The new paradigm: leadership as meaning making

Mihai Vacariu

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All change begins with a change in meaning

Margaret J. Wheatley

There is a need to rethink leadership in terms of the way meaning is made within any organization. New times call for new organizations and for new leaders. Meaning is something that gives employees a sense of purpose and value within the organization and it should become the underlying basis for fostering innovation, preparing the organization for continuous change, and for achieving effective leadership. Creating shared meaning within the organization by inviting people to become co-creators of meaning is probably the most fundamental characteristic of the new leader.

Introduction

The term “leadership” is perhaps now more in vogue and more controversial than at any time in the past. Many authors have tried to define the term, but the outcome has been that there are now too many definitions of leadership, almost as many as people attempting to define it. There have been conducted several thousands of empirical studies on leadership. All seem to come up with contradictory results, simply leading to confusion. However, what we can observe as the amalgam of these definitions is that each author tried to emphasize the essence of leadership.

All of theories think they know what is the essence of leadership, whether would be based on the question of charisma in the leader or the contingency and situational approaches, or more contemporary theories such as transactional leadership and transformational leadership. However, in this paper the aim is not to establish a “universal model” of leadership, but rather to show that

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without understanding leadership within the contemporary social context, then the real role of an active leader can be missed. The thing that is being missed is the essential human context in leadership itself, and the very way in which we ascribe meaning to leadership.

As Kellerman points out in his excellent review: “Leadership is contextual. What works in one year, setting or organization simply doesn’t apply to any other” (Kellerman, 2001, p. 15). This is something that is often overlooked when each new theory is proposed. And yet it is a fundamental prerequisite for our understanding of leadership.

This is a change in perspective away from a focus on the outward activity of the manager or leader, which leads us to an appreciation of the increasing importance of the role of the social milieu, but also of the role of the individuals and their appreciation of themselves. We live in a new millennium and it is necessary a re-thinking of leadership. One thing that the present moment demands seems to be a lesser reliance on a positivistic definition of leadership. Instead, what is required is a sort of existentialist view. Lawler is one of the few authors who hints at this (Lawler, 2004, p. 66). This kind of approach implies that the meaning which leaders give to their vision needs to be shared with their team members in new ways. And perhaps more importantly, our appreciation of the role leadership needs to examine the manner of this “sharing” of meaning as fundamental principle which underlies the whole basis of leadership vision.

The current context of business

History teaches us that change leads to a real evolution of circumstances. The course of the last hundred years showed us that these changes could take place in a dramatic way, and with an unforeseen speed, particularly in technology. We live now in a world of change par excellence. The very fabric of society is now utterly different from what it was a hundred years ago or even fifty years ago. What we call globalization can be seen as just illustrative of these social changes. It is now over a generation since Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” (McLuhan, 1962). Now that seems just a commonplace idea. We are now accustomed not only to think of ourselves as citizens of the world and as consumers of worldwide media, but as actual equal participants wherever we might be based. And this is the important point, that there is a much greater alertness to our own individual humanity, and to the scope and opportunity of being actors in the world.

Of course, what we have come to call “globalization” implies not just new opportunities for individuals but it also implies a greater fight for natural resources. Education has become globalized too, and at the same time we have all become more and more informed. But this increase in awareness extends
also the way that any individual understands and appreciates their place within
the work of organization. Obviously, more is demanded of everyone and
everyone demands more of our leaders.

All of these changes can only appear as tumultuous if this underlying
basis of social life is overlooked. And so, in these circumstances, what is the
appropriate sort of leader in any organization in our time? We need to change
our point of view about leadership and to come to understand that leadership is
about creating meaning within the organization.

Defining meaning

Karl Albrecht is probably right when he claims that "In many ways the
crisis in business today is a crisis of meaning" (Albrecht 1994). We should
observe however that this crisis throws up the questions that are needed for its
solution. But we have to appreciate that one must make the decisive step to
move from one paradigm to other, just as Thomas Kuhn describes revolution
change in science. The difference is that the revolution which is required here is
in the thinking of leaders and in their willingness to appreciate the social
structures that are with us. The paradigm shift required is from the leader (seen)
as manager to leader as meaning maker within the organization. This calls forth
then a demand that the whole approach to change, innovation and vision has to
be recalibrated for achieving effective leadership.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, meaning is defined, firstly, in
simple terms as “the significance, purpose, underlying truth of something” and
in more particularly for our purposes as “something which gives one a sense of
purpose, value, especially of a metaphysical or spiritual kind; the perceived
purpose of existence or of a person's life” (OED).

