

Leadership Lessons: Philosophy and Practice

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During my career in corporate communication and organization development (OD), I have served as a leader, a follower, and have experienced leadership in many structures and situations. Early in my life, I observed my father as a leader of a global nonprofit organization that he started after retiring from a 30-year career with the United Nations. He moved home and family back to his country of origin, and started a self-funded charity to help abandoned children and the related social, health, and economic needs of families in south India (www.cupinternational.org).

Watching him through the start-up phase and the ups and downs of subsequent phases over the next 25 years, I observed him handle criticisms of his strategy; suffer staff transitions, lawsuits, financial difficulty; and handle the impact of all of this on his family. I watched how he stood true to his vision and became creative about funding and growth, more flexible with operations, a more confident communicator, and how he gained the admiration and respect of his employees as well as the pure love and gratitude of those in the communities served by his work.

Later in my life, I reported to a senior executive in a global telecommunications firm in southern California. I was rather junior on this man's team, yet I never felt less important than those more seasoned. When times got difficult, and he had to lay off people on his team, including me, he handled it with openness, respect, and compassion. He tipped me off about the impending situation, and used his network to get me another job.

These two great leaders stand out in my career history. They, other leaders, and my continued study have shaped my leadership philosophy. Today, this is as follows:

Taking a **systems view**, I look for ways to **change** organizations, individuals, and myself for the sake of improvement, **listening** first to the stakeholders involved and drawing on my existing experience and instincts. I am courageous in being vulnerable and in doing the right thing. I am persistent. I take **risks** that are as calculated as they can be, moving with appropriate speed to action. I motivate my team members, peers, and superiors by **constantly communicating** with them about our mutually desired future state while appealing to their sense of higher good. **I am politically savvy and smart** - I view politics as a neutral and real part of life and I enjoy navigating those. I address people as **humans and emotional beings** first, employees second. I always want to know about how I can **serve them**. I listen to critics and filter what is true for me and what is not—this requires a **strong understanding of myself**, to which I am committed as a lifelong student.

In this paper, I examine the pillars of my philosophy by comparing them to current organizational leadership theories for effectiveness and any potential weak areas that could be bolstered. This examination is particularly meaningful to me now since I am at the beginning of a new leadership opportunity, having just started a managing director position at a global communication firm where I lead a multi-disciplined team of 40 people across various offices and practice groups as well as a client organization that is complex and matrixed.

Leading in an Open System

My leadership philosophy centers on a systems view of organizations. At a very basic level, systems theory builds on the work of Austrian biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, who studied the systemic interconnectedness of nature (trees, plants, their environment, and the weather) in the 1950s. The key to his study was that, rather than investigate each element in isolation from each other, Bertalanffy studied them together and particularly focused on how they are connected. Social psychologists Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn were among the first to adapt this perspective to organizational theory. “All social systems, including organizations, consist of the patterned activities of a number of individuals,” they wrote in *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (1966, later revised).

My opinion based on experience is that an effective leader focuses on these patterned activities on the individual and also the organizational level – all at the same time. This is one of the expectations that makes leadership difficult. This ability to read the relationship nuances quickly on behalf of multiple entities seems to be a rare one, among the people I've met. Further complicating leadership is that leaders must pay attention to all the elements of the system itself (in addition to their connection points). Literature on biologic and environmental systems agrees that to be classified as a system, the following must be present: 1). Objective - Every system has a predefined goal or objective towards which it works. 2). Standard - It is the acceptable level of performance for any system. 3). Environment - Every system, whether it is natural or manmade, co-exists with an environment. It is very important for a system to adapt itself to its environment. 4). Feedback – Information comes from all parts of an organization system. Feedback about the output of a system, based on observation, improves the system and ensures it meets standards. 5)/ Boundaries and Interfaces - Every system has defined boundaries within which it operates.

The figure shows my graphic interpretation of an organization within a system, and its connecting points. This view of systems is helping me understand my current, new role.

In the Star Model, which Jay R. Galbraith (1995) developed in the 1970s, he describes organizations as

having five aspects. The first is strategy, which determines direction. The second is structure, which determines the location of decision-making power. The third is processes, which have to do with the flow of information; they are the means of responding to information technologies.

