

ALTERNATING CURRENT: A THOUGHT PAPER ON LEADERSHIP

ALTERNATION

“Know thyself.”

~ Thales of Miletus

The word “electricity” comes from the Greek word *elektron*, whose root is *elek*, or “shine.” One of electricity’s first surveyors was Thales, who urged us to know ourselves.

I believe it is possible for a leader to create the circumstances within him- or herself, his or her followers, and often the situation at hand, to bring light to the world – in essence, to shine.

My thoughts on leadership begin there: with the essential need for leadership to provide light, illumination, a way forward. To help grasp the steps by which a leader can do that, I have borrowed not just from etymology but also from physics – in order to bring light, one needs energy. In our case, with leadership, we need the model of alternating current. If leadership needs to be flexible and reflective, then a leader needs to assess, have the courage to act, but then know when to stop to reassess, and then pick up the courage to act further. A leader must alternate, working through a constant cycle of growth and energy, learning and doing. If “alternating current (AC) is an electrical current where the magnitude and direction of

the current varies cyclically,”¹ then we can get an indication of a model of leadership from this phenomenon.

And so these are my thoughts on leadership, beginning with its most important characteristics as an opening to my model of how it can work.

AC: THE ALTERNATING CURRENT OF ASSESSMENT AND COURAGE

“In simplest terms, a leader is one who knows where he wants to go and gets up and goes.”

~ John Erskine²

From the moment we are born, we are presented with the challenge of being human. That challenge is often a difficult master, but if a partnership can be reached then untold rewards are ours for life. Principal among the characteristics of this challenge is the need to learn. Lifelong learning – and self-knowledge is crucial here – is both a gift and a responsibility. And if learning can be joined by courage, there is nothing that cannot be done.

This is the heart of my thoughts on leadership and forms the core of how I see the model of leadership functioning. Assessment, which must include self-assessment, is the key to knowledge and without knowledge “leadership” is a blind man groping dangerously for his way. Courage – courage as a behavior, not just an emotional facet of the will – is the key to action and without action “leadership” ceases to exist altogether. To better understand the importance of both aspects, one need only look to the “spiral of experience,” the Action-Observation-Reflection model. The spiral itself displays how cyclical the practice of leadership

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternating_current

² http://politicalquotes.blogspot.com/2004_05_01_politicalquotes_archive.html

is, but instead of arguing that use of A-O-R “enhances”³ leadership development I would argue that it is indispensable. If we choose to lead through action and then observe the consequences but do not reflect, then there is no direction – this is the blind man. If we observe and reflect, but this leads to no action, then there is no leadership, there is only thought. Action requires courage; reflection is assessment; this reflection leads back to action, or assessment leads back to courage. For leadership, the cycle is vital: it is its spirit put into practice.

THE AC MODEL: HOW ASSESSMENT AND COURAGE ACT

“...knowledge for the most part exists only in application.”

~ Peter Drucker⁴

Assessment and courage act cyclically, supporting each other even as they are needed individually. These two factors, working constantly in their relay, create the means by which distinct characteristics are used to build and strengthen leadership; to see it the other way around, the distinct leadership characteristics that leadership theory and practice identify all combine to generate assessment and courage as indispensable leadership skills. If isolated, these characteristics will not necessarily point to how assessment and courage work to create leadership – but seen working in tandem the relationship emerges.

In describing in greater detail how leadership characteristics combine and function as elements of both assessment and courage, I will chart out a model. This AC Model, like the energy that gives its name, provides the framework in which we can see how “the magnitude

³ Hughes, *et al*; *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* [5th ed.] (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005); p. 47

⁴ “The Age of Social Transformation,” *The Atlantic Monthly*; November, 1994

and direction” of assessment and courage “varies cyclically.” We will begin with assessment and its constituent parts regarding the self, values and vision; from there we reach courage, with its requirement of acting to secure connections and communication within the interactional framework; then the model cycles back, of course, to assessment with central ways in which leadership is constant and progressive rather than fixed and purely situational. What is of primary interest in reviewing assessment and courage in leadership is how closely they conform to the primary seminal considerations on leadership itself: assessment and courage are the initiators of both education and experience, respectively (but not independently).

ASSESSMENT (THE BEGINNING)

Assessment – Identifying the Self

Assessment is the beginning of the process of leadership, but it will return again and again as part of how leadership develops and matures. At its beginning, however, it forms perhaps the inescapable origin of any leader’s growth: the individual’s requirement to “know thyself.” Identifying the self is not an academic exercise, nor is it a battery of self-assessment diagnostics, although all of these are part of a later stage when leadership is approached purposefully. At the beginning is how a person becomes him- or herself. Here is where education (formal or otherwise) and experience (and the education that brings) work together to form the personality, intelligences and interests of the future leader. These are the primary building blocks of leadership skills, and yet they are all the result of assessment.

