



TEAM INTERNATIONAL

11825 IH – 10 West, Suite 205

San Antonio, TX 78230

p: 210.641.7733

f: 210.641.9654

www.teaminternational.net

Leading from Behind

A leader... is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.

-Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

Linda A. Hill, who holds a distinguished professorship at the Harvard Business School, asks: How can we find this kind of leader who “stands behind”: one who understands not only how to lead, but also how to create a context and a culture where others are willing and able to lead ?

Stephen Covey might connect this with his Eighth Habit: finding your voice and helping others find theirs. However, it’s more than that, isn’t it? Because the voice of the leader is not just finding his/her own calling or passion, but also connecting this passion to an ability to influence or lead others. And it’s also an ability to “contagion” others with a passion for leading and influencing others. Leading from behind implies inspiring others to lead.

Of course, our cultures in many places, including the U.S., may not support Mandela’s and Hill’s concept of leadership because they believe that it’s the leader who has to be out front and showing the way, especially in times of change and challenge. And some might say that “sheep” are a poor metaphor for many followers, since these creatures are not thought to be very bright.

But let me take the case of a counter example: some years ago, I observed one of our client executive leaders show “leadership from behind” when TEAM International (TI) was working on a series of executive seminars for DuPont in Mexico. Raúl Muñoz, a very charismatic and effective leader and long-time CEO of the company, gave a presentation on future company strategy and tactics and took questions from his executives. On nearly every point, he would say something like, “Well, the person who knows most about this matter is _____, and I’d like to ask him to give his viewpoint.” You could see the invited speaker beam with pleasure when this happened. And you could feel the flock moving forward as these “most nimble” went out ahead.

Although I admit that the above scenario would not frequently be witnessed in some top-down organizations we work with in Latin America, Hill cites another case of a woman manager who worked for Nicelodeon Latin America, who conducted herself much the way that Raúl Muñoz did during her presentations to senior management, by including the members of her team in her presentations and giving them public credit. She was told that she was making a career mistake in doing so, but she persisted in this methodology and thereafter won support for her team's effectiveness in a difficult and volatile market.

So when does the leader need to be out front, and when is it more appropriate to lead from behind? Linda Hill comes close to saying that we should always be developing unconventional leaders, even and *especially in emerging economies* where cadres of savvy traditional leaders may not be present. That may be a good target to shoot for, but our experience and research suggests that there are some environments that might be particularly toxic for leaders from behind:

Difficult political environments where relationships may be run more on the basis of patronage than merit. Raúl Muñoz went from a long and successful career in DuPont to a curtailed assignment as CEO of PEMEX, the Mexican government-owned oil monopoly. After an initial period of success as a private-sector executive who was able to make the cross-over work, he was soon attacked and forced out, under some rather unsavory, but also petty charges of mis-handling of personal expenses. The arcane political structure of the company apparently did not lend itself to the insertion of a collaborative private-sector executive, even in the euphoria of the business efficiency orientation of the then-new Vicente Fox administration.

A long-standing cultural bias toward top-down leadership styles. I should point out that, in general, in Latin America, there is, emphasized across the business landscape as well as the political one, a "*caudillo*" or leader-oriented style of governance. This is borne out in the TI data on interpersonal styles [FIRO-B], where we find that expressed control scores are statistically significantly higher among Latin American executives than among their U.S. counterparts. The control pattern is reinforced by a culture that emphasizes the role of the father, the CEO, and the president of the republic. These historic cultural modes are not easily broken nor forgotten in the display of leadership and in its development.

A collapsing economic environment is another enforcer of the traditional focus of out-front leaders. Consider the case of Henry Cisneros, former Mayor of San Antonio and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Clinton. Cisneros, a highly involving public official, saw his efforts to increase home ownership fall on the hard times of the sub-prime debacle. Apparently his leadership from the rear influenced lenders like Countrywide to overextend their financing to underqualified homeowners. The jury is still out on the fate of some of his urban developments, but the damage to his image and his collaborative development style has been considerable.

Charles (Chuck) Prince, was a very leadership-development-oriented CEO of Citi(group). Under his tenure, an extensive executive coaching focus was established for the top-100 managers of the company. There was considerable budget for and commitment to developing these managers, and Chuck was a leader who trusted his managers to lead the bank in the right direction. He was also very supportive of and participated in a number of town-hall exchanges with a bent toward hearing the “Voice of the Employee” and other interventions intended to grow the other-focus of Citi executives. Unfortunately, Chuck was forced out of office under the collapse of confidence in Citi in the sub-prime defaults of 2008. To Citi’s credit, the executive development program is still functioning, although it has currently been impacted in its outreach by a budget slow-down.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that future organizations will require more participative and inspirational rather than directional leadership. Linda Hill points to the increasing need for this kind of leader in the fast-changing and complex organizational environment that is upon us. She says, “The more you want to get the best out of a group by letting people use their own judgment and take risks, the more you want to lead from behind.” “Besides,” she adds, “ we already have a lot of people who are able to lead from the front. We need to develop people who can lead in a different way.”

An example of this shift can be found close to our own environment. One of the longest-lasting CEOs at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) to date has been John Alexander, who led CCL for 10 years at a low profile. John came up through the ranks at the Center and is very highly esteemed by his ex-colleagues for the ways he led quietly and inspirationally during his tenure. CCL grew significantly during this period and extended its international outreach in Europe and to Asia. John’s behaviors were similar to the ones observed above at DuPont and Nickelodeon: he got people involved and moving, and he gave them the credit.

All the evidence today for future leaders for tomorrow points to the kind of leadership behaviors represented by John Alexander at CCL. Leadership development is no longer just a matter for individual focus, but also a requirement for individuals to focus on their groups and the impact they have on them. More and more, in order to increase the effectiveness of our groups and teams, we will have to lead from behind. We have to pursue, as Hill writes: “...a leadership development initiative...that can help identify and develop new kinds of leaders...who are globally aware, who can link the company’s values and culture with its strategy, and who can collaborate with others throughout the organization.”

An excellent vision, and one to develop by!

I had finished this article at about the time of the stock market crash in October, 2008, and I realize now that it was woefully incomplete. More needs to be said about the “collapsing economic environment” I reference above, because it may call into question the entire concept that is the subject of this piece. Perhaps it is, in these uneasy times, that

we may see a need for leaders who are out front with new ideas, new and steady strengths, and calming influence under panic-producing conditions. Of course, “situational leadership” is an old concept, but still a robust model when followers prove they are undeveloped or immature. Nothing describes our recent experience better than immaturity, a lack of foresight, and just plain, as it turns out in hindsight, recklessness in our national financial management.

The sheep had gone wild, or were on steroids, or maybe they were just wolves in sheep’s clothing! But equally vicious was the rabid response to their discovery in our leadership midst. Even in the staid old situational leadership model, there is no provision for a quadrant of negative task and negative relationship behaviors, where we all go down together, gnashing our teeth and bleeding down each other’s net worth. There is no “bell curve” for these behaviors, as my financial planner points out when he says that all his financial models go out the window at $>3\sigma$ from the norm.

The jury is still out on what will be the attitudes and behaviors of the new generation of business and government leaders that will guide us out of the current morass. But my hunch, better yet, my faith is that they will profess and act on many of the same values as we have described in moral and authentic leadership, that they be oriented towards others and not self. And perhaps they will have an uncommon ability to be calm and restore trust to a shaken market system, and to preserve peace in a troubled world. I don’t know whether such a leader will guide from ahead or from behind, but he and/or she will certainly be very visible from all sides, and will have to be head and shoulders above the flock!

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T. Noel Osborn