Organization as a system

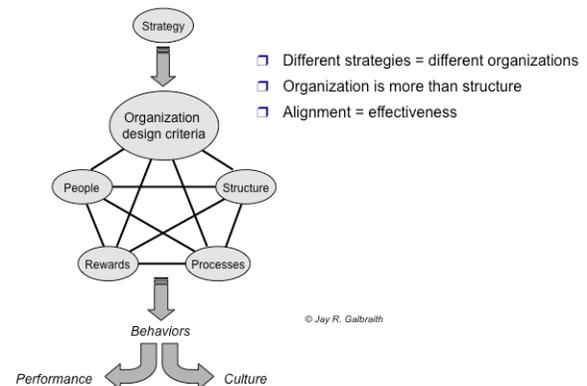


The fourth is rewards and reward systems, which influence the motivation of people to perform and address organizational goals. The fifth category of the model is made up of policies relating to people (human resource policies), which influence and frequently define the employees' mindsets and skills. The graphic below shows the Star Model, with entry and exit points that lead in and out of the organization system.

A temptation to me as a leader in the past has been to focus on structure more than other aspects of my organizational system.

Galbraith (1995) cautions against too much emphasis on structure because of the danger of ignoring the more-important aspects of

processes and rewards, and people. These, Galbraith said, are becoming more important in today's fast-changing business environment and the rise of matrixed organizations.



Leadership and Change

At the top of the STAR model is organizational strategy because leadership and change depend on that. One of the primary aspects of my leadership philosophy has to do with the complexities of change. In my experience, change is a time of the greatest leadership needs and challenges, often caused by crisis that impacts the organizational system from the inside and out. In fact, Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy (2009) said that all change can be thought of as crisis. The fact that I am new to my organization and team is a crisis of sorts – it represents a major shift to the entire system of this organization and account team. Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy (2009) said crisis has two phases: the emergency phase during which a leader must stabilize the situation and buy time; and the adaptive phase, when the leader must “tackle the underlying cause of the

crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality” (p. 1). In my new role, I am still in the process of stabilizing this situation while also trying to understand it. I realize this is a true change management challenge, and I draw on a model I created to help guide me through it.

Change is a constant of organizational life, whether physical and logistical (new parking assignments), process (new software systems are implemented), large (a new CEO takes charge), or dramatic (a natural disaster closes operations and endangers employees). All change alters a system. Many clients have come to me for help dealing with these alterations. To provide structure for my change management work with consulting clients, I created a strategic model (see the figure below). It is called the “Designing Change” model to depict my desire to put change within a creative as well as scientific context. My intent is to show the change process as a continuum of distinct, related, and interactive phases. In addition to serving as a practical guide, the Designing Change model seeks to further organizations’ understanding of change theory –that is, the “best” ways to effect change within their organizations. Leadership is an inherent and basic part of my model since change must be effectively led to achieve its goals, and because change impacts organizational structure, and because change is difficult for most people and they need help dealing with it effectively.

Managing change requires a strategic approach. OD scholar Thomas G. Cummings (2014) said, strategy is a “continuous pattern of focused actions and decisions that enables the organization to continually re-position itself in its environment, gain a competitive edge over its rivals, and achieve higher levels of performance.” His “Stages to Strategy Development” (2014) are helpful as I seek to evaluate and refine my Designing Change model. Briefly, Cummings’ stages are 1) Strategy Assessment, 2) Create Strategy Statement, 3) Reality Check and Commitment, and 4) Finalize Strategy Statement and Design Implementation Plan. I created the

Designing Change model to help organizations ensure they are indeed initiating and implementing strategic change, rather than change based on less effective premises.

Broadly described, the Designing Change model contains the following phases:

1. Grasp – leaders and consultants come together to create definition for all aspects of the change, including the business case (the reasons for the change), and desired outcomes (goals).
2. Know – understanding of the change and its impact on all parts of an organization’s system is deepened.
3. Launch – strategic plans are made that align with a shared vision and mission for a desired and mutual future state.
4. Move – implementation of the change strategy begins and is followed through.
5. Sustain. In this final stage, feedback and communication as well as stakeholder engagement are important in order for change to become the new normal state. This stage focuses on the future, which could include another change initiative (highly possible given the current dynamic state of organization environments).

Since we are talking about change within human systems, communication and emotion are addressed as part of each stage.