Notice I do not state “self-assessment,” although that can happen either intentionally or unintentionally. Assessment is not how a person acts in the world nor is it necessarily introspection – it is the measurement and evaluation of the world, of forces, of one’s place in the world and of how to act in the world. In this respect, it is important to understand that these building blocks are learned through interaction with the world, how education comes from experience, how practice makes perfect, if you will. It seems basic to recognize that the Action-Observation-Reflection model is not only a leadership tool, it is a life tool learned, used and relearned each time it is used. Since it is learned, using A-O-R does not exist with “innate” qualities. It exists if someone makes it a practice. Knowing this, I conclude that leaders are never born – they are always made. Even if some aspects of personality, traits and behaviors are innately or genetically present, without the support of assessment learned and applied those innate qualities are ineffective in adequately building leadership skills.

Assessment – Identifying the Core and its Conclusions

The core of a person’s maturing assessment of the world and his or her place in it is the creation of values. Beliefs are created cognitively and rationally, they are what we know whether we have explicit evidence or not. Values are emotionally based, and as such tie into a stronger, more fundamental approach to life. We can change our beliefs if given the right impetus; it is much more difficult to change values. They are deep inside us. They are the result of our ongoing early assessment of the world.

Once values are identified, however, they cannot rest. If “value programming” illustrates “the extent to which forces outside the individual shape and mold personal values,”⁵

⁵ Hughes, *et al*; p. 135

then the creation of a personal value system must come from the individual's assessment of those same forces. Personal values are learned from experience. These values, though, are not static – they are difficult to change, but they are restless nonetheless. They require life, practice in the world that created them, in order to be validated and bring satisfaction to the individual: "Value systems are seen as guides that help individuals choose appropriate behaviours and social positions and make decisions."⁶ It is those decisions, when practiced, that form the conclusion: goals. An individual's goals are the practical decisions he or she makes based on his or her personal value system. When writ small, they help the individual conduct him- or herself on a daily basis; when writ large, however, they can grow the heart of ongoing leadership. This forms the last facet of the bedrock leadership building blocks.

But not the last facet of leadership itself: values lead to goals, but when combined they result in vision, for vision reflects back on values – without one, the leader cannot have the other. And without this early assessment, a leader is not made.

COURAGE

Courage – Goal-setting and Action Plan

Despite the importance of the years-long stage of assessment, it is for naught if the next leadership characteristic is not practiced: courage. If assessment is necessary in order to learn (or learn how to learn), courage is necessary to actually live the life of leadership. Without it, nothing happens. The practical plan that matures out of one's values is that person's vision, but vision is inseparable from goals. (Even if sprawling, a vision is a goal: "to rid the world of AIDS"

⁶ overview by Clive Seligman, PhD, cited on <http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/psychology/IO/faculty.html>.

is a goal, albeit a colossal one.) Thus, if vision is to have life, then accompanying it must be goal-setting and its partner, an action plan.

This is the central point of courage. Courage is defined as “Bravery, boldness...nerve oneself to a venture...”⁷ or as “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty”⁸ – essentially the same thing – and both definitions reflect a state of mind rather than an action. I would propose that for leadership purposes courage must stretch beyond that state of mind to become a behavior, a skill. In order to form the connections and generate the communication necessary for true leadership the leader must act to form goals and animate an action plan. Whether you call it courage, (self-)confidence or Noel Tichy’s “edge,” courage is indispensable. As Feargal Quinn, executive chairman of the Irish supermarket chain Superquinn, puts it, “YCDBSOYA: You can’t do business sitting on your armchair.”⁹

Courage – Associations

There are two associations that matter in forging ahead with leadership. The first are the connections made, the context; the second is the method.

The connections made within the leadership context is the interactional framework of leader, followers and situation. Of such central importance is this design to leadership that it is as requisite as the A-O-R assessment. If courage leads to action which leads to the practical intelligence in knowledge and experience, then the context of the interactional framework is where the design of leader-follower-situation becomes reality. It is within this context that the

⁷ Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 5th ed, Oxford

⁸ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, at <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

⁹ http://www.fastcompany.com/articles/2002/05/rtsd_quotes.html

leader must act with the courage to meet and draw on both followers and the situation. Acting here becomes the necessary development of both consideration and initiating structure.

Relationship and task management therefore are the concrete actions that further goal setting and the implementation of an action plan. While these managements are necessities they are also means to an end, the visioned goal. This means that of necessity as well are the intermediate shorter-term goals necessary not only for progress but the perception of progress. It is crucial to make progress palpable and shared since this is the way that followers understand their situation as defined through the common goal – connections are maintained between leader and followers through this sharing, through their mutual journey together to a future goal. “Always remember that the future comes one day at a time,”¹⁰ advised Dean Acheson, and it is true for every individual courageous step a leader and followers make toward their common end.

