The worst leader is he who people despise. A good leader is he who people worship. A great leader is he who makes people say: "We ourselves did it."

Lao Tse

Just as in the theory of systems the whole is more than the addition of its parts, in management, the team is more than the addition of its members. That which makes a team differ from a group of working people is synergy. Through the development of a shared vision, an engagement with certain essential values, a context of mutual confidence and respect, and a unifying interpretation of certain recurrent practices for the efficient coordination of actions, a group of individuals can generate a creative energy which largely exceeds the mere addition of individual energies. Such as a light beam may organize itself by means of a crystal into a laser ray, a beam of individuals may organize itself through a field of intellectual, emotional and existential forces producing an extraordinary team. The leader is the person in charge of creating and maintaining such field of forces.

Traditionally, the leader is identified with a person detaining formal authority. From ancient heroic myths to modern management literature, the leader appears as an individual capable of leading others. This image is valid all right, but it conceals other possibilities. In this article I want to put forward an alternative idea: shared leadership. To do so first I will analyze the role of the leader and then I will propose it can be played by a collective person. Moreover, my thesis is that in highly uncertain situations, exercising shared leadership has advantages over individual leadership.

Quoting Peter Senge, “Our traditional idea about leaders – special persons who determine the direction to be followed, take key decisions, and instill energy – is based on a non-systemic and individualist vision of the world. Especially in the West, leaders are heroes, great personalities occupying the center of the scene. As long as these myths prevail, the focus of attention will increasingly fall on immediate facts and charismatic heroes rather than on systemic forces and collective learning.” (The New Task of the Leader, the Creation of Learning Organizations – Sloan Management Review, Fall 1993.)

The role of the leader

The leader develops precise functions destined for keeping cohesion and alignment of the organization, directing it towards its objectives, assuring a maximum utilization of its resources, honoring its system of values, feeding the individual enthusiasm of its parts, and continuously regenerating the culture which supports the interactions.

The leader maintains the creative tension. Every action (be it individual or collective) sets off from the difference between a present reality which is unsatisfactory and a desired future possibility. The leader is permanently busy “charging the battery” of the organization through a dual strategy - (a) interpreting the present world, (b) imagining possible future worlds.

The first focus of a leader is hermeneutic (interpretative): he looks at the world reading its signs and providing sense to the group reality, for instance, studying the market and casting an analysis of its forces, weaknesses, opportunities and risks.

As Max de Pree, ex-president of Herman Miller, says: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality”. Much of the multiplying effect a leader exerts lies on his ability to help
people see the reality in a more generative, deep and energizing way. The leader can see (and show) opportunities where others only see problems.

The second focus of a leader is poetic (creative): he looks into his heart, reading its wishes and imagining a possible reality which may make them real, for instance, making up a new way of doing business. Quoting Albert Einstein: “Imagination is more important than information because knowledge is limited while imagination embraces an infinite possibility.” The leader’s power derives from his ability to paint futures which can light up the passion of the members of an organization. This “sacred fire” that burns in men’s spirit is the fuel of the organizational engine.

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Every individual exerts this leadership task for himself. The responsibility for one’s life and the actions being displayed is not feasible of being delegated. An organization which demands the subordination of personal autonomy becomes a cult that deprives individuals of power, discourages and neutralizes its members. The way to build a community collectively responsible for its creative tension has to do with encouraging a continuous reflection on reality and organizational aims.

The leader teaches and redesigns the organizational culture. A culture is a set of ideas and practices which aid a community to locate itself in the world and to sail about it, a collective “mental pattern” which organizes the experience of those participating in it coherently. Quoting Schein: “Leadership is related to the formation of the culture”. The construction of the organizational culture and its evolution management is the “sole and essential function” of a leader.

Mental patterns are systems of deeply rooted assumptions, generalizations, images and archetypal plots which influence how we understand the world and how we take actions in it. They condition our personal, organizational and social lives and help us to make sense of reality and perform our functions efficiently. They determine what is rational, correct, moral, convenient and legitimate for us. They help us decide how to interact with others and with the world, so as to maximize efficiency and keep coherence.

