

Leadership Philosophy  
Benjamin E. Norquist  
Azusa Pacific University

### Leadership Philosophy

Leaders have the potential to inflict substantial harm on people. Indeed, the headlines are brimming with such stories. Some may be motivated by exploitive intent prior to becoming leaders. Others may develop these intentions as they accrue the power to avoid accountability, but in many cases, leaders may be partially or fully unaware of the harm they inflict. In any case, the harm to others can be real and widespread. Yet, leadership and leaders have played an undeniably positive role in society as well—leaders found new organizations, invest in others, transform neighborhoods, lead congregations, and provide help in communities the world over. What is clear from a quick glance is that leadership carries high stakes. It is important that it be approached with care.

### **The Context of Leadership**

I believe that social contexts in which leaders operate are structured to resist deep change. Granted, society is continually shifting as evolutionary theories of change emphasize (e.g. Sporn, 1999), but in alignment with such evolutionary theories, I believe that there are no truly closed social systems and that all systems are in dynamic relationship with their environments. I further believe that such systems—formal organizations are an important example of this kind of system—seek homeostasis, which is the process by which an organization continually self-regulates in order to maintain equilibrium with its environment (Kezar, 2018). Such self-regulation produces conservative change by definition, especially in a higher education context (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Birnbaum, 1991). My philosophy of leadership is founded on this understanding that contexts where leaders operate tend to resist planned change by nature, especially planned change at structural levels.

Within organizations, leadership is often treated as an identity (“I *am* a leader”) or a substance (“leadership”), but I believe that leadership is best approached as an action, something that “some people do some of the time” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 24). In my understanding, acts of leadership emerge in social contexts where interest, power, and opportunity for change align. In other words, leaders are not autonomous actors, standing over against society, but socially constructed members of their contexts (Berger et al., 1967; DeRue et al., 2010). One’s identity as a leader is socially negotiated as individuals claim and grant leader status interpersonally (DeRue et al., 2010). For this reason, I make a distinction in my philosophy between the reputation or position one has as a leader and individual instances of leadership. It is not only possible, but common, that individuals who have achieved leader status do not lead. The converse is also true, that those who are not recognized as leaders do in fact lead. Approaching leadership primarily as an episodic action, performed by those who have various levels of ability, interest, and opportunity to seek a change, contrasts with the popular construct of leadership as an identity.

The above-mentioned idea of social construction is foundational to my philosophy of leadership, yet this does not preclude discretion and agency on the part of the leader. People dynamically possess and deploy varying degrees of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in pursuit of their interests; thus, the power to act is an essential element of leading. My philosophy of leadership rest on the insight that agency lies both in society, acting on individuals who may lead at times (DeRue et al., 2010) and in individuals, particularly when they make intentional decisions to lead or follow. Because mobilizing people toward a vision requires sacrifice (leaders *spend* social capital), an act of leadership is a uniquely intense expression of agency,

both on the part of the individual and the social context that brought that individual to that moment, equipped with the resources to act.

### **Why Lead?**

Ellul's (1964) ever-relevant critique of the postmodern shift away from telos to technique speaks presciently to the leadership industry today. In addressing the technologization of society, Ellul conceives of more than new physical and digital technology. His critique addresses social technologies as well, the conversion of social structures into instruments and the entailed loss of meaning. Other aspects bend, or are subsumed and transformed to adhere to the internal logic of a given technique. Leadership, as it is construed in instrumental ways, is an excellent case in point. The leadership literature represented in summative texts like Northouse (2015) or Nahavandi (2014) proceeds with a notable focus on technique and method, on exploring questions around *how* leadership works and how to *efficiently* produce outcomes through the application of leadership (*as a technique*, Ellul would add). Questions about the appropriate ends for which leadership should be practiced may be addressed, but are often squeezed into the one chapter about ethics (e.g., Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Kezar, 2018; Northouse, 2015).

