

The Unconventional Path of Leadership

Twelve reasons to rethink our personal leadership agenda

Session One: Rejecting the “busyness” in business

Our lives – and our leadership journeys – tend to follow one of two paths: the “conventional” and the “unconventional.” The conventional path is driven by our work cultures – cultures that tend to thrive on action, activity, and results. That’s why it’s called work. So, when we are at work, we need to be “doing” something (anything).

Here is where we will start the journey. Our lives are accelerating in terms of increasing complexity, unmanageable aspects of time, escalating expectations, and declining resources. Welcome to the age of anxiety. In the process, we are losing our sense of community and our ability to be fully present for each other when we are needed most.



“I’m so busy – I have lots of meetings to manage, goals to meet, and a to-do list that just doesn’t quit. You should see my e-mail. Lunch date? Maybe next week. Gotta run, I’m late for my next appointment!”

Busyness gets noticed in work. It’s praised by others. It also gives us a sense of self-importance (I must be important . . . look how busy I am). Busyness also makes it difficult to relate to others who are not being swept forward with the same level of determination and flurry of activity.

Unfortunately, “busyness” also absolves us of our need to do the deeper and more profound work that will truly make a difference in our personal and professional lives. We can’t stop, look, or listen. We are simply too busy going to meetings, saying yes to all requests, and “doing our best.” However, in the process we lose sight of the bigger issues that underlie our work. We continuously attack the surface issues – failing to identify and

solve the core source of the problem.

Our bias for action is so strong that we no longer question – “why are we even doing this?”

When we are forced to slow down, we miss the sense of urgency that comes from the “busyness” pace. In fact, slowing down (e.g., having to stay home with a sick family member) creates a sense of vulnerability that occurs when we get pulled from the game. We dutifully complete our responsibility to family but somehow it still feels like a distraction and we cannot wait to re-enter our go-go world.

Here’s the deal. “Busyness” – the wrong answer to the complexities and responsibilities of life – has never been associated with great work. To be in the moment – to be fully present and attentive to the person or task at hand has become a lost art in our go-go, web-based culture. We are physically present but our mind, psychic energy, and deeper capacities have been unwittingly diverted or diffused by the three sins of distraction:

1. **Trying to do too much:** We often fall into the “busyness trap” – eventually becoming addicted to the high that comes from a caffeine-fueled over-engagement.
2. **Trying to do too many things:** We also fall prey to the multi-tasking madness that is enabled by our hand-held and desktop devices that are grossly mismanaged at the personal level (leading to TADD – technology-assisted attention deficit disorders).
3. **Trying to fit one more thing in:** This is also known as the time management trap. We believe we can manage time – but it’s the wrong focus and leads us to do dumb things. For example, you look at your watch and it is five minutes before you meet a friend in the lobby for lunch. You could leave now and arrive comfortably in time – but you don’t. You turn to your e-mail, quickly opening all new deliveries without fully responding to any of them. Unfortunately, the e-mail from your boss has a troubling tone to it – and the anxiety it produces follows you into your lunch date.

The non-conventional leader refuses to be swept along by this new cultural

current. They protect and enjoy slack time – savoring quiet moments of reflection and rejuvenation.

For the non-conventional leader, “reflection” is just as important as “response.” Through reflection, they facilitate their own potential to create meaning. They slow down. Go off line. They think – not just process information – but bring their fullest cognitive and emotional capability to the issue at hand.

You don’t need a mountaintop. You just need to create some time and space.

Another key element of reflection is that we remain open to adjusting our ideas about our selves and the world. By doing so, we learn to view our challenges differently. It allows us to counter the automatic, “busyness” thinking that leads us to the same insights and solutions.

Simply stated, the non-conventional leader is not “busy.” They have a presence that suggests the opposite . . . they have purpose.

*There has been much tragedy in my life;
at least half of it actually happened.*

Mark Twain

My life is my message.

Mahatma Gandhi

Session Two: One hand on the wheel

Our lives – and our leadership journeys – tend to follow one of two paths: the “conventional” and the “unconventional.” In our last session, we discovered how easy it is to lose ourselves to “busyness” – especially in our work lives.

In fact, in many organizations, the busyness factor becomes the dominant barrier to real leadership and the creation of meaningful change. When “busy” – the body’s physiology adapts to the urgencies (real and imagined) of the day. This response is great for reacting and multi-tasking – but hopelessly inadequate for the reflective, others-oriented, and values-based orientations of leading.

