MULTIPLE LEVEL LEADERSHIP: OR WHAT IF GOD IS A MOUSE?
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Jerry Harvey, in his book, The Abilene Paradox, (1988) shares a story about his daughter, Suzanne. I share it with you now because I believe that it has a "moral" for our study of leadership.

My daughter, Suzanne, has long been the Gnostic of our family. For example, shortly after her seventh birthday, she returned from church services and confronted me with the question, "Daddy, what if God is a mouse?"

Being a college professor with a Ph.D. in Psychology and having read more than a little in such disciplines as psychiatry, group dynamics, organizational theory, religion, philosophy, and physiology, I feel that I am reasonably well prepared to answer questions that deal with human behavior, management, and comparative theology. For reasons known only to God (or mice), however, I did not feel adequately prepared for Suzanne's metaphysical onslaught. Therefore, trying to maintain the semblance of decorum required of any self-respecting father who doesn't want his daughter to discover early in life that his wing-tip shoes cover feet of clay, I replied with what I thought, under the circumstances, was admirable calmness, "What do you mean, 'What if God is a Mouse?'"

"Well." said she, "if God is a mouse, aren't we wasting a lot of time going to church? And, even if we do go, shouldn't we be putting cheese in the collection plate? A mouse wouldn't want money."

. . . "Suzanne," her name came out in my most authoritative voice, "I don't want to hear you ever ask again, 'What if God is a mouse?' I don't want you blubbering on about whether God is an orangutan, an armadillo, or a potted plant, either. Questioning God's existence is immoral. It's communistic. What if everyone did it? Things would get messed up. Why don't you just drop the whole question and go play hide-and-seek with Megan?"

"Why?" she said. "If God is who he says he is, he wouldn't mind us asking the question; and if he isn't, we sure ought to quit trying to catch the mice downstairs." (p. 1-2)

This story challenges our assumptions about who God is. It questions, as only seven year olds can, the established belief about God's shape. I started with this story because I think that it is time to question our background assumptions about leadership. To ask the metaphorical question, "What if God is a mouse?" and apply it to the study of leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge our background assumptions about leadership and develop a model for understanding how leadership may be practiced if it occurred on multiple levels within an organization instead of at the top of an organization. To help us do this, I've generated a series of "What if" questions that reflect a different set of assumptions about leadership than our present belief system. The rest of the paper will explore the effects of these statements on the practice and conceptualization of leadership.

- What if leaders aren't the most visible people in the organization? Why do we assume that visibility is a prerequisite of leadership?
- What if leaders are affected by gravity? Why do we study people at the top of organizations as if leadership only exists there?
- What if followers aren't the only ones at the bottom of an organization? What would our conceptualization of leadership be if we looked throughout the organization for leaders?
- What if leadership isn't done by an individual but a collective group of leaders? What is it about our heritage that implies that leadership is embedded in an individual? What would happen if we separated

leadership from agents of leadership (leaders)? Maybe it takes a group of leaders at all levels of the organization to create leadership outcomes?

- What if you can't control people and organizations? Our present concept of leadership implies that an individual (working from the top of a hierarchy) can have enough power (usually defined as control) to effect change. What would happen if this was no longer possible due to increasing complexity in organizations and paradigm shifts within organizations/society?
- What if organizations aren't hierarchical any more? What would happen to our thoughts of leadership if only heterarchical organizations existed?
- What if the construct of leadership changes over time? What would happen to our study of leadership if we treated it not as an archeological dig, but as an evolutionary process that changes as society evolves?

Paradigm Shifts and Leadership

I believe that there is a paradigm shift occurring within organizations which is having an effect on the way leadership will be practiced in the future. Lincoln (1985), in her book Paradigm Shifts in Organizational Theory, delineates an old and new paradigm of organizational theory. The new paradigm challenges our background assumptions about organizations and hence how we practice leadership in the new paradigm. Figure 1 summarizes the concepts of the old paradigm and new paradigm as initially developed by Schwartz and Oglivy (1980).

Figure 1

Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Simple/probabilistic	Complex and diverse
Hierarchy	Heterarchy
Mechanical	Holographic
Determinate	Indeterminate
Linearly Causal	Mutually Causal
Assemble	Morphogenesis
Objective	Perspective

These and other authors believe that organizations are no longer simple. They are made up of increasing diversity, complexity, and interdependencies (Kotter, 1985; Wieck, 1985; Clark, 1985). This challenges our inner hopes that there are simple solutions to the problems we face in our organizations and concepts of leadership.

This new paradigm is based on different beliefs and assumptions about organizations. This paradigm sees organizations as complex and diverse, heterarchical (with relationships based on interdependence and less on natural authority), holographic (the culture is embedded in total within each member of the organization), indeterminate (unpredictable), mutually causal (actions and responses are circles rather than straight lines), morphogenesis (radical change can happen), multiple perspectives (reality is socially constructed and there is no single "truth"). Needless to say, if our organizations fit the new paradigm, leadership and power as we know it will not fit.