In contrast with the emphasis on technique summarized above, I believe that people cannot become better leaders until they discover and commit themselves to a *good purpose*, good in a moral sense. Although I may be impressed with leaders who are highly effective in creating change and mobilizing people, unless they are committed to such a purpose, their leadership will be hollow. In my view, goodness is rooted in Jesus' life, his offer of his selfhood for the sake of others, and his teachings. When asked, Jesus summarized the moral laws of Israel in the dual command to love God and love others (Matthew 22:40). Similarly, Paul writes about Jesus that

he selflessly abandoned the rights and privileges of heaven to pursue his good mission among people (Philippians 2). According to my leadership philosophy, goodness is rooted in the example of selflessness Jesus gave the world. In my view, this principle applies to more than Christians: I understand Jesus to have offered not merely a sectarian example, but a universal human template. Contemporary leaders can follow Jesus' example of love or fail to do so—according to my philosophy of leadership, this will be the measure of their goodness. A leader could build empires, erect monuments, mobilize thousands into action, increase shareholder profits, introduce new strategies, launch new programs, receive promotions, and write best-selling books, but without love, all these achievements would be “nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate” (1 Corinthians 13, *The Message*). Thus, I am committed to the centrality of a *good purpose*—something akin to what Representative John Lewis meant when he encouraged listeners to “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America” (Cole, 2020)—in determining the quality and value of leadership. To connect this discussion about love back to the prior discussion about social construction, society will always inevitably produce leaders who are technically capable of contributing to the organizational systems that are already in place. In contrast, what is uniquely needed is a good purpose rooted above the social, but deeply committed to the good of society. One of the hallmarks of goodness, in my view, is care of people, particularly the marginalized.

My deeply held value for people needs to be expressed in concrete, daily, and even embodied ways in leadership practice. In her book, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space, and Influence*, Morse (2008) described the physical nature of leadership—powerful people take up more social space than do others. When some people enter a room, everyone takes notice and the social space changes, but others might come and go, and no one realizes

they were ever there. Unfortunately, this often follows race, class, and gender lines depending on the context, but primarily it relates to charisma (Morse, 2008; Nahavandi, 2015). Morse explained the nature of this kind of interpersonal power, explored its signals and levers, and finally, asked her readers to consider the stewardship of this kind of power. She asked her readers to consider: if they have interpersonal power, *what is it to be used for* (again, turning the leadership question into one of telos and ethics). All too often, people with this power wield it unreflectively, and end up using it for personal gain at cost to others. Morse's insights have been important to me, influencing my leadership philosophy in important ways: it is insufficient to deploy traditional mechanisms of leadership, even in pursuit of commendable goals, if by doing so I rob others of the space they need in order to make their own substantive contributions. When people are given the chance to make their own contributions, and when the connection between their contributions and successful achievement of valuable goals is clear, people begin the dignifying process of discovering or constructing *meaning* from their work. If, by always dominating the social center, managers inhibit their employees from achieving this kind of meaning-making in their work, they perform what I perceive to be managerial malpractice. They are, in fact, treating their employees as less than human.

### **Technique**

Although I find it important to start with the good purpose of leadership—I think of my philosophy of leadership as teleological in orientation—leadership is also methodological. I believe it is basic to good leadership that leaders approach their methods in ways that are rooted in and consistent with their teleological commitments.

Emerging from the love purpose discussed above, I view good leaders as servants of those in their sphere of influence. Questioning earlier scientific management approaches

characterized by authoritarianism, Robert Greenleaf (1970, 1977) developed a leadership philosophy called servant leadership that clarified much of what is needed. In servant leadership, the management relationship shifts away from control mechanisms toward a synergistic relationship between leaders and followers (Parris, & Peachey, 2013). According to Greenleaf, servant leaders know that frontline employees have insight into customer needs of which executives are unaware, so servant leaders share decision-making authority with their followers. In my work with Christian executives, it is clear that Greenleaf is known both among academics and Christian business practitioners. Unfortunately, among this group, I perceive a risk that servant leadership can be used as a positive gloss that obscures issues of power asymmetry, inequity of benefits, and (more rarely) outright abuse. Indeed, servant leadership has its critics—it has been characterized as veiled paternalism for missing the agency and wholistic humanity of followers (McCrimmon, 2010 is an example). Despite these legitimate qualifications to servant leadership theory, Jesus' example and teachings (e.g., Matthew 24) undergird my belief that gospel-enabled, Holy Spirit-empowered servanthood among leaders is nevertheless possible and critically needed.