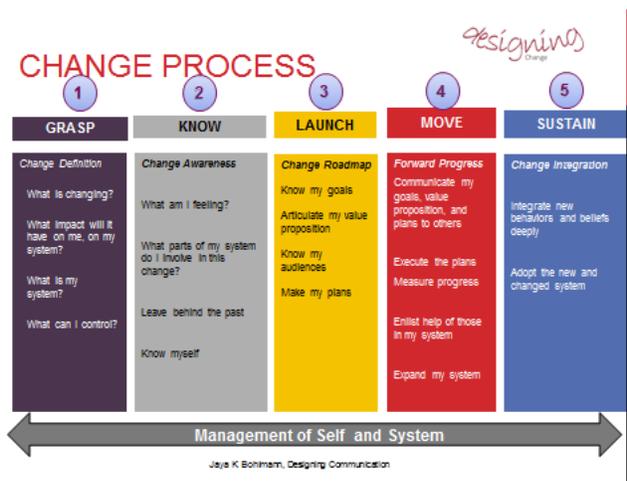


Figure 1. *Designing Change* model by J. Bohlmann, 2013

Communication as a Leadership Function

I am a communications expert first, an OD professional as an important supplement, so it might make sense that I view communication as a crucial pillar of my leadership philosophy. OD and management experts agree with me. When it comes to change in particular, Greiner & Cummings (2009) say that key stakeholders need to be actively involved in strategy making from the start. Coch & French (2009) agree, especially if some individuals within the organization's system are resisting the change. They say that it is possible for management to dramatically modify or even remove resistance to changes large and small. They advocate the use of communication, mostly in-person and from leadership level individuals, in order to communicate clearly the need for change and motivating participation through collaboration. The Designing Change model calls for clear communication at all stages of change – I believe it is the conduit and the engaging force for individuals and groups in the system driving and impacted by the change.

The Designing Change model strives to show this involvement at all stages. The first stage, for example, calls for leaders and other decision makers to come together to set the stage and identify important aspects of the change. In the second stage, further understanding is asked of an additional level of employee and stakeholder groups. Third, plans are created and this involves yet another set of stakeholder groups. By the fourth and fifth stages, all stakeholders of the organization's system, internal and external, are involved. They are, in fact, the change agents – they are facilitating and implementing changes while providing and taking in feedback so that the change strategies are analyzed for any possible need to adapt, as well as measure results of the change initiative that indicate success or failure.

My view of the importance of communication is backed not only by theorists but by practitioners. Irene Rosenfeld, CEO of food company Mondelez International, attributes communication to her success in turning around a failing company. She said in a 2014 interview that she believes:

“a big part of any leader’s job is to communicate clearly and communicate often, particularly in times of change. It’s important that people know where we’re going as a company (our goals), what it will take to reach our goals (our strategies) and how we’ll achieve them (our values). Along the way, we all need to “tell it like it is,” which is one of our core values, so that we have candid conversations about how we’re doing and what we can do better. Finally, it’s crucial to recognize people’s accomplishments and assure them their hard work is appreciated.”

Leading Individuals and Teams

In the system view as presented earlier, it makes sense to think of individuals as the foundation of the system. Therefore, leadership must focus primarily on the individual level. I have observed this to be true in my experience. According to Tschudy (2006) and others, individuals are one of five sub-systems of organizational systems. The other parts are: group, intergroup, organization and organization-environment. Indeed, the individual is the foundational and most important element of the whole systems. We are, after all, referring to a human system in this approach.

Hultman and Gellerman (2006) assert that four variables of personal and social needs of individuals must be addressed by group members and the leader in order for the group to function effectively. These variables are: balance, viability, alignment, and authenticity. (One tool for studying these variables is the Values and Assessment Inventory, or VAI, 2001). Kets De Vries (2001) expands on this by asserting that healthy organizations are made up of healthy individuals, who exhibit qualities of a stable sense of identity, can deal with reality, are

resourceful and feel powerful, have a positive body image, can deal with separation and dependency, and several other qualities.

In my experience and as Bolman & Deal (1992) said, “Much of the work in large organizations is now done in small groups or teams. When those teams work badly, as they often do, they can block even the most talented individual from realizing their potential” (p. 34). Block (2000) says that although executives and others with authority are in the room during a whole-system decision making process, the power of the approach is the focus on collective knowledge and collective purpose. With many organizations moving toward this approach, it seems natural for the individual worker to wonder where or if they matter in the overall system.

Leading individuals as part of teams is common to me in the workplace. Much of the work in large organizations is now done in small groups or teams, and I’ve led and participated in many teams that worked both well and badly. Most of the academic and professional literature about teams agree with my view that team members collaborate on talents, skills, and resources in order to achieve a goal effectively and efficiently. They have a shared goal, depend on each other to perform tasks, and their efforts are cooperative. Collectively, the literature also says that teams are more effective than individuals.