Warren Bennis defines meaning as “as information endowed with purpose and
relevance. We’re all hungry spirits looking for meaning, wanting to make a contribution.
We all seek meaning in our lives, and we need it at work” (Bennis, 1998, p. 5).

The creation of meaning is not just the preserve of the leader. It needs to be
understood from the point of view of every individual within an organization.
Something more than the productive outcome of the manufacture of goods and
services is involved here.

Meaning is something that is a fundamentally part for any person in our times,
if they are not to be alienated from any group activity. As Karl Albrecht says:

People aren't sure of themselves because they no longer understand the why
behind the what. They no longer have the sense that things are well defined and
that hard work will lead to success. More and more people have feelings of doubt
and uncertainty about the future of their organizations, and consequently about their
own careers and futures. More and more organizations and their people are in a crisis
of meaning. Those who would aspire to leadership roles in this new environment
must not underestimate the depth of this human need for meaning. It is a most fundamental human craving, an appetite that will not go away (Albrecht, 1994, p. 22)\(^3\).

The key thing is that increasingly an active interest is not just required of people but that they themselves feel an inherent demand to be conscious of the responsibility for their own actions, and to appreciate their organization’s role in society and how they take part in the clear vision of that role. Meaning as such has to become something that transcends the bland goal of organization. Somehow it has to be a part of the ethical process, even an intrinsic part of the spiritual being of the participants.

Two observations are important here. Firstly, it is important always to take into account what is important to the people involved, to see “what is meaningful to people rather than as recommendations for what should be meaningful to them” as Wheatley points out (Wheatley, 2001, p. 15). And the second thing is there is a need to take into account how meaning is created and developed at different levels of organization, that is to say, meaning presupposes a certain participation in what we might have thought was previously the role of managerial staff. This question of participation is very important. The way that a manager can engender the participation will be a clue to what modern management should be. The people in an organization need to be brought together and to be part of the project, but it is their participation in meaning that is fundamental. In a sense, people who are well led, at least from the modern perspective proposed here, are willing to take a higher ideal and make it into a joint project, but it is as if they have created both the inner meaning for themselves whilst at the same time participating in the outer meaning of their work in the company.

In the introduction of his extraordinary book, *Rethinking the Future*, James Gibson asks one of the most fundamental questions for any organization: “What is it that truly binds a network organization together? Is it merely information technology? Or does it require something deeper and far more meaningful?” (Gibson, 1998, p. 9). According the complex system theory any organization can be regarded as a complex system. But we have to appreciate first and foremost that we are speaking of complex systems comprised of human beings, and moreover, human beings which have historically been increasingly emancipated from group attachments. The dynamic of human organizations demands that individuals have something of a deeper appreciation of the meaning they ascribe to their place within the organizations. In a way, this has all to be created from scratch. Perhaps the key thing for any leader in the current age is that we have to recreate meaning for any company or organization anew in each case. Leadership should not be thought only part of strategic management either. Leadership should be about creating meaning, but in a way their

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job is to provide a point of departure that sets out to create something which gives one a sense of purpose of being in that organization, a value or an ideal to pursue.

Meaning and innovation

Business innovation has as its heart individual creativity, but of course creativity harnessed to good purpose. Creativity itself might be defined as playful action where the person involved is particularly observant to development in meaning. As Wheatley puts it “Every change, every burst of creativity, begins with the identification of a problem or opportunity that somebody finds meaningful” (Wheatley, 2001, p. 14). Within an organization, people are creative if they feel that they are part of the project’s organization as co-creators; they feel as though as they are establishing the meaning themselves. And really, there is no innovation unless a new idea can become part of group activity.

In an interesting article in Harvard Business Review, “Inspiring Innovation”, the editors tried to find out from various executive directors what was the secret for innovation within their businesses. Daniel Vassella, CEO of Novartis puts it bluntly: “Make it meaningful”; the way in which an organization can foster innovation is by aligning business objectives with the ideals of their employees. He is convinced that “people also do a better job when they believe in what they do in how the company behaves, when they see that their work does more than enrich shareholders”. The aim of being a “good worldwide corporate citizenship” generates a deep meaning for the employees and unleashes their energy and enthusiasm. This shows that a universal good ethics in business can make for a competitive advantage. This is one way in which can be a connection between the overall leader’s objectives and everyone else’s objectives within the organization. This points to a fundamental base for innovation, it suggests that if we can appreciate sound ethics then there is nothing to stop a good communication of leadership. But we need still to have a clear sense of how objectives become shared values and can become a working ideal, or what we might call, a joint project.