The leader is the cultural architect. Through his example, his words and his actions he exerts a deep influence on the way of thinking and on the way of being of the organization. With his behavior the leader is constantly sending subliminal messages about what is good, true and beautiful; the three dimensions that, according to Plato, define the essence of a cosmovision. This design task is a fundamental lever point to create the organizational synergy. The “adequate” culture becomes the link connecting the present reality with the future vision, through efficient and ethical mechanisms of behavior.

Cultural design is a continuous task. Beliefs and behavior systems tend to become age-stiff and to lose contact with the dynamic reality which generated them. The obsolescence of certain ideas and practices represents one of the major risks threatening survival and vitality of the organization. On a social level, Michel Foucault analyzed this phenomenon and concluded: “The history of thought and culture throws a continuous pattern of great liberating ideas, ideas which inevitably become oppressive strait jackets containing the seed of their own destruction at the moment they face new emancipating conceptions which will eventually turn enslaving”. The leader is he who is permanently busy updating the culture, to keep it fresh and vibrating.

With his behavior the leader is constantly sending subliminal messages about what is good, true and beautiful.

Every individual has a personal leadership world in this area. As a father, a mother, a brother, a friend, a therapist or a manager, the person is able to show and project his cultural influence over his immediate environment. In organizational life, the coherence of culture demands a “traffic director” who helps to negotiate and align cultural forces emanating from each individual.

The leader defines structures, strategies and politics. To implement the ideals and cultural values, the organization needs to literally “incorporate them”, or “make them corporal”. The structure is the body of the organization, the visible side of culture. The leader is the person in charge of conducting the generation and maintenance of the structures, strategies and politics. In particular, the leader is in charge of keeping up the strategic compromise against environment pressures. When the temptation for straightforward gratification threatens with deviating the organization from its objectives and fundamental values, the leader works as an “anchor”, and reminder, of that which, though essential, may turn invisible to the eyes of urgency.

Such as the designing of a culture, this defining of structures, strategies and politics is a continuous and dynamic task. To keep its coherence, the organization must fit the evolution of its mental pattern to the evolution of its forms and courses of action. The leader coordinates the design conversation in which the organization permanently reinvents itself.
Again, we emphasize the necessity of an individual leadership in life. Particularly, the creation of personal structures such as the family, the job, friends, a religious congregation or other groups, are essential actions. To live in plenitude, the individual needs to examine his conscience and implement behavior standards which enable him to be at peace with himself and ethically proud, disregarding the pressures of the moment. In an organization, different individuals gather around directing ideas. While in the past these ideas exclusively came from the leader, in the future they will be born from a community dialogue. (The term dialogue comes from the Greek “dia-logos” which stands for “shared sense”).

Shared leadership: The leader as a collective person

The great risk of charismatic leaders is the temptation they generate in others to delegate on them the responsibility of leadership. In situations of high uncertainty and volatility (such as those proposed by the present century) nobody has enough cognitive and emotional ability to totally assimilate the complexity of reality. If the community (and each of its members) does not take upon itself the role of leadership, it is highly probable it lives trapped in its childhood, depending on what the “parents” (leaders) dictate it to do. The problem is that paternalism, be it heroic or tyrannical, generates order through the eradication of the differences.

Such homogeneity brings about peace, but it reduces the possibilities of managing increasing complexity. Organizations are coming to understand the value of preserving diversity. Diversity, though, is a double-edged weapon. Provided there is a common place where the different points of view can align one another seeking a transcendent welfare, the organization learns and develops with effectiveness. When the common place is absent, the discussion creates friction and wearing away rather than light and energy. We have attributed the leader the responsibility for creating that common place, but no leader can substitute the individual compromise of each member of the organization. In the world of the future, those companies which have members both individually and jointly responsible for leadership, will bear a clear competitive advantage over those where the passivity of the personnel delegates such leadership to the “boss”.

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