One of the most powerful approaches to countering this “doing” orientation is the cultivation of an organization vision – a clear and compelling picture of where our work lives are collectively headed. Without this “sense of destination” we can find ourselves lost in urgencies of the day.

Here’s the sobering reality: Only 4% of us feel that we are being guided by a meaningful vision.

So . . . imagine for a moment that you are driving along a beautiful stretch of country road.

The tree-lined path gently winds as you catch glimpses of rural life against a backdrop of rolling hills, glistening lakes, and an infinite skyline that draws you forward. The top is down – the gentle wind awakens your spirit – and your favorite music soothes the soul.

Your mind is completely open – your view is abundant – as you find a special rhythm in your journey. Life feels wonderful – and the possibilities seem endless.

All of a sudden you turn a corner and hit an unexpected patch of fog that brings visibility down to zero.

What do you do?

Every time I ask the question, I get the same answers:

- I slow down.
- I position my foot to brake fast.
- I turn my lights on.
- I grab the steering wheel with both hands.
- I lean forward to see better.
- I turn the radio off so I can hear better.
- I become hyper-focused on one thing – driving.

The same goes for our work lives. Without this ability to “see ourselves” into the future, we begin to hunker down – remain cautious – and our singular focus goes to “what can go wrong.”

A clear vision “opens us up” to the world and gives us a focus that allows us to cut through the “fog of busyness.” With one hand on the wheel, we relax, lean into the curves, and move toward the meaningful possibilities that we have “mapped” into our journey.

I know you. You have chosen the non-conventional path that is illuminated by vision.

Session Three: Scout's honor?

Our lives – and our leadership journeys – tend to follow one of two paths: the “conventional” and the “unconventional.” More and more, we are discovering how the “conventional” path no longer serves our deeper needs. In today’s session I want to explore the new relevance of values for the leadership journey.

Below is an example that may touch some nerves – but hopefully you will understand my reason for sharing. It is the Scout Law. Many of us – even those who were not boy or girl scouts – will recognize the words that originated about 100 years ago in England. They are alive and well in some form in over 200 countries that sponsor scouting for boys.

A Scout is
trustworthy,
loyal,
helpful,
friendly,
courteous,
kind,
obedient,
cheerful,
thrifty,
brave,
clean, and
reverent.

At first blush, this sounds like the ideal boy. In fact, it is frequently used as an illustration of the virtues to which every young man should aspire. The stability of a 100-year old tradition also has a special appeal. But let's take a closer look.

A deeper review of these values suggests that the ideal boy is both social and responsible. We are all for that – especially as we experience the lack of social grace that tends to characterize adolescence. But is being a “nice guy” enough?

A second review of the list will start to reveal that something is missing. In a world that is accelerating in terms of complexity and the need for meaning – we are seeing increasing demands for **values-based, adaptive, innovative, decisive** and **visionary** leadership.

While we all certainly see the virtue in being friendly, courteous, kind, cheerful and obedient – shouldn't we also emphasize the progress-oriented characteristics of **achievement, determination, independence, resolve and purpose**?

Or how about cultivating the scout's capacity for **acceptance, tolerance, and inclusiveness** – requirements for living in a modern, pluralistic society? Surely, development in these areas are occurring – but to what degree should they become part of their stated charter?

Although representing a timeless foundation, I am concerned that the Scouts Law has not kept pace with the needs of youth in cultivating their leadership voice – **a credible voice** that will help them find meaning in our contemporary settings that are frazzled by choice, complexity, and moral challenge.

I also believe there may be some connection between the lagging values and the massive and declining enrollments in scouting. Although scouting recently enjoyed its 100th anniversary – its worldwide membership has fallen below 4 million – from a high of more than 6 million boys and adults in 1972. The scout ideals may simply be losing their relevance in an increasingly complex world

This is not an attack on an organization that has enriched many – and has

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brought great benefits to countries around the world through the purposeful and positive engagement of their youth. But it is a wake-up call to leaders of all organizations to seriously account for the values that will guide their organizations into the future.

What do our values say about us? Do they inspire new thinking and bold action? Or do they create mental boundaries that unwittingly limit our potential? More importantly, do our values grow and stretch us in the directions where the world needs us most? Or do they allow us to hunker down in the safety and security of an unchanging ideology?

Unfortunately too many of our leaders are trapped in an “**either-or**” thinking that limits their capacity to promote change. In the Scouts example, it is not about abandoning the rich traditions and long-held values for something new (an either-or dilemma). Rather, the non-conventional leader looks for the “**both-and**” solution that preserves the meaningful core – while respectively growing the new and necessary principles that will guide our thoughts and actions.

