

Leadership and the New Mythology

Emergence is life's process for taking local actions to achieve global impact.
- Margaret Wheatley

What times are these? Truthfully, no one can answer this. There is so much we don't know. For every argument for an issue, there is an equally valid argument against it. For every strategy that worked in the past there is an equally qualified strategy that will not work in the future. We cannot depend on past success to move organizations into this new, ambiguous future. As a leader, how can you think about your organization, your resources and your thinking to thrive into the future?

The paradigm of leadership is shifting with everything else. Those of us in leadership development are finding that we have to unlearn much of what we have learned to make way for new ever-changing information and influences that no OD program could've prepared us for. What is essential and most important right now for leaders?

In the last year I have been working with a colleague on this very same question. We are seeing a shift that we call the "New Mythology". There is a new mythology enlivening our organizational culture; one that speaks of connectedness, participation, and collective intelligence. You can see it in business, in politics, in new technologies and in our culture.

All signs of disequilibrium and chaos—all dilemmas, conflicts, crises, roadblocks or breakdowns—are indicators of an organization's misalignment with this new story, a new myth. It is no longer about doing things right, but rather, about doing the right things, and the right things must be collectively determined and engaged.¹

The new mythology is inspiring new patterns of organizing, innovating and interacting, and will require new competencies in leaders. Those leaders who are successful will be able to:²

- ☞ Organize for transformational learning, in order to evoke the best in individuals and teams
- ☞ Reframe crises in ways that sustain hope and leverage it into collaborative conversations
- ☞ Navigate in the field of collective intelligence in order to generate and co-create innovative ideas and solutions
- ☞ Act collectively, while engaging multiple perspectives with presence and integrity

There is wisdom beyond any one person's experience and our emerging leaders must tap that collective wisdom to meet the challenges of the future (economy, environment, globalization, politics). Reliance on traditional models of leadership is a liability at this time because of the volatility and ambiguity in which we currently live. We need to find new ways that we can't see because of the old ways of looking. Wisdom is held collectively, and accessed most effectively in collaboration with others. The key to access in this field

¹ Source: Judith O'Brien, PhD

² Source: Judith O'Brien, PhD

is receptivity—it is like being an empty vessel through which wisdom can flow. This requires an understanding of the motivations and an adjustment of “ego”. This is an awakened, authentic, embodied action that is aligned with a higher purpose. This is a new version of power in the sense that power is the ability to act purposefully and meaningfully in a new paradigm.

For the *Emergent Leader* there are critical competencies that must be mastered.

Cultivate community: Real and virtual, to convene dialogue and debate on the issues that are most important to organizations, communities and the world. These communities will value and leverage their diversity in service of finding the best solutions for the problems facing us.

Focus on sustainability: Leaders that take the long view towards sustainability over short term profits, that treat their customers and employees with respect and that understand the need to conserve and replenish our natural resources will find that their organizations will be profitable and thrive. They will do well by doing good.

Shift perspective: Instead of engaging in the attitude and language of fear, define today’s challenges and breakdowns as an opportunity for the emergence of something new and better, whether it is a new technology, product or service, moving from an attitude of fear to one of possibility enlists the best in us.

Create more value: Striving to create the most value for their stakeholders, leaders can instill the qualities associated with innovation, creativity and initiative building high performance into their teams. In the absence of information it is the creative mind that will be agile enough to thrive in chaos.

Demonstrate social and ethical responsibility: We are seeing the backlash to activities and business models that ignored their social and ethical responsibilities to the people they served. People will no longer tolerate behavior that is perceived as irresponsible and they will make their displeasure known by not buying services and products that do not take into account their impact on people and the environment.

Embrace paradox: One of the most difficult things for leaders to understand and embrace is paradox, when two seemingly conflicting ideals or beliefs or values are held within the same space. Personal power has to be held in the same space as collective empowerment. Being a student and learner is as important as being the teacher and expert. Values on technology and people must be balanced. The resolution of the leadership paradox requires leadership not by old command and control models, but by the appropriate use of power and the ability to engage others in a vision.

Move beyond knowledge to wisdom: Knowledge can be defined as expertise, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education. Wisdom is knowledge, understanding, experience, discretion, and intuitive understanding, along with a capacity to apply these qualities well towards finding solutions to problems. It is the judicious and purposeful application of knowledge. No one person will have all the knowledge required to solve today’s and tomorrow’s problems. Wisdom comes from tapping into the collective experience and knowledge found in organizations and societies. The ability to inspire others to share this knowledge will be a core competency of tomorrow’s leaders.

Build personal resiliency: Because of the complexity of current issues and the extraordinary demands on leaders, building personal resiliency will be essential to leading

with conviction, decisiveness and empathy and collaboration. Research studies have linked stress management to leadership performance. Someone who is ill or who does not maintain their own well-being cannot support the demands of the future.

Nothing is as it was. Whether we know it or not, we are writing a new story, a new mythology. Leaders must understand and embody this new story, and move to create environments within the workplace where people feel connected to one another, engaged in a participative way, and inspired to be whole and united. This is the only way that we will thrive in this new and changing world.

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