But teams have their challenges, which leaders must face. Each individual on the team is struggling with ambiguity, complexity, turbulence, and confusion - the normal conditions of modern organizations, as Bolman & Deal describe (1991). Bringing these mental processes to the collective experience of a team magnifies them. The individuals on teams and the managers of the teams deal with this chaos by “filtering and interpreting their experience in the light of cognitive maps, or frames, that they have developed through education and experience,” (Bolman & Deal, p. 35). Bolman & Deal have created the “frame” concept as a way to view

complex situations, and say that leaders must have the ability to use multiple frames in order to size up a situation accurately, without distortion. They say the inability to reframe in a crisis (such as a client situation that is disorganized) can immobilize people, or plunge them into misguided action.

Of the four organizational frames posed by Bolman & Deal (1991), they said while the structural and human resources variables were especially crucial to group success, they can be over-utilized (leading to good management but not necessarily great leadership). They said the important political and symbolic lenses could be more useful in leading effective teams.

Bolman & Deal say in particular, the symbolic frame is the best predictor of effective leadership, and therefore, the most effective teams. Why? Because “symbolic thinking is subtle and complex...and gets to the heart of issues of meaning and faith that none of the other perspectives captures” (p. 37). The symbolic frame puts social construct around a situations, interprets facts rather than sees them as objective, pays diligent attention to myth, ritual, ceremony, stories and other symbolic forms.

With the symbolic frame in mind, Bolman & Deal assert that “soul is the real secret of a team’s success” (p.43). They offer the following as keys to successful teams: 1). acts and symbols that are involved when someone joins a team are important; 2). diversity gives a team a competitive advantage; 3). leading by example is more unifying than commanding; 4). specialized language fosters cohesion and commitment; 5). stories, humor, play, ritual, and ceremony can reinforce team identity. To me, these add up to effective communication, which is another primary aspect of my leadership philosophy.

Awareness of Self and Others

Since leaders not only manage systems but also are themselves an important part of the system they lead, I believe that effective leaders need to possess high levels of awareness of how they operate, are coming across to people in behavior and communication and their overall impact on others. Further, I learned it's important to know my desires in advance, be hyper-aware of them, and be flexible to have them change during the process. In addition, knowing how each of my desires and goals fall within my priority list for the situation is important. So self-awareness has to be brought into the situation, and awareness of the factors external to me has to be quickly assimilated!

New in my job, I recognize my emotions as those identified as “problems in entering a new group,” cited by Schein (1988, p. 41). The problems as indicated by Schein are questions of identity, control and influence, needs and goals, and acceptance and intimacy. I believe I went through questions, emotions, self-awareness, and actions related to all of these in this first situation with my new team.

As I continue my work, I am made even more aware that self-awareness as a manager makes me a more effective leader and change agent. I've participated in many performance reviews, 360 degree feedback sessions, coaching sessions, trainings, and team-building sessions – and with each one, have progressively built an evolving awareness of my style, personality, biases, preferences, and most important, how all of these affect others' perceptions of me – and how all of this impacts my ability to lead people and effect change and other goals. This phenomenon is validated with empirical evidence from Allan Church (1997), who found that high-performing managers were significantly more self-aware compared to average-performing managers.

To effectively answer those questions, I turn to scholars and theories of power. Among other tools and theories, I have consulted the FIRO-B, an adaptation of Schutz' 1978 FIRO Awareness Scales (Schnell & Hammer, 1993) and Maccoby's 1976 career style inventory as a basis for self-awareness; Eagly & Carli's 2007 study that depicts common blocks to women's paths to leadership; and use the advice of Jeffrey Pfeffer in his 2010 book on power regarding personal qualities, creating resources, building a reputation, and overcoming opposition.

