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Invisible Leadership

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INVISIBLE LEADERSHIP

Can a common purpose truly inspire people to engage in leadership? The leadership scholars Georgia Sorenson and Gill Robinson Hickman maintain that a common purpose can spur individuals to act using their own leadership agency. *Invisible leadership* is a descriptive term used to denote a process in which major organizers and change leaders often are unknown to those outside the endeavor; as a result, their source of motivation, valuable contributions, and personal agency also go unnoticed by outside observers. Yet not all individuals remain invisible within this leadership process. Certain participants volunteer or are selected by the group to articulate and represent the common purpose publicly, while others engage in leadership behind the scenes, invisibly. Participants may move in and out of visible and invisible leadership roles or work primarily in one mode.

The management consultant and social activist Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933) explained the term *invisible leader* in an article written in 1928 and published after her death. She viewed the common purpose as the influential invisible leader that led both leader and followers.

Invisible leadership emerges when people become advocates and embodiments of the common purpose. Individuals strive to achieve a shared and valued end without regard for their own visibility or recognition. Their willingness to work, either invisibly or visibly as needed, results in a type of self-transcendence. Follett's work suggests that the "leader's role in these situations is to see the unifying thread or 'total inter-relatedness' between all the different factors in a situation" (Fox and Urwick 1982, 244). Sorenson and Hickman call this unifying thread *charisma of purpose*. They contend that its powerful effect on group members is a direct result of the worthiness and attraction of the purpose itself.

COMPONENTS OF COMMON PURPOSE LEADERSHIP THEORY

Sorenson and Hickman propose a theory of common purpose leadership to advance the study of this phe-

nomenon. Common purpose leadership occurs when individuals, without regard for recognition or visibility, are motivated to take action by a passionate commitment to achieve a common purpose that is greater than the group's members' individual self-interest and, in certain cases, even greater than the group's overall self-interest. Key components of this type of leadership are the common purpose; a passionate commitment to and ownership of the common purpose; opportunity to act; self-agency; the ability to rise above self-interest; and fluidity of leader and follower roles, which may be either invisible or visible. Causes that inspire common purpose leadership frequently involve social action or movements, although social causes are not the only inspiration. Common purpose leadership can also develop, for example, in companies whose employees are inspired by a visionary mission, or among creators of civil or faith-based communities.

Participants initiate leadership for a common purpose based on a perceived opportunity to act and based on individual or collective self-agency. Opportunity occurs when resources (financial, human, intellectual, or social capital) become available or when a precipitating event provides the catalyst for action. Participants may then defy existing authorities and institutions that are unresponsive or unjust and may create new approaches, power structures, or institutions.

Deeply committed to the common purpose, participants come to the process with a willingness to serve as either leaders or followers, with or without personal recognition (visibility). Furthermore, as noted earlier, visible and invisible roles are flexible; a person may have a high-profile role at one point and be working behind the scenes at another, although it is also true that some people may occupy certain roles for the long term, based on their willingness and capacity to serve.

The group may pick someone (or someone may volunteer) to act as a representative who will articulate the common purpose to the wider public, and individuals outside the process may attribute the motivation, processes, and collective action of the group to this visible, public, or newsworthy individual or group of individuals. However, unlike heroic

leaders, these spokespeople are not using personal charisma or the influence of their position to motivate the group to act.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Sorenson and Hickman arrived at their initial conception of invisible leadership by analyzing situations in which leadership appeared to be inspired by the purpose as much as or more so than by the influence of particular people. They studied written accounts of social movements in autobiographies and biographies, examined interviews with activists, initiators of change, and organizational founders, and probed case studies of organizations. They also explored the concept with focus groups of leadership scholars.

Illustrations from Social Movements

The work of the Women's Political Council (WPC) provides an example of invisible leadership committed to achieving an inspirational goal. A group of black women activists who were members of the WPC began the fight against segregation in their city by targeting segregated bus seating practices in Montgomery, Alabama. Jo Ann Robinson played a key role in initiating the WPC-orchestrated boycott. David Garrow's description of Robinson captures the essence of her innately invisible style and the invisibility of the WPC.

Robinson remains generally hesitant to claim for herself the historical credit that she deserves for launching the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–1956. Although her story fully and accurately describes how it was she, during the night and early morning hours of 1–2 December 1955, who actually started the boycott on its way, it is only with some gentle encouragement that she will acknowledge herself as “the instigator of the movement to start the boycott.” Even then, however, she seeks to emphasize that no special credit ought to go to herself or to any other single individual. Very simply, she says, “the black women did it” (Robinson 1987, p. xv).

The study of leadership often focuses on individuals. Initiators of change are individuals, but in common purpose leadership they are instruments of

larger processes. Wilma Mankiller, former principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, is a case in point. She was the first woman ever to be elected chief of a major Native American tribe. As a leader, she sought inspiration in the vision of the Cherokee people rather than in her own personal vision. Although Mankiller was publicly visible during her time in office, she was not enamored of her public role or of the idea of remaining in the top leadership position. Instead she saw herself as a serving the common purpose of her people, and she intended to pass the leadership baton to a new leader when the time came. During her term of office, the Cherokee Nation grew from a net worth of \$34.6 million to nearly \$52 million, and membership ballooned to the point that some 119,000 individuals claimed membership in the Cherokee Nation in the early 1990s. When Mankiller was ready to vacate the leadership position, she actively campaigned for her successor. She continued to live and work in her community after the election of the new chief.

