those variables that will have the greatest effects on a systemic change. Once the problem is identified and a solution is found, the leader must then seek the commitment from each individual involved in the system. What I have yet to address is the manner in which a good leader obtains that commitment. Gardner (1995) would say that it depends on the leader's ability to tell the right story to the right audience at the right time. However, I believe it requires more than that. I believe it is, as Wheatley (2005) describes, a matter of quantum physics.

A Quantum Leap

The field of organizational leadership has taken a quantum leap from the traditional positivist approach that viewed organizational change as linear and controllable, to a more human approach that views organizational change as complex and uncontrollable. Fullan (2001) says "leading in a culture of change is about unlocking the mysteries of living organizations (p.

46). What are these mysteries? In an interview with Scott London (2007), Wheatley offers her insight to the mysteries of human behavior by explaining that even though change is complex, living organisms seek to self-organize around changes in their environments. Since we cannot control for the complexity of change, Fullan (2001) and Wheatley (2005) believe that leaders would be more effective in trying to understand the processes of self-organization.

In applying quantum physics to human organizations, Wheatley (2005) says that individuals do not exist in any organization as independent entities. Each member in an organization is somehow connected to another through webs of relationships. These webs are undergoing constant changes requiring individuals to self-organize. Both Fullan (2001) and Wheatley (2006) state that there are patterns in self-organizing processes that leaders can learn if they are willing to observe and listen to each member of the organization. Fullan (2001) says that leaders can take their understanding of self organizing processes one step further by carefully creating a disturbance to a system that will illicit a particular order, or pattern of behavior. Thus the new paradigm in organizational leadership is that order and control are two separate concepts and that it is very possible to have order without having control (Wheatley, 2005). The idea of a leader being able to illicit order during times of change in complex human systems has incredible implications.

The next logical step would be to apply the understanding of self-organizing processes to systems thinking. If webs of relationships are inevitable in an ever-changing culture, then a good leader is able to use those connections to share information and generate knowledge. This requires dialogue instead of discussion (Senge, 2006), and "looking for insights inside of messiness" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 208). Fullan (2001) refers to making sense of the messiness as *coherence making*. It is an ability to collect and synthesize information from all levels of the

organization in order to form one vision. In making one coherent, shared vision, leaders no longer separate themselves from the rest of the organization. And, they are more likely to gain the commitment from the organizations members because everyone has taken part in creating the vision. They have done more than the right thing; they have done what is right.

So What?

"I take open-mindedness to be a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one's own values. Open-mindedness is the keystone to what we call a democratic culture" (Bruner, 1990, p. 30).

In writing this final paper, I have had to truly think about what I believe are the most important attributes of a good leader. I chose not to include the typical long lists of characteristics because I think that good leaders ought to have more depth than breadth. I have particularly avoided the topic of knowledge and the idea that leaders must be experts in their fields. Senge (2006) discusses the importance of knowledge in his concept of *personal mastery*. But, I believe that many have misinterpreted this term to mean that leaders must attain the highest possible level of knowledge so that no one is able to pose a challenge to them or their ideas. This was perhaps the case with Margaret Thatcher. In this sense, I do not think that one needs to be an expert to be a good leader. However, I do believe that personal mastery is an important attribute of good leadership and before ending this reflection, I would like to address it more closely.

My interpretation of Senge's personal mastery is having the discipline to grow through reflective thinking in order gain an objective truth of reality. In the field of post-secondary world language programs, there are a number of problems that seem to go unnoticed. Students are becoming more displeased with university world language programs and adjunct instructors are

not returning to their positions at increasing rates. What is the reality of university students who say that they are only studying a foreign language in order to meet their degree requirements? What is the reality of adjunct faculty who choose to leave the profession after a few semesters of teaching a world language? Without personal reflection, leaders in the field of post-secondary world language programs may only look at the extrinsic causes for these problems. Without understanding the true reality, they may revert to systematic solutions such as reducing degree requirements or by offering better schedules for part-time faculty. I believe these changes would only address the symptoms, not the real systemic issues.

As a future leader in my field, I recognize that to fully understand the objective reality of these problems, I will need to reflect on my own role in sustaining a system that may very well be destined to die. To successfully implement a systemic change, I must be willing to involve every individual that is connected to the system. This means that I may have to conduct research to gain an understanding of what the students really want from a world language course. I may have to spend time examining my own mental models of why adjunct instructors are leaving the profession before I engage them in dialogue. Then, it will be up to me to synthesize this information into a coherent, shared vision. That vision should then serve as the foundation for systemic change. New language courses or changes in professional development programs for adjunct faculty must also be based on this new vision. However, to do all of this, I know I must acquire certain skills and knowledge during my doctoral program. I am confident that my program of study will allow me the time to grow, both in my ability to conduct research and in my thinking. My goal is to improve post-secondary world language programs through a collaborative effort that includes the students, the instructors and the administrators.

As I re-read that last sentence, I couldn't help but think that my goals are somewhat overly idealistic. Perhaps they are unrealistic. It is very possible that my program of study will lead me in a different direction. Yet, what I have learned this semester about leadership applies to all directions. My identity as a leader will continue to develop as I progress not only through this program, but through life. The road to good leadership is an individual path. For me, it is actually quite simple. It is as Drucker said, doing what is right.

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