

The Holistic Leader: A Developmental Systemic Approach to Leadership

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Leadership is to the twenty first century what management was to the twentieth. As more research and training programs are conducted that address leadership, it becomes imperative for professionals to continually redefine and expand their understanding of leadership. This article presents an overview of *Holistic Leadership*, a model that I developed by integrating various theories, concepts, and writings on leadership.

Holism is defined as “a theory that the universe and, especially, living nature is correctly seen in terms of interacting wholes (as of living organisms) that are more than the mere sum of elementary particles” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 1999, p.553). Therefore, to be a holistic leader, one must be able to not only understand and lead others from this vantage point, but also must be able to understand oneself in terms of how their own intra-interacting aspects create a whole that is greater than their sum. Holistic Leadership is defined as: *a) being able to lead from the mind, the heart, and the soul; b) to apply a methodology that encompasses a developmental systemic approach in order to impact oneself as leader, others as followers, and the environment; and c) lastly, this process should reflect a journey that leads toward transformation at the individual, team, and organizational/community levels.*

In the article “A new neuroscience of leadership”, Robert Cooper (2000) describes how the human fetus’ *three brains* are developed. First the brain of the heart is developed, followed by the brain of the gut, which leads to the final development of the brain in the head. This article demonstrates not only the differences between these three

aspects of human intelligence, but also the importance of these three brains working collectively. Therefore, it is imperative for leaders to continually develop insight and awareness into their three brains.

The Leader's Mind

Understanding yourself, and knowing how you perceive and interpret the world is vital to becoming an effective leader. How one goes about this inner journey is as unique as each individual. Exploring the brain of the mind enables one to recognize, understand, and assess how this brain contributes to one's perceptions and subsequent behaviors. Leaders need to understand how they and others perceive, gather, organize, and make decisions regarding their world. Holistic leaders also understand that all varying styles, approaches, and personalities are valuable and necessary complements to one another in any group setting.

Mental models. A significant aspect to the brain of the mind is recognizing and working with our mental models. Mental models can be defined as the way we view the world, our assumptions, beliefs, values, etc. that help create our own reality and the pictures one holds in their mind (Senge, 1990). It is human nature to make leaps of abstractions. The cognitive part of our conscious mind has limitations that make it necessary to develop short cuts, generalizations, and pictures so that we can absorb, categorize and organize data more efficiently. In addition, our history, personal experiences, and personality contribute to the development of our own set of mental models.

Leadership requires one to develop strong reflective and inquiry communication skills. By doing so, a leader can understand their own, and others', mental models and

make any necessary adjustments. One sign of holistic leadership is the incorporation, integration, expansion, and communication of new and old mental models.

Diagnostic skills. Utilizing analytical abilities enables leaders to cognitively assess, understand, and formulate strategies for change. There are several theories and approaches from which the holistic leader can draw. Judith Gordon (2002) describes a four step diagnostic approach to systematically analyze and prescribe actions for change: *description* (collecting data), *diagnosis* (analyzing and identifying key factors), *prescription* (identifying solutions to problems), and *action* (implementing and evaluating solutions). Other diagnostic skills include understanding and working with systems, identifying driving and resisting forces on change efforts, and formulate strategic interventions. By developing good diagnostic skills, a leader has powerful tools from which to approach individual, team, and organizational development.

The Leader's Heart

For too long it was thought that human beings in the workplace should leave their feelings “checked at the door”; that somehow feelings could be separated out from the rest of the person. Ignoring the existence and importance of a person’s heart leads to increased negative conflict, depression, and underperformance. The heart is at the core of what motivates, inspires, and drives us. Our feelings provide us with invaluable information. When we listen, we demonstrate respect and value for others and ourselves.

Motivation. Understanding what motivates oneself and others is one of the core building blocks to effective leadership. There are several motivational theories from which to draw – e.g. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Herzberg’s motivators and hygiene factors, and McClelland’s achievement motivation theory. Regardless of what motivation theory, or

theories, one draws from, understanding, assessing, and then, working with these concepts is fundamental to effective leadership in organizations and communities.

Personal visions. Personal visions put form to what the human heart holds. They result in leaders and followers who are more committed, take more initiative, learn faster, have a broader sense of responsibility, and learn beyond work-related skills and competencies. This results in organizational benefits that include high performance, service, profits, employee retention, and many other measures that lead to higher returns on investments (Senge, 1990). Holistic leaders enable themselves and others to take time to reflect and continuously reevaluate and redefine visions. By doing so, the power of the heart is fully recognized and utilized.

Emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman (1996) defines emotional intelligence as the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in our relationships. His framework includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. It is easy to understand just how important emotional intelligence is in regards to effective leadership. A holistic leader understands this and works diligently at developing higher levels of emotional intelligence, both in oneself and others.

The Leader's Soul

The holistic leader plays particularly close attention to matters of the soul; for this leader knows it is at the core of creating a new era of leadership, a new story. Margaret Wheatley (as cited in Spears, 1998) challenges us to begin to tell and thereby create the new story. She states “We observe a world where creative self-expression, and embracing systems of relationships are the organizing energies, where there is no such

thing as a separate individual, and no need for a leader to do it all” (p.344). Wheatley speaks directly to and from the soul; the collective energies that we can both emerge from, and tap into. She speaks of the need to release control, allowing the natural states of chaos to transform into creativity and growth.

Palmer Parker (as cited in Spears, 1998) emphasizes the need to release our control, to find the power that resides within our spirit, and to create community. He challenges us to reach down into our souls in order to confront our shadows, our deepest fears. It is through this deep inner journey that we come back into the light and find true empowerment.