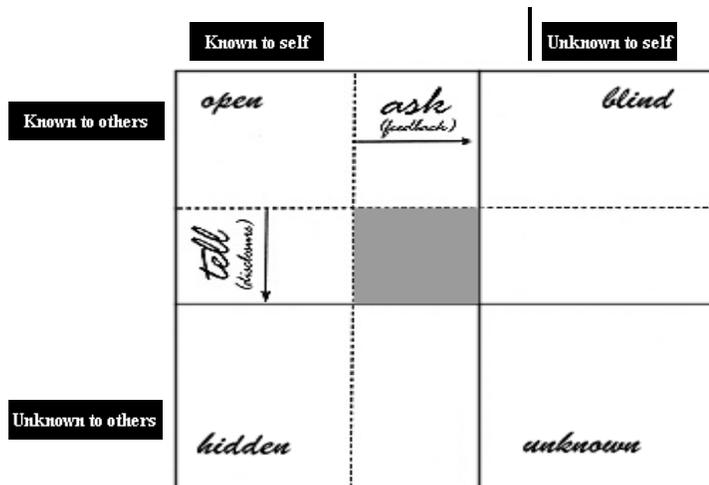
Having completed Maccoby's (1976) career style inventory, I am interested to learn that I am a "gamesman," and I realize this is an apt description. In thinking of my career, I have taken risks and made career moves most of my peers have not, and my resume now reads in a way some find unconventional because I have not stayed with one or two organizations nor even with one industry. I've taken my share of risks. Nearly three years ago, I left a vice president position in a global corporation to become an independent consultant – a risk that I deemed worth taking because it would give me new opportunities. I love to learn new techniques – this is part of the reason I'm in the MSMOB program at Benedictine University although I have another graduate degree in a different field. I am great at energizing my team and my peers, and I compete in the workplace to "gain fame, glory, the exhilaration of victory," which is part of Maccoby's description of a gamesman (1976, p. 171). In terms of career, my greatest fear is to be labeled a loser – this is a trait Maccoby also ascribes to gamesmen.

Being a gamesman means I am open to all opportunities. In my understanding of gamesmanship, I am willing to pursue this position because it's fun to meet the people in the organization, figure out where I could fit and be successful, and compete for the role and its accompanying elements such as salary, responsibilities, and management of the team.

Taking risks and playing games could send the message that I'm independent and don't depend on what others think of me, that I prefer to be alone. As my FIRO-B scores attest, this is far from true. I have clearly high needs for both inclusion and affection (with need for control much lower). Is this a paradox? Schnell & Hammer (1993) describe the FIRO-B description of need for inclusion as having to do with forming new relationships and associating with people, and determines the extent of contact and prominence that a person seeks. The need for affection has to do with emotional ties and warm connections between people, and determine the extent of closeness that a person seeks. I know I have been missing these elements in my independent consulting structure, which is one of the reasons I have returned to organizational life as an in-house professional.

Leaders are only human (most of the time), and so have some areas that they might not fully understand within themselves. In my experience, a useful model for understanding this is the famous Johari Window (see the figure below). This can provide rich opportunities to know oneself and others. I have used the model for leadership coaching for clients and for myself to help build self-awareness, proficiency in dealing with others, and to grow as a person.

Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955)



The usefulness of this tool is that it shows us how to move more fully within all parts of our conscious behavior, beginning with the “open” area, which is that part of our conscious self – our attitudes, behavior, motivation, values, way of life – of which we are aware and which is known to others. With this, we balance the hidden area, which cannot be known to others unless we disclose it; the blind area, the things about ourselves which we do not know, but that others can see more clearly; and the unknown area, where we are more rich and complex than that which we and others know and is sometimes revealed to our consciousness.

Leadership and Power

French and Raven (1959, in Burke), in their famous five sources of power, provide an effective structure for thinking about how I might enhance, create, and maintain power in this new organizational situation. These power bases, which define power in terms of behavioral acts are: reward (having something others want and would be willing to do things for you to get them), coercive (having resources that can be used to punish others, so they will do things to avoid), expert (having information or knowledge that others benefit from and that they don't already have), legitimate (having authority based on position, title, or role, which others accept as your right and are willing to obey), and referent (having power due to personal attraction and others' desire to please you). Using these, I can analyze my potential power sources in my new position.

Pfeffer (2010) says that the two most important qualities determining power in leaders are *will* (the drive to accomplish big things), and *skill* (the capabilities to turn ambition into accomplishment (p. 40). According to Pfeffer (2010), the attributes of will are 1. ambition (a focus on achieving influence and the drive to succeed at a clear vision), 2. energy (the ability to put in long hours to acquire knowledge and skill), and 3. focus (specialization in a particular

industry or company, concentration on a limited scope of skills, and/or concentration on the particular skills within your job that are the most critical).

Pfeffer's emphasis on focus seems at odds with this era, in which workers are moving among companies, the corporate celebrities are entrepreneurs who are shunning traditional paths to success, and gamesmen (like me), who take good risks and have fun moving around the pieces of their careers rather than sticking to a well-worn and marked path, and who Maccoby (1976) says are the leaders of today. Pfeffer (2010) says that power is more likely if we apply our ambition and energy to a limited range of activities in a pretty narrow set of companies or industries because we have to build networks, relationships, visibility, expertise, and power over time, and, given that our careers only contain a few decades, it isn't possible to build these very deeply if we have to cover more than a few companies and industries. This makes sense to me - I have seen employers shun gamesmen in favor of those who have been in certain industries or types of companies, and human resources professionals look suspiciously at resumes that contain more than a few moves. Does it mean gamesmen cannot be truly powerful? Or does it mean our opportunities are fewer, only found in a certain kind of modern mindset among executives and hiring managers? Those are interesting and important questions for further study by organization development professionals and scholars.