Unfortunately, it is possible for leaders who personally value their followers to nevertheless fail to enact that value in their leadership approach. In my view, this disconnect highlights the importance of *authenticity* in leaders. Although there has been some ambiguity in the development of authentic leadership constructs (Gardner et al., 2011), there do seem to be common elements such as integrity between role and self-concept, others centeredness, and moral commitments (Gardner, Coglise, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Whitehead, 2009). Shamir and Eilan (2005) offer a framework I find helpful that includes the following elements: the alignment between self-concept and leadership role, the centeredness of self-concept on strongly-held

convictions, the coherence of leadership goals with each other, and the alignment of their behavior with their self-concept. Multiple scholars of authentic leadership see moral commitments as an essential element to the model (Avolio et al., 2004; Walumbwa, et al., 2008; Whithead, 2009). In an age marked by immoral “leadership”—Enron, the banking and loan tragedy, Bill Hybels, Ravi Zacharias, and Brett Kavanaugh for example—this emphasis is well taken. The initial discussion about social construction of leaders is relevant here: what is needed is a purpose that is not sidelined by environmental pressures but that shapes leadership decisions.

Adaptive leadership theory articulates a distinction between authority and leadership—authority is given in order to advance institutional objectives in line with existing norms, but leadership is exercised by those who recognize that existing norms or practices are inadequate and marshal others to adapt to new norms (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Adaptive leadership theory recognizes a difference between a technical challenge, where a need aligns with existing institutional norms, and an adaptive challenge, where the need requires changing the organizational norms themselves. This leadership theory posits that adaptive leaders toggle between the *practice field* and the *balcony*, refining their view from inside the action as well as above it. The balcony view allows leaders to identify adaptive challenges and pursue adaptive change. In order to facilitate this adaptation, such leaders *orchestrate conflict, regulate the heat, and take responsibility for casualties* (Heifetz et al., 2009). Perhaps ironically, organizations reward those with authority who preserve and advance familiar and uncontroversial values with the label of leader—but often, adaptive leaders risk marginalization.

Like other conventional leadership theories, adaptive leadership assumes high autonomy and agency—it has less to offer those who are bound by their organizational positions or lack of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Adaptive leadership’s distinction



between adaptive and technical challenges may leave too little room to recognize genuine acts of leadership in non-adaptive, more stable contexts. Nevertheless, adaptive leadership is an important part of my leadership philosophy in its emphasis on challenging norms and taking personal and organizational risks if they are in pursuit of a good purpose. Because adaptive leadership emphasizes that leaders challenge organizational norms, it accounts for how a leader who is morally sensitive to issues of equity and organizational justice might approach adaptive processes. Since institutional response to change tends to be conservative by nature (Heclo, 2011), and institutions contain organizational structures and policies that perpetuate inequity, adaptive leadership offers an important set of tools for leading adaptive change.

Although my approach to leadership tends to decenter the role of charisma, the transformational potential of leaders remains in view. In contrast to more transactional approaches, a transformational leader produces commitment with their person. As articulated by Bernard Bass (1985), transformational leaders garner commitment, trust, and admiration from their teams by setting an example, inspiring with vision, and stimulating through charisma. This relationship of trust becomes the context in which leaders help their teams identify goals, take ownership for their work, and contribute beyond what is expected. Transformational leadership is perhaps best known for four key practices, again from Bass: *idealized influence*, *intellectual stimulation*, *individualized consideration*, and *inspirational motivation*. Leaders set an example for the standards being pursued by the team, serving as a role model for others (idealized influence). They create a social context that nurtures innovation and creative contributions from their team (intellectual stimulation). Transformational leaders foster their team's motivation and commitment to shared objectives, communicating high standards, and helping individuals increase their contributions (inspirational motivation). Leaders also allow for diversity and