For example, power which is used to gain control over decisions, actions, and people will not work in a complex, mutually causal, heterarchical system. "Power over" depends on hierarchical, simple, and linear

causality assumptions. Complex organizations breed specialization and interdependencies. These variables create boundaries on any individual's power (Kotter, 1985).

Leadership is generally seen as top down. That is why so many of our studies have looked at CEOs or political leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Levinson & Rosenthal, 1984). These studies assume that in order to study leaders (and leadership) one must look for them in positions of authority (at the top of organizations)! In a heterarchical system, leadership may have to be redefined as starting with each individual and emanating outward in all directions (Oncken, 1984).

It is apparent that the old and new paradigm create a paradox for our study of leadership. How can leadership (given its present assumptions) be practiced in the new paradigm? I believe that one way to transcend this paradox is through the concept of multiple level leadership. If we began to see leadership as a collective outcome and as something that is "owned" by the community instead of an individual, we might be able to understand leadership in the new paradigm. In this new paradigm, leadership might be an outcome of a collective set of activities which leaders positioned throughout an organization work toward.

Multiple Level Leadership: What Would It Look Like?

To help understand what this type of leadership might look like, we need to find organizations that reflect the new paradigm. I believe that volunteer organizations can give us hints of how multiple level leadership might work. Volunteer organizations reflect components of heterarchy, mutual causality, complexity, diversity, and multiple perspectives.

For example, members of a volunteer organization have sovereignty with the officers. They always have the freedom to go elsewhere or not follow through. The threat of loosing their job does not exist. Most organizations have prescribed limits on how long people can stay in office. This means that leaders change on a regular basis. The future of a volunteer organization depends on long term leadership development. Leaders must exist at all levels because it is there that future board presidents are selected. Volunteer organizations are loosely coupled (Wieck, 1985) and messy. Strict rules of hierarchy are hard to practice and ambiguity reigns. Finally, volunteer organizations have to develop people. They can't weed out people who aren't ready through a traditional hiring process. These organizations meet people where they are and work to develop them.

In these organizations, leaders reside on all levels of the organization. In fact, an individual can come into the organization as a leader and volunteer for a very simple task. Volunteer organizations often recognize groups within it and individuals who, at all levels, contribute to the whole mission. But, generally success (or a leadership outcome) is defined organizationally instead of individually. It isn't the chairperson of the board of directors that gets the credit of being a leader, but a network of leaders who, through working together, accomplish leadership. This mutual effort of a number of individual leaders who move in a common direction make things happen. In organizations that are as loosely coupled as volunteer organizations are, one person can't do it!

Volunteer organizations often have diverse participants where alignment is created by shared visions based on superordinate values. Influence is developed through negotiating credibility with fellow members. Mutual respect, trust, and rapport are foundation pieces to influence. Decision making processes include and empower diverse participants (Brown, 1986). These processes help to ensure support and commitment of a wide variety of members.

These organizations see leadership as an outcome and leaders as agents of leadership. They exist on many levels and move with fluidness throughout the system. It is through networks and linkages that multiple leaders create leadership. Power is not defined as control in these organizations. Leaders of volunteer organizations have learned through experience that power wielding brings few results with people who have sovereignty and

where organizational linkages are loose and messy. Instead, power is negotiated and built on mutual respect and rapport. It is expansive rather than controlling. Power is used to build the capacity of individuals to do things and to create a shared set of resources and energy where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. These forms of power are called "power to" and "power with" (French, 1985).

If leadership is going through a paradigm shift like may other disciplines, and if it were based on different assumptions like "what if" questions outlined earlier, what would the new paradigm of leadership look like? Figure 2 outlines the differences between our traditional view of leadership and an emergent view that better fits a multiple level concept of leadership

Figure 2

Traditional Paradigm	Emergent Paradigm
Hierarchical	Heterarchical/Collective
Leaders & followers	Multiple level leadership
Tangible Tasks	Intangible Tasks
Fragmented	Holistic/Connected
Management Concepts	Meaning Systems
Organized	Messy
Rational	Intuitive
Analytical	Complex ideas/perspectives
Linear	Diversity/mutual causality
Compartmentalized	Interdependencies
Single Causality	Fluid/Flexible
Rational (of the head)	Heart (emotions and spirit) added To rational
Power over	Power to and power with
Organizational goals	Purposeful Direction with Superordinate values
Individual focus	Common good

This paradigm represents the beginning of a shift in assumptions about leadership. This new paradigm embeds leadership in the community instead of the individual. It allows for concepts of multiple level leaders to exist because the direction and application of leadership involves more than one individual. The outcomes of leadership can be separated from the agents of leadership.

The implications that this has on developing, applying, and studying leadership are vast. However, our first step is to be open to different conceptualizations of leadership. Ones that challenge our traditional "leader at the top" mentality. I believe that multiple and collective leadership will be the only way to match the heterarchical, complex, mutually causal, multiple perspective elements of organizations.

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