The non-conventional leader respects the past while fully embracing the call for meaningful change – bringing the **grit**, **pluck**, and **stamina** needed to lead the way.

In the transmission of human culture, people always attempt to replicate, to pass on to the next generation the sills and values of the parents, but the attempt always fails because cultural transmission is geared to learning, not DNA.

Gregory Bateson

Session Four: I don't want to hear what I need to hear

In the last few weeks we have discovered how easy it is to lose ourselves to the conventional “busyness” path.

One of the great costs of this orientation is that we lose contact with the voices and messages that need our attention most. Here's how it happens. When we let “urgency” dictate the rhythm of the day – it naturally brings with it the feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and defensiveness – creating big barriers to our best self.

Our “new normal” becomes more of a perpetual survival state. Not surprisingly, our ability to “live at the edge” of our capacities is supported by thousands of years of programming. So, in many ways, this “hyper state” feels right to us. It's in our collective DNA. In fact, many of the most successful people I know are continually pushing up against the limits of their work life, relationships, and the countless personal struggles that characterize the contemporary life.

Unfortunately, this “new normal” takes away our leadership voice – significantly reducing our capacity for collaboration, creativity, and meaningful change. To protect our fragile “no slack” state, we set up defenses to insulate us against the inevitable new challenges that will come our way. Here is one truth that I have discovered over the years:

There is an inverse relationship between the leader's current level of “busyness” and the amount of bad news (truth) they are willing to receive.

In our “busyness” state we simply do not have the emotional capacity for non-routine challenges. We are “without margin” and our subconscious – where our “survival mode” really lives – knows that we don't have the time or personal resources to deal with any more BAD NEWS. So, we suppress it. Delay it. Deny it. We do anything but deal with it.

Here's the other related truth that I discovered:

As leaders, we cultivate an “acceptable level of isolation” – and we like it.

We like being protected from the bad news. We like the fact that others are willing to “spin” the truth for us – keeping us “partially whole” while Rome burns. Leaders know this to be true – because they perform the same sacrifices for those above them.

The non-conventional leader has cultivated a different kind of presence – one that gives them special access to the things they need to hear. Here’s how it works. The non-conventional manager develops routines that invite problem-finding and truth telling. Here are just a few examples:

- **They create a “no blame” zone:** They don’t blame people – they see fault in the larger system (and culture) that drives behavior. This frees people up to engage fully in the truth telling process.
- **Engage more than the brain:** Our non-conventional leaders routinely tap into the special intelligence of our emotions. When they ask others – “How do you *feel* about this decision?” – they gain access to special insights that our analytical, “left brain” could never conceive.
- **Spend more time being fully present:** Because they are more fully present to the “real tensions” that require their best attention – they shield themselves from the busyness trap. Not only is *being fully present* the safest place to be (we are most anxious and most vulnerable when we get stuck *rehashing the past* or *worrying about the future*) – it allows us to see the underlying tensions of the issue with clarity and focus. The conventional leader always seems a little distant, disconnected, and diverted from what matters most.
- **Will let ideas incubate to gain perspective:** The non-conventional leader is an artisan when it comes to problem-solving. Intuitively, they know that a night’s sleep usually cuts a problem in half. They also know that the problem didn’t change – they did! Time always brings perspective – so they will live with the problem longer – letting its energy dissipate while they gain insight.
- **Practice the art of inquiry:** They simply want to know what’s going on and will cultivate a culture of inquiry around them. They know how to ask great questions. Actually, **they love to ask great**

questions. For example: What is the *other* truth that we may be missing? ---- inviting deeper thinking and fresh perspectives.

The non-conventional leader hears what they need to hear.

See you on the path,

Mike

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

Oscar Wilde

Pretty much all the honest truth telling in the world is done by children.

Oliver Wendell Holmes. Jr.

Session Five: The non-conventional leader gets to the “heart” of things

In our current journey we have been exploring what differentiates the conventional vs. the non-conventional leader. The non-conventional leader – non-conforming in nature – does things differently. One differentiating quality is that they tend to be *in medias res* – or in the “middle” of things.

So, here’s a quick breakdown and translation of this well-known Latin saying:

- in (in, into)
- medias (middle)
- res (thing)
- **in medias res = into the middle of things**

The phrase comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace, who advised the aspiring poets to go straight to the heart of the story instead of starting at the beginning. The belief was that the epic poem needs to begin at some crucial point in the middle of the action.