individuality on their teams, engaging with each member as a unique person with their own strengths, weaknesses, and potential (individualized consideration). According to transformational leadership, these elements must be practiced in order to nurture and transform a team (Bass, 1985). I approach these insights carefully and critically, because there is potential for substantial harm when charismatic leaders are unencumbered by authentic commitment to a good purpose. Charisma-oriented leadership approaches also tend to overlook authentic acts of leadership, connected to good purposes, enacted by those with less charisma and those without organizational position. Nevertheless, charisma (and confidence) are powerful tools, but only properly exercised when circumscribed by accountability and good purposes.

### **Conclusion**

Because I consider leadership an action before it is an identity or formal position, I believe everyone has the potential to lead—this is true, even if that leadership is exercised in small and modest ways or is enacted in informal rather than formal roles. The corollary is that everyone also has the potential and, I would say, the responsibility to follow. It is in the quality and commandability of the commitments of people that we find the reason to lead *and* to follow. When I am committed to an important and good purpose, I should be ready to lead others toward it, and when I encounter someone who is committed to such a purpose, I should be ready to follow them toward it. Those with the opportunity to lead, to influence others toward a vision, should be circumspect, and wield their power in ways that always foreground people over resources. It may be tempting to make leadership about the leader, but it should always be about the purpose, and should be evaluated on that basis.

## References

- Avolio, B., Luthans, F., & Walumbwa, F. (2004). *Authentic leadership: Theory-building for veritable sustained performance*. Working paper. Gallup Leadership Institute, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Bass, B. (1985). *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. Free Press.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor.
- Bergquist, W. & Pawlak, K. (2008). *Engaging the six cultures of the academy*. Jossey-Bass.
- Birnbaum, R. (1991). *How colleges work: The Cybernetics of academic organization and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. SAGE Publications.
- Cole, D. (2020). John Lewis urges attendees of Selma's "Bloody Sunday" commemorative march to "redeem the soul of America" by voting. Retrieved September 17, 2020, from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/01/politics/john-lewis-bloody-sunday-march-selma/index.html>
- Derue, D., & Ashford, S. (2010). Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(4), 627–647. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2010.53503267>
- Ellul, J. (1964). *The technological society*. Vintage Books.

- Gardner, W., Cogliser, C., Davis, K., & Dickens, M. (2011). Authentic leadership: A Review of the literature and research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly* 22, 1120-1145.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.007>
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). *The Servant as leader*. Center for Servant Leadership.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Press Paulist.
- Heclo, H. (2011). *On thinking institutionally*. Oxford University Press.
- Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Cambridge Leadership Associates.
- Hersey, P. & Blanchard, K. (1993). *Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources*. Prentice Hall.
- Kezar, A. (2018). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading, and enacting change*. Routledge.
- McCrimmon, M. (2010). Why servant leadership is a bad idea. Retrieved August 28, 2020, from <https://www.management-issues.com/opinion/6015/why-servant-leadership-is-a-bad-idea/>
- Morse, M. (2008). *Making room for leadership: Power, space, and influence*. InterVarsity Press.
- Nahavandi, A. (2015). *The art and science of leadership*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Parris, D. L., & Peachey, J. W. (2013). A systematic literature review of servant leadership theory in organizational contexts. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113(3), 377–393.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1322-6>
- Shamir, B., & Eilam, G. (2005). “What's your story?": A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 395–417.

Sporn, B. (1999). *Adaptive university structures: An analysis of adaptation to socioeconomic environments of U.S. and European universities*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Walumbwa, F., Avolio, B., Gardner, W., Wernsing, T., & Peterson, S. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, 34, 89–126.

Whitehead, G. (2009). Adolescent leadership development: Building a case for an authenticity framework. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 37, 847–872.