Women in Leadership

Part of my work in corporate strategy, especially during the past few years, has focused on diversity and inclusion with an emphasis on the role of women in business. I know that my leadership style is, in part, shaped by the qualities particular to my gender. Waclawski, Church, and Burke (1995), in studying women in the field of OD, say that the types of values and interventions promoted by women in OD are important and have the potential to significantly change the future of OD. I have observed this to be true in OD and in business in general –

women influence leaders to focus on people, interactions, relationships, and nuance, which enriches decisions and processes traditionally driven only by numbers. This area of study is important to me because I am a woman, and I am now adding OD to my communication education, skills, and experiences, and envision continuing my work at the unique niche of communication and OD.

I've also observed the impact of diversity on large scale change efforts. My career has involved many sizes and types of organizations in a variety of industries – however, my favorite challenge is to lead strategic change and engagement for large corporations. This is partly because these usually include more diversity on the teams with which I'm working and their workforces overall. I was intrigued by the concept of the impact of diversity on large scale organizational change, as studied by Worley, Mohrman, and Nevitt (2011). They were interested in how the diversity of a group impacted results of change efforts, and found that stakeholder diversity in the group's composition affects the number of stakeholder perspectives that were heard during the meeting and the wide range of issues addressed during decision making. I've seen this first hand to be true in many situations. And not just diversity of gender, race, or other traditional diversity categories, but diversity of background, ways of thinking, personality styles, and other factors that contribute to the richness and therefore long lasting change efforts of which I've been part.

Conclusion

An analysis of one's leadership style begs the question "what type of leader am I?" After reviewing the literature, it seems I must choose from among distributed leadership (multiple leaders take on complementary leadership roles), situational leadership (leadership is task relevant), transformational Leadership (leaders engage with others to create a connection to raise levels of motivation), and servant Leadership (the responsibility of leader is to serve others). I feel I am a transformational leader. In Bass

and Riggio's (2006) view, transformational leaders see themselves as change agents, are visionaries who have a high level of trust in their intuition, are risk-takers, but not reckless, are capable of 'sharing' their vision, have extraordinary cognitive skills, believe in people, and are flexible – they learn from their experiences. This sounds a lot like my leadership philosophy, backed up by the material I've covered in this paper: leadership is crucial to change within a system, which must be designed to effectively accomplish strategy, leaders must take in all aspects of systems especially their connection points, leaders must communicate well especially during change, and leaders must view their systems at the individual and team levels.

There is much more literature on leadership and all of these topics. So far, what I know is that I am the leader I want to be for today. As I move forward and continue to develop as a leader, I aspire to higher levels of transformational leadership, moving toward the somewhat newer concept of charismatic leadership. According to Ronald E. Riggio (2012), this is characterized by a distinct social relationship between the leader and the follower, in which the leader presents a revolutionary idea, a transcendental image or ideal and the follower accepts this course of action not because of its rational likelihood of success...but because of an effective belief in the extraordinary qualities of the leader

Some of the qualities of a charismatic leader include dissatisfaction with the status quo, articulation of a very clear vision, extraordinary communication skills, they function as an effective role-model, they use unconventional strategies to achieve change, they inspire trust in and empower others, they seem to be internally clear and without conflict, they hold a relational power base, they can realistically assess needs and constraints. To me, the effects of this kind of leadership would be terrific. These are described as followers trusting in the 'rightness' of the vision, a similarity of values/beliefs, a heightened sense of self-confidence, acceptance of high challenges, emulation of the leader, unconditional acceptance of the leader, strong affection for

the leader, emotional involvement of the followers, and unquestioning loyalty. What an experience that would be!

I also draw on McClellan 2009 ideal leader profile, which says the best leaders have a high need for power that is greater than the need for affiliation, and a moderate need for achievement. This is a stretch for me, it seems, given my high need for affection (as pointed out by the FIRO-B). Overall, for me at this point in my career, it seems I am well suited for transformational leadership on the way to becoming a charismatic one. Leading appropriately to the current situation within the context of my organization's people, culture and strategy is my true goal.

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