The non-conventional leader gets this. Both their storytelling and their actions are *in medias res*. They create a special energy because they bring themselves and others to the heart – the essential truth – of the matter at hand.

The conventional leader begins their story from the beginning – not sparing any of the details or build-up:

“Five years ago we embarked on a journey and along the way (blah, blah, blah) . . . “

The non-conventional leaders begins their story at the tension point:

“After five years we find ourselves at a critical crossroad – a choice that will change everything . . . “

The conventional leader is rational – proceeding with a step-by-step logic.

The non-conventional leader is not restricted by the “rational” and realizes that the world does not need one more reasonable person.

The old logic – which we learned in Speech 101 – is that there is a beginning, middle, and an end to every presentation. The new logic is impatient for the whole truth.

Mostly True

I have stopped listening.

I have heard this speech before.

I have also given it.

Many times.

Different words. Same outcome.

It is mostly true.

But not true enough.

Not now.

Not after all this time.

You are (I am) hiding something.

I can tell by the language.

It is perfect -- but not pure.

It is logical – but does not make complete sense.

Not after all this time.

No one really thinks (feels) that way.

Why do we talk this way?

Things are left out.

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Things are put in.

I can tell by how you say things.

You are rehearsed – but lack conviction.

You are polished – but lack presence.

You know I know.

We have both been there before.

I see you (me).

I want you (me) to start again.

Listen. Listen.

I want you to tell me a story.

Tell me a story so true that it could be my story.

I am ready.

I am waiting.

Ready.

Waiting.

Tell me a true story.

Session Six: If you're not lyin' – you're not tryin'

In the last few weeks we have been exploring the differences between conventional and non-conventional leadership styles. In this session, I hope to show how the non-conventional leader helps us to rediscover the true boundaries of truth – in a world of “spin.”

Spin has gotten so pervasive and acceptable – the truth has become this vast gray area with expanding boundaries. We exaggerate, over-promise, shade things, embellish, slant, skew, show-the-best-side, promote, push and position.

Let's think this through.

We see the problem first and foremost in “marketing spin.” Marketing spin is the process of creating illusions of value while keeping reality hidden. Everything good about the offering is highlighted, promoted, positioned, and exaggerated – while ignoring the “whole truth.”

Unfortunately, spin will ultimately erode brand value. While the brand is supposed to raise the level of integrity between the product and the customer – marketing spin undermines that relationship by distorting reality. In other words, my experience with the product does not match up with its promise!

Our personal lives are no stranger to spin either. Whether it's the stories we tell – or the presentations we make at work – the data is always skewed in some way. We position things. Leave other things out. We put our best foot forward continuously. Our report to the boss that makes current business conditions appear to be better than they truly are – is spin!

The non-conventional leader sees the danger in spin.

Instinctively, he or she knows that when we **spin** – we put our personal integrity at risk. Our integrity is our “center” – our sense of “wholeness” – and represents our “completeness” as a person. When we spin – we end up on a slippery slope where truth becomes “negotiable.” As the truth erodes, so does our self-respect. We start to lose faith in ourselves. So,

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integrity is much more than being honest with others.

Integrity starts with being honest with our selves.

When we are true to our selves and others – even under difficult circumstances – our higher self becomes engaged in ways that we cannot imagine. We are infused with a sense of purpose that elevates our status. When we spin, the opposite happens. The smaller self emerges. We lose our feel and need for the truth. We end up playing the “smaller game” of rationalizations and half-truths – a game that soon becomes our life.

So, try this for a week. Be absolutely honest with your self and others. Unflinchingly tell the truth. Be vigilant and on-guard for any deviation that might impact your overall integrity. After this weeklong test, assess the levels of anxiety, vulnerability, and overall well-being that you know feel (compared to previous levels). If you are like most, you will discover or re-discover this simple and profound reality:

The truth will set you free.

“Never separate the life you live from the words you speak.”

Paul Wellstone

“Men acquire a particular quality by constantly acting in a particular way.”

Aristotle

“A liar needs a good memory.”

Quintillian

Session Seven: It's always us vs. them (and we love it)

We have been exploring the differences between conventional and non-conventional leadership styles. In this session, we will explore how the “**us vs. them**” mindset has become one of the dominant orientations that we experience in our work and personal lives.

Simply stated, we grow up in a **win-lose** world. We don't get a break from it. It's “**us vs. them.**”

Who is **us**? **Us** can be defined at a range of levels.