Transformational Leadership and Servant Leadership theories both incorporate the significance of the soul and its role in leadership. They encapsulate the concept of transformation of both leader (or servant) and follower in respect to moral, ethical, and spiritual development. The leader does not hold all the wisdom or power. It is through the act of service and attending to the needs of the entire human being that both individuals reach higher levels of empowerment, enlightenment, and motivation for growth.

Developmental-Systemic Methodologies

The true power of the holistic leader comes from the integration and continuous development of all three brains. The holistic leader applies these concepts and skills by utilizing methodologies that are developmental and systemic in nature.

Situational leadership model. The Situational leadership model, developed by Hersey and Blanchard (as cited by Northouse, 2001), is both developmental and systemic in nature and takes into account the leader, the follower, and the situation. It has a

developmental continuum that measures the maturity level of followers in terms of attitude, motivation, and ability. The model suggests that leadership styles range from Directing, Coaching, Supporting, and Delegating, depending upon the maturity level of the follower and the situations that are driving this level. Situational leadership requires that the leader be able to assess the needs of the follower, and adapt and alter their style as needed.

Senge's systems thinking. Senge (1990) effectively presents systems thinking as a framework from which one can organize and understand how events, behaviors, and phenomenon affect one another, both in the short-term and the long-term. It reflects the dynamics of reciprocity and interdependencies. It provides both a theoretical construct and a practical concrete framework. When one applies system's thinking as opposed to linear thinking, one can see the dynamics that are reinforcing an event or limiting growth. Understanding how to apply leverages for change results in intervention planning.

Holistic leadership, when channeled through situational and systems models, journey towards transformation at three levels: the individual, the team, and the organization.

Transforming the Individual

Personal mastery is defined as “the discipline of personal growth and learning. People with high levels of personally mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek” (Senge, 1990, p. 141). By implementing the holistic approach, the individual begins the process of transformation. This can be seen, felt, and experienced through a continuous process of pursuing truth, assessing personal values, and striving towards one's goals.

Empowerment. Transformation is seen as one becomes more and more empowered. While there are many different ways to view and define empowerment, holistic leadership looks to the individuals' beliefs and perceptions about their internal and external locus of control. Holistic leaders seek to create an environment that is conducive towards high levels of empowerment. This includes encouraging individuals to share in the decision-making process, having open channels of communication, establishing a culture of trust and respect, and allocating authority to make decisions, take risks, and learn from experience.

Ethical Growth

Transformational leadership and servant leadership theories have ethical and moral development as core values. Holistic leaders serve as both role models and guides to their followers. By serving others from high moral and ethical standards, leaders and followers both rise ethically and morally from the experience. It is within the relationship, that transformation occurs.

Transforming the Team

Holistic leadership inevitably leads to transformation at the team level. This is accomplished through a developmental process that includes communication, shared vision, high team performance, and team learning.

Communication. The greatest way to achieve effective communication is through empathic listening. This requires that one put aside their own reactions, defenses, etc. so that true listening and testing of understanding occurs. The ultimate goal is for all team members to develop excellent inquiry skills (i.e. searching, probing, testing understanding of others' ideas, feelings, etc.) as well as advocacy skills (i.e.

communicating clearly and effectively one's own ideas, feelings, etc.). In doing so, this reciprocity leads to increased levels of trust, risk-taking behaviors, interdependency, and ultimately, improved performance.

Shared vision. Shared visions are important for several reasons: (a) all members of the team/organization are pulling in the same direction, (b) they foster genuine commitment, (c) they create a common identity, (d) they create synergy, and (e) they motivate the workforce. Having shared visions can be the best antidote for resistance to change within organizations; therefore, it is preferable that everyone be involved in the process.

Establishing alignment between personal visions and shared visions sustain high levels of energy, motivation, and momentum.

High performing teams. The holistic leader understands the untapped human potential and power that can be found in high-performing teams. High-performing teams are versatile and adapt to changes quickly; they are innovative, creative, more productive, generate synergy, and epitomize the concept of empowerment. Holistic leaders work hard to develop the necessary skills, provide the necessary resources, and create the necessary environment, which enables high-performing teams to excel.

Team learning. Ultimately, full transformation at the team level results in team learning. As Charlotte Roberts (as cited in Senge, et al., 1994) states “Team learning is also the most challenging discipline – intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. The process of learning how to learn collectively is unfamiliar” (p.355). Team learning requires the integration of all the skills and elements described within this leadership model.

Transforming the Organization

Leadership that highly values ethical approaches to change will help to transform organizations and communities. It is through consistent and rigorous role modeling, over extended time, that ethical growth and development occurs at the organizational level. Holistic leaders continuously strive towards creating a culture of openness, trust, respect, participation, empowerment, and growth. This is demonstrated as an organization goes through the transformational process from the bureaucratic to the flatter entrepreneurial culture.

If an organization implements the concepts, values, and practices prescribed by holistic leadership and the developmental systemic approach, an organization will naturally transform into becoming a learning organization. Senge (1990) defines a learning organization as “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p.3).

Learning organizations learn faster than their competitors, thereby creating a competitive advantage that is expanded globally. As our global community becomes more and more complex, there is a need for organizations to recognize the need for on-going change, to become more adaptable and flexible, and to respond quickly to the changes that occur around them. In a learning organization, the entrepreneurial spirit gets unleashed, growth and learning is created for everyone, resulting in a greater good for all.

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