Courage – Appreciation

Just as there are two associations that matter in leadership, there are two appreciations. These appreciations are the essential ways that a leader must work with his or her followers: the first is motivation; the second is giving power.

In communicating with followers, vision is served by motivation, bringing direction, intensity and persistence to organized action. This requires courage on the part of the leader: he or she is, by virtue of the position, responsible for meeting both the needs and the expectations of his or her followers. If there is no end to the complexities inherent in the situation, there is a difficult practical end to the motivational needs and expectations of

¹⁰ *Sketches from Life of Men I Have Known* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961)

followers; each follower is, after all, an individual. The leader, however, must satisfy his or her followers. To do this is to have the patience, fortitude and self-confidence to reach out to individual followers to assess not only what their effort-to-performance-to-outcome-to-valence expectations are, but also how to meet them. Meeting these expectations becomes the continuous application of information, development, integration and alignment.¹¹

This enormous effort is the means by which a leader can achieve, through the equally enormous strength of his or her followers. Communication is central to motivation; power is central to success. Certainly a leader has power – and it is the leader’s responsibility to give power to his or her followers. This ties into the needs theory of motivation as it provides a sense of security and ability as well as the need to belong. It also ties into expectancy theory as power itself is a valued outcome. Giving power also builds trust and respect. In the end, as well, not only is follower power vital to accomplishing objectives, it is vital to developing self-leadership. For those who wish to lead well, no end is as valuable than to lead a base of fellow leaders.

Courage, thus, while having its origins in the emotions, is not simply a feeling – it is a behavior, to be practiced and developed. Having the courage to use communication and power to build trust, respect, direction, intensity and persistence: this results in influence, the basis of the leader-follower relationship. It is the difference between the rhetorician and the performer. “When Cicero spoke, people marveled; when Caesar spoke, people marched.”¹²

¹¹ “Human Performance Improvement,” Wilson Learning,
http://portalcenter.wilsonlearning.com:7779/pls/portal/docs/page/wlc_web_site/file_holder/43951_hpi_wp.pdf

¹² Warren Bennis, cited on <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/86/courage.html>

ASSESSMENT (THE CONTINUATION)

Assessment – Accountability as Part of A-O-R

Assessment leads to knowledge, with hope to learning how to learn as well as what the individual values; courage is the required next step in order to see those values realized through associations and appreciation, connections and communication; all of this leads directly back to assessment. Assessment is the pivot on which leadership development turns, and turns again.

If the Action-Observation-Reflection model is to serve the leader, the leader must serve it. Action must lead all the way through reflection but reflection must then lead back to better action, otherwise leadership cannot develop to its potential. At the early stages of leadership development assessment was central, but its apotheosis could be reached only if the potential leader was open to accountability. The same is true – more so, in fact – at this stage after courageous action has been taken. Accountability here is not just reaction to the world’s reaction, but feedback from followers, response from the situation, criticism and advice from superiors, peers and subordinates. It is how the leader not acts but interacts with his or her environment. As such, accountability is at the heart of reflection, or assessment. This makes honest development the key to leadership growth: “Here is the very heart and soul of the matter. If you look to lead, invest at least 40% of your time managing yourself – your ethics, character, principles, purpose, motivation, and conduct.”¹³

¹³ Dee Hock, “On Management,” cited on www.fastcompany.com/online/05/dee2.html

Assessment – Continuation

Continuation of assessment practice means one principal idea: the continuation of leadership itself. Just as initial assessment led to courage, if assessment backs up courage then leadership maintains its commitment to the A-O-R model and that assessment leads again to the courage to act. This is fulfillment of the double-loop learning so essential to effective leadership. It involves participation from followers, peers and superiors in driving self-assessment, awareness of the situations at hand and to come, and growing understanding of how the courage to act can lead to valiant management. “Valiant” shares the same Latin root as “value” and needs to be understood as the guts of the decision-making process for any leader.

This stage of assessment is for progress and fulfillment. It is only through assessment (reflection) on our practical courage (actions) that we can hope to adequately build the final block of our leadership skills. Action for its own sake can be destructive – instead we want action that targets future aims and fulfills future goals. It is only through enlightened assessment that action makes sense in the long-term and points the way forward in the short-term.

Which brings us to the last point regarding leadership: what to do when the goal is met? What to do when one’s leadership has been discharged? Assessment is not about simply reviewing the past – it is about examining the present and observing the horizon. That horizon is to where all leaders travel. As such, assessment is the link to the future, future goals, future needs and future succession. It is about returning to reflection but seeing something new there. And so we continue on our loop, but with the addition of another C to the AC: change. If

leadership is to succeed, assessment-courage-assessment must itself change to include the courage to change. Leadership provides within itself the means of its own continuation – if assessment and courage are nurtured.

“Men make history, and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Harry Truman, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1955-1956. 2 volumes)