It's our country, our political party, our religion, our favorite sports team, our school, our town, our club, our work group – any orientation that links to our identity – and therefore must be protected. We need to protect **us** from **them** – their country, their religion, their team, etc.

In many ways we are drawn to the tension of “**us vs. them.**” There are a range of reasons – but deep down where we really live is this truth:

Our self-worth (us) is enhanced as a result of theirs (them) being diminished.

We see this most clearly in reality TV – which has become one of the dominant forms of entertainment programming. We love voting people off the island. So it is not surprising that we bring this “**survivor**” mentality to our work lives. “**Them**” can be anyone (our bosses, fellow colleagues – even our customers).

In continually defending ourselves from “them” – we lose our capacity to take the larger, abundant view. We don't see the interconnections, the common humanity that links us together. In many ways . . .

I don't see YOU.

That is because YOU are part of THEM.

THEM are THEY.

We don't like THEM.

Shhhhh . . . THEY might hear you.

I don't like working with THEM.

Nobody does.

THEY don't understand how WORK works.

US understands.

THEM doesn't.

THEM are not us.

In many ways THEM don't seem to get it.

It is highly unlikely that THEM will ever get to be US.

Not in this lifetime.

THEM seem pre-ordained to being THEM.

So sad. Forever THEM.

But THEM also makes me feel better about who I am.

I am US.

But mostly I am ME.

US are ME's.

I didn't make up the rules.

That's how it works.

US vs. THEM.

ME vs. THEM.

My friend is crazy.

I tell her this.

She doesn't understand the true nature of THEM.

To THEM she says I see YOU.

I see the good news in YOU.

I want to do good things for YOU.

I trust YOU. Even though I don't know YOU all that well.

I see YOU.

I want to see YOU again.

Why does she say this to THEM?

My friend is crazy.

Session Eight: I am better than you and you know it

We have been exploring the differences between conventional and non-conventional leadership styles. The conventional images of leadership – I am above you, ahead of you, better than you – still dominate in our psyche. The contrarian – non-conventional approach – is probably best captured by Robert K. Greenleaf – over a half-century ago.

Greenleaf reveals a view of leadership (in his ground breaking book: ***Servant Leadership***) grounded in a state of being, not doing. The essence of his work is that the most important decision a leader makes is the choice to serve. As Peter Senge explains, this choice “is not an action in the normal sense – it’s not something you do, but an expression of your being.”

When we complain of the “lack of leadership” in our institutions – we are longing for those who fundamentally want to serve others (and to serve us) – not claiming power due to technical competency, political savvy, or drive for influence.

In the leader’s quest to guide organizational change toward high performance and commitment, the insights and skills required **to serve** are not as clear and comfortable as the instincts for autonomous action. Managers at all levels are pressed to meet the competitive realities of the business day which require setting direction, communicating clearly, and controlling business processes to ensure quality.

The challenges in managing in today’s environment gives support to the dominant **“Lead first”** attitude that seeks to bring order to the uncertainty and complexity of organizational work. **“Lead first”** instincts provide the decisiveness and ego involvement that make the world go ‘round. **But they are not sufficient to empower and produce the kind of employee commitment that is sought in today’s global economy.**

Also, the efficiency that comes from **Lead First** leadership rarely supports the development of high commitment organizations. Something is missing. It’s not the know-how or business acumen – even though we have entered an era of complexity. The missing elements – the necessary condition for long-term competitiveness – are the **Serve First** attitudes that managers and supervisors must integrate into the workplace as a key sources of

motivation, innovation, and unity.

This rationale is based on the reality that individuals hold a deep and driving need to find meaning for their existence. In fact, purpose, meaning, and commitment are difficult to separate in developing strategies to produce high commitment organizations.

The ***Serve First*** leader recognizes the needs of others, looks for potential motives, seeks to satisfy higher level needs, and engages the whole person. This type of leadership actively translates personal values into action. The result of this type of leadership is a relationship of mutual development that ultimately converts employees into committed stewards of the mission.

Small voice wins

Big voice says

I am so proud of you

You know more

Do more

Have more

Now wonder they don't get you

Don't like you

Small voice says

I am unsure . . . at risk

Is this all there is?

Can I keep this up?

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Will they find me out?

I feel lost

I have lost my sense of wonder

I cannot remember the last time I was enchanted with someone

Or some thing

Or surprised by joy

I feel vulnerable

I am vulnerable

(I feel alone when I am with those I know best)

This is not real

Not good

But where is my outrage?

My anger?

My guilt?

My deep, deep dissatisfaction with what I have become?