Illustrations from Business and Nonprofit Organizations

Inspiring purposes are not limited to social movements. Brian Lamb started C-SPAN to provide unfiltered broadcasts of public policy matters to the U.S. people so that they could decide key issues for themselves. In all the years he has been broadcasting, Lamb has never spoken his own name on the air. Lamb, those who fund C-SPAN, and the founding members of the organization believe wholeheartedly in its purpose and persevere in their quest to bring public issues to the people. C-SPAN has gained tremendous respect and popularity since its inception in 1975. Even so, Lamb, in keeping with the role and style of invisible leadership, intends to have less and less influence on C-SPAN as the years go by.

In addition to individuals, groups can provide examples of invisible leadership. The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra is a conductorless ensemble founded on the belief that musicians can create extraordinary music when an orchestra uses the full talents and creativity of every member. Instead of a traditional conductor, the musicians use a demo-

cratic leadership process in which leader and follower roles rotate, permitting members of the ensemble to share equally in the group's leadership. Orchestra members select a leadership team of five to ten players called the core, which replaces a conductor for each piece of music. All the while, the group's leadership remains invisible to the public. The driving force of the orchestra is its common purpose:

Above all, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra is marked by our passionate dedication to our mission. That passion drives every musical and business decision that we make. Our organization's mission isn't imposed from above but is determined—and constantly refined—by the members themselves. (Seifter and Economy 2001, 16)

BUILDING ON EXISTING THEORIES

A prevailing assumption of many leadership theorists is that leaders are the ones who exert the most significant influence on followers to take action toward reaching a common goal. Given this assumption, leadership research typically focuses on how, and under what circumstances, leaders influence followers. This rich body of scholarship examines and identifies specific functions, behaviors, influence, characteristics, and responsibility of leaders in the leader-follower relationship. The power of the common purpose often receives less emphasis than the influence of leaders or leader-follower relationships, even in theories that acknowledge the common purpose as an important factor. Common purpose leadership theory does not replace current theories of leadership, nor is it a leadership substitute. It contends that a compelling common purpose, held individually and shared collectively, often influences people to engage in leadership.

The political scientist James MacGregor Burns asserts that transforming leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purpose. He holds that the effectiveness of leaders must be judged not by their press clippings but by actual social change. "Whatever the separate interests persons might hold, they are presently or potentially united in the pursuit of 'higher' goals, the realization of which is tested by the achievement of significant change that represents

the collective or pooled interest of leaders and followers” (Burns 1978, 425–426).

Burns defines leadership as “leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals” that represent the collective values and motivations of both the leaders and followers (19). Transforming leadership assumes that leaders must first persuade followers to act. The central focus of Burns’s theory is on raising the level of motivation and morality of the individuals in the process. He says that “transforming leadership ultimately becomes *moral* in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both the leader and the led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (20).

In describing the concept of servant leadership, the essayist and consultant Robert Greenleaf used the term *goal* to mean the common purpose, the big dream, the visionary concept. In his conception, that goal is always out of reach, but it is something to strive for and to move toward. In servant leadership, the leader shows the way, induces others to follow, provides structure and models risk-taking behavior. Greenleaf proposed that both individuals and institutions can act as leaders for the purpose of serving one another to build a good society. Even when institutions are servant leaders, the trustees acting as leaders, rather than a common purpose, ultimately exerts the strongest influence.

Mutuality of purpose among leaders and followers is a general factor in transforming, servant, and common purpose leadership theory. What is special about common purpose theory is that it broadens the spectrum of leadership beyond the seminal influence of a single leader or group of trustees serving as leaders to include the many individuals, seen and unseen, who willingly adopt either leader or follower roles, as needed, based on the powerful appeal of a common purpose.

Certain group theories help to explain elements of this type of leadership. Convergence theory contends that certain personal characteristics lead people in collective processes to join groups. The social psychologist Donelson Forsyth explains that these groups are not unrelated collections of dissimilar people, but “the convergence of people with compatible needs, desires, motivations and emotions” who

join together to satisfy their needs (Forsyth 1999, 455). He cites studies that shed light on the concept of self-agency in collective processes. Researchers have found that individuals who join social movements are higher in personal efficacy and believe that their action can make a difference in the outcome. Another study discovered that “self-confidence, achievement orientation, need for autonomy, dominance, self-acceptance and maturity are positively correlated with social activism” (Werner, cited in Forsyth, 1999, 455).

The moral and ethical aspects of common purpose leadership theory can be examined both prescriptively and descriptively. The prescriptive approach has participants champion ethical causes and use ethical means to improve conditions for themselves and members of society while doing no harm to others. A descriptive approach examines the full range of common purpose initiatives, from those that are ethical and helpful to others (such as the civil rights movement) to those that are unethical and harmful to others (such as white supremacy).

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY

Common purpose leadership is a developing theory and requires further testing of its components and further examination of its significant processes. Qualitative approaches, including interviews, case studies, and focus groups are likely tools for the next stage of development. Ultimately, surveys and longitudinal studies will inform the development of theory and practice. Common purpose theory is not a leadership substitute or theory of leaderless groups. Rather, it reveals a process that Mary Parker Follett called “multiple leadership,” in which both seen and unseen participants are committed to achieving a common goal.

—Gill Robinson Hickman

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