Big voice says

Don't be small

Don't play the smaller game

You know more

Do more

Have more

You are winning

Small voice says

No, no

I want my innocence back

I don't want to be big

I want to be small

Travel light

Go anywhere

Fit in small places

Be spontaneous

Open

Reborn in knowing less, doing less, having less

Being more

Big voice says

You don't make sense

This is not the path we have been on

Small voice says

I want to be fascinated

Lose myself in the moment

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Be in awe

Tremble in the presence of the sacred

I want to be small again

Big voice says

(No response)

Small voice says

I am thankful for this life

All of it.

Session Nine: Is there a Dog?

We have been exploring the differences between **conventional** and **non-conventional** leadership styles. After eight sessions together, it is time for me to introduce my favorite conventional vs. non-conventional leadership analogy.

I hope I don't offend too many with this one – but it is **cat** vs. **dog**.

Cats truly capture the conventional images of leadership – independent, self-sufficient, and agile. Not bad stuff. But at their extreme they start to morph into – aloofness, incremental progress and hidden agendas. Unfortunately, for most of us, this is how we experience our leaders. Over time, the demands of leadership take their toll – and our leaders gradually succumb to a detached, **cat-like** presence.

Dogs are totally opposite. The moniker of “man's best friend” in no way captures the true essence of dog – which is for me – the ethos of non-conventional leadership. They are “totally engaged – and hopelessly transparent.”

Dogs also love unconditionally – and have a belief system (proven by research) that is more abundant in its view than any other creature that walks the earth. More than anything, they believe you will come home for them. (That is why they are waiting by the door.)

My analogy continues:

Dogs have friends. Cats have staff.

Dogs are all in. Cats play their cards close to the vest.

Dogs care. Cats don't.

Dogs trust. Cats aren't taking any chances.

Dogs also bring an enthusiasm that is irresistible and always draws others in. As leaders, we can learn from **Dogs**. We have entered an era where this kind of transparent, hopelessly abundant, and trusting nature can bring a sweet, sweet humanness back into an attention-deficit humanity. It centers us in the ultimate truth that we do not exist alone – we only exist

for each other. Yes, there is a Dog.

Is that you?

Yep, yep, yep

It is you

Oh boy

Gosh, golly, wow

So, so glad to see you!

How long has it been?

Only 30 minutes?

Really?

Wow!

Seemed a lot longer!

Where have you been?

Oh it doesn't matter

I'm just glad you are back

Don't leave OK

Ok?

Ok?

Ok?

If you do

Take me OK

Ok?

OK?

OK?

I just want to be with you

Who are you talking to?

It doesn't matter

I am listening

Mostly to hear my name

But I love to hear you talk

It reminds me that you are here

With me

Heh, wanna go outside?

Not now, OK

Maybe later

I'll be ready

How about now?

Oh, you mean later later

OK

Cool

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No problem

We'll go later

Heh, you look sad

If you are sad I am sad

Are you sad?

It's OK to be sad

I will be sad with you

Maybe we should go outside

It's hard to be sad outside

Let's just be together

I'll be right here

Right next to you

With my eyes closed

It helps me to anticipate

What will happen next

I hope it involves me

Session Ten: When Communicating – Less is More

We have been exploring the differences between **conventional** and **non-conventional** leadership styles. With the urgencies of the day pressing at us, we often find that our communications with each other lack connection and meaning.

Here's the deal. All of us want to be heard. Especially in our attention deficit cultures where any kind of sustained focus is a premium. Unfortunately our response is often to be more aggressive in getting our voice heard - leaving no space or separation between someone's comment and our "already formulated" response.

The conventional leader unwittingly compounds the problem. Feeling pressure to live up to their leadership status - they push to have their opinions heard - their points made - their arguments won. In a sense, they believe it is their job to advocate passionately. OK, to a certain degree - yes. But not all the time!

So what now? Besides our ego-driven, amped-up, double-latte-fueled existence - we lack a "facilitative structure" for our informal communications. Here are some thoughts to help you reverse this troubling trend.

Whether it's a conversation with one other person or you are facilitating a meeting, practice the art of the "pause." In other words, don't rush to fill in the speaker's final thoughts and then rush to present your idea. Give them their full opportunity to be heard - and actually hear them. It is a little counterintuitive - because it seems like we are giving up our fair share of air-time by not strategically inserting ourselves into the conversation.

Give them a few extra seconds after finishing their thought. It gives the communicator that brief extra reflection time to not only discover what they want to say but to be fully heard.

This is the critical point. Once we feel heard, we can open ourselves up to hearing others. The "psychology of abundance" takes over. When there is

plenty of food for a group - people will self-monitor and actually eat less. When it is perceived that there is not enough food - people will hoard - and actually eat more than they normally would. We do the same with our appetites for "listening and being heard."

The "pause" also does a couple of other things. It shows respect for the speaker. It underscores the message: "What you say is important, is there anything else you want to add?" It also cuts down on communication time. When there is an ethic at work that allows people to complete their thoughts, they will do the same for others, eliminating the need to repeat messages or over-communicate to be fully heard.

The bottom line is simple: If you want to get your point across -- make understanding the goal. When you try to understand the point of view of others – you create an opening for them to do the same. Amazingly, people will worry less about outcomes when they feel they are fully heard - becoming more open-minded in their view.

"Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."

Karl A. Menninger

I hear you

For the first time

In a long time

I heard you today

I not only heard the words
(I always hear your words)
I not only understood the message
(I almost always hear your message)
Today I heard your story

Behind the words
Beyond the message
Is your story

It is a great story
I love your story
It could be my story
(In many ways it is my story)
But I lost track
Stopped listening
Became numb
To you

No, no, not to you personally
No, no, never
But all the stuff
That became distractions

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LEARN PLAN DO

That became the busyness in my life

Kept me from hearing you

Hearing your story

I think I stopped hearing your story

When I lost connection to mine

When I lost track of all the everyday moments that

When linked together

Tell a bigger story

Create a life

I keep re-learning this one thing

It is these everyday moments

When fully experienced

When appreciated

When reflected on

When shared

When remembered

Remind me of who I am

I heard you today

I heard your story

Session Eleven: Before you can change the world. . .

We have been exploring the differences between **conventional** and **non-conventional** leadership styles – learning to cultivate our capacities to fully experience the hope, anxiety, grace, grief, joy, outrage, humanity and humility of the unconventional leadership path.

Before you can change the world, you need to understand it.

The conventional leader seeks to change the world through the force of their personalities – the brilliance of their strategies – and the resources that they can bring to bear. Unfortunately, their best efforts end up woefully short of the mark. The core reason is that they fail to “see and feel” the systemic nature of their quest.

They don’t really know how “their world” really works and “their world” will resist in a complete way any efforts to change it.

The non-conventional leader knows a different experience in their journey to create meaningful change. At first they stand outside their system (their world, their organization, their community, etc.) – and learn to understand it in an objective way.

From the balcony they can observe with new eyes and see the “whole” at work. They see the processes that make up the whole. They also see how the system is in perfect alignment with its current outcomes.

With this new perspective they can now dive deep into the system as a full participant. They become an active change agent – fully committed to helping the system grow. It is at this level they develop a true “feel” for the system – understanding its true nature and potential. They learn that systems are human systems – with the “humanness” adding a level of complexity and messiness that is not easily managed.

They see their special relationship to the system – feeling responsible for it – wanting to make a difference within it.

Bigger patterns emerge and the leader begins to connect their “balcony view” (the larger, dispassionate view of the system) to their “basement

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experience” (the gritty, human, and up-close-and-personal encounters). Their rational intelligence joins with their emotional intelligence to create a special view that knows what is missing and what needs to be done. Moving back and forth between the balcony (I see it) and the basement (I can feel it) they develop a deep sense of what’s possible.

See it. Feel it.

Over time, something very special happens. They no longer see themselves separate from the systems they work in. They become the system. They become the tension that leads a system through its conflicting needs for growth and stability – and to differentiate (make things different) and to integrate (make things whole). They feel empowered with a special sense of efficacy that comes from a capacity to “see and feel” the systemic nature of their journey.

I am the system.

I am the coffee girl

It was just a job

A transition job

Waiting for a better job

I learned to hate that job

Taking coffee orders at the counter

Answering dumb questions

(Made me numb)

No one really saw me

Appreciated me

Nothing worked like it was supposed to

No one worked like they were supposed to

Made the boss anxious

Made me anxious

Unfulfilled

Bored

Like everyone else who worked there

We were without hope

We were lost in the system

Amazingly

Our shared vulnerability

Became our shared purpose

Became our reason for showing up

We started to see each other

Began to listen to each other

Started to see the good news in each other

We were in it together

LEARN PLAN DO

Started to experience these fleeting

But extraordinary moments

Moments of synchronicity

Between us

Our work

And our customers

I got lost in these moments

Got absorbed into the flow

Lost track of time

(Stopped checking the time)

Became less self-aware

More aware of others

The system was working

(I was “working” the system)

Developed a unique feel for my role as the order person

Setting the pace for the team

Setting a tone for the customers

I was in the middle of the system

(and I liked it)

Discovered how small things matter to the system

Because everything is connected

To everything else

In a system

Small improvements amplify our work

Energize us

Draw us in

We feel responsible for the system

It is a system that serves

Serving others abundantly

I can see the system

See how it works

I can feel the system

It is a part of me

I am the system

Session Twelve: I am my personal brand (not!)

We have been exploring the differences between conventional and non-conventional leadership styles – learning to cultivate our capacities to fully experience the hope, anxiety, grace, grief, joy, outrage, humanity and humility of the non-conventional leadership path.

In this session we will explore the new practice of **personal branding** – differentiating how the conventional and non-conventional leader approach this popular new concept.

Personal branding is the process where people will proactively manage their public image. The practice has moved to “front burner” status in response to the “social networking” phenomena – which exploded in 2008. Overnight, we have all had to “up our game” in terms of **self-presentation**. Whether it’s to gain attention on a dating sight – promoting our new band – or trying to network with potential investors – we want to influence others and gain our appropriate rewards!

Digital networking opportunities – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn -- have given the individual unbelievable reach in their ability to market themselves:

Welcome to the era of digital entrepreneurship!

So, with all these new tools, anyone can have a global platform to craft and promote a personal brand. There are a number of reasons why personal branding has emerged. Most of us – even those with jobs – have been reduced to free agents in this global economy. All of us need to proactively network and positively position ourselves as the inevitable shifts in work opportunities occur.

But with all the “noise” and information overload in the system (magnified by our technology-assisted attention deficit behaviors) -- we can feel overwhelmed. As a result:

We feel compelled to generate a differentiating web presence.

And that is exactly where our psychic energy goes! We lose ourselves to

the magnetic draw of this new world where we are truly empowered to promote, position, and proclaim our “best self.” Once created, we need to sustain it.

We love the process of expressing ourselves to a larger – immediate audience – one that is hyper-responsive to even our most routine messages. We soon find that the process of constructing and maintaining an image can be very time consuming. But here’s the deal – it can also put our personal integrity at risk.

Integrity starts with being honest with our selves.

Our integrity is our “center” – our sense of “wholeness” – and represents our “completeness” as a person. Unfortunately, in our efforts to market our best self – we can end up on the slippery slope where our “marketed self” overshadows our “true self.” Over time, we lose connection with our “inner public” in our desire to serve an external one. The powerful media projectors of culture create compelling forces to conform to a popular and conventional ideology. So . . . for many of us:

Our internal brand – what we stand for – becomes lost in the urgency to be seen, acknowledged and accepted by others.

The epic film – The Wizard of Oz – serves as a wonderful learning metaphor. It beautifully chronicles one of the great “leadership” journeys of all time. It starts with our heroine – Dorothy – who leaves home to go in search of something she believes exists outside of herself. Like all of us, she finds herself on a “yellow brick road” that promises great benefits – which she soon discovers to be both elusive and non-existent.

It is amazing how each of the four main characters – Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man – represent unique but timeless approaches to developing our personal purpose – aka – our **internal brand**.

The Tin Man seeks a heart and the opportunities to use it. When we lead with our hearts – we remain “true” to ourselves as we seek to create meaning.

To what degree do others know your true heart?

The Cowardly Lion wants to be courageous. When we lead with courage we desire to take risks and to “make things happen.”

To what degree are you willing to sacrifice image for impact?

The Scarecrow wants a brain so that he can think – creating bold new ideas, developing deep levels of competence, and solving big problems.

To what degree are you on the path to mastery?

Finally, there is our heroine, Dorothy. Even the Wicked Witch of the West cannot deter her from her responsible nature to build a safe community for her fellow adventurers.

To what degree have you discovered and defined “home” for you and those counting on you?

Like Dorothy, we know we must leave this place called home. To venture beyond what is knowable and comfortable is the only way we will ever know for certain what “home” really is for us. We can always return to the “place” called home – but it won’t feel right without the necessary experience, knowledge, and self-acceptance that comes from confronting a world that does not know you. So, we venture out. In the process, we learn the deep, deep truth that:

Home is not a place. It is not a place that you miss. Home is a place that defines where you are from.

A modern-day Dorothy is my daughter (and hero) Mackenzie – who after two years in New York (she grew up in California) is beginning to understand the true meaning of home.