This manner of sharing joint ideals can provide a clue to the way innovation can take place as a whole. Ethical standards become new benchmarks in ethical practice, but the recognition is an inner one, an appreciation of inner meaning. Bringing together objectives, ideals and values is the key of creating meaning and motivating people within the organization. When the leader and the people “below him” have come to create the same meaning for themselves then real innovation is possible.

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Meaning and change

There are two things we need to consider regarding change in business. Firstly, change has become now an accompaniment of the everyday business. Secondly, people have to accept that this is the way the things are in contemporary business life. But, we have to be aware that if leaders create all changes arbitrarily, then obviously only confusion can ensue.

Within organizations there has always been the issue of change. However, it is true that in the not too distant past changes were taking place at relatively predictable intervals. Since then, it tends to be thought that there is a need to find an antidote for employees’ resistance to change. Considering of course that change is inevitable. Nowadays, we need not only to react to change, but just as much, to be agents for change. Every organization has to have a robust appreciation of how it deals with change. Either way, it has to be a joint project where meaning needs to be ascribed and for there to be a consequent willingness for concerted and appropriate action. “New times call for new organizations,” claims Gibson (Gibson, 1998, p. 5). This requires creating vision and most importantly, of communicating that vision to others. This must occur at every level. For a corporation or large organization, a clear vision of strategic direction needs to be communicated throughout the whole organization. That goes without saying. But how? According to Stace and Dunphy, if such a vision is intellectually rigorous and well conveyed it “helps to create an impelling sense of urgency for achieving major change within enterprise quickly” (Stace & Dunphy, 2001, p. 78). In the same way, Bennis claims that in these times of change leaders need to “lead with purpose and trust” as every employee within the organization should have a meaningful contribution to make to its work (Bennis, 1998). There should always be direction, communication and a clear individual appreciation of the meaning leading to joint action. What we call vision is a conception which is an idea which can be acted upon. True leadership sees that potential realized5.

Thus, it is important to notice here that leaders should not focus only on structural change. Their job is to see the things get done, and that means that all of these things just mentioned have to become part of the culture of the organization. An appropriate organizational culture can deal with change. And the underlying element of organizational culture should be the relationship everyone has to meaning. This might be something that people are not fully aware of, but yet, we can still say that they are lead in a wholesome way. Stace and Dunphy put it clearly: “Culture also centers on the creation and continuity of meaning which becomes embedded in assumptions and the way organizational members go about their work” (Stace & Dunphy, 2001).

If all employees within the organization can create meaning for themselves which they feel naturally that leads to good purpose and that it is in keeping

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5 Kotter considers that creating a vision and communicating it is one of the eight steps to transforming an organization J. P. KOTTER (1996), “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail”, Ibid. March-April, pp. 1-9.
with the cultural organization and it is transparently open to thinking, then we can say that that is true leadership⁶.

**Meaning, vision and effective leadership**

True leadership is not only about overcoming the resistance to change, but it is an intrinsic part of business at all levels. What we really need to ask ourselves is what would be happening in business if it were really undertaken in a modern manner? There has been provided so many answers to this question that only asking it now throws us into a sort of a crisis? Asking the question can on its own lead to a hesitation – and yet once asked the question becomes an unyielding demand. In fact, many authors consider that we are already in a crisis in business (it seems that we have been in a crisis for ever). If this crisis really exists it is because we simply are not happy with the idea of central direction in an age when we feel naturally the need to be conscious for the basis of our actions. That is why, perhaps Karl Albrecht is right when he assumes that the crisis in business is a crisis of meaning (Albrecht, 1994). What this might mean is that we need to continuously try to make our aspirations reality. Thus, in the end, the question would be better rephrased: “What type of leadership can make our dreams come true?” To put it differently, “How do we undertake the journey which gives us the feeling to achieving such things?”

Maybe the leaders we want are those who are able to create a mission, to motivate people and to build a culture. A culture based on fundamental values related to deeper meaning. These sort of leaders are those who, as Goleman says, “mobilize people toward a vision” (Goleman, 2000, p. 83). People in the organization have an inherent wish to understand not only what they are doing, but also why they are doing it and as well to know that everything fits together within a greater vision. William Turner puts it this way: “The vision must have meaning, because man cannot live without meaning. The vision must be holistic and congruent, encompassing the church, the family, the community, and the institution. If it doesn’t, values and priorities will conflict” (Turner, 2000, p. 83). What Turner is saying is that things need to ring true in our own soul, in the small and in the issues writ large, basically at the same time. Most importantly, every man and woman needs to know how crucial his or her contribution is to achieving the joint goal. In a sense they need the feeling of being not just useful,

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⁶ “I Am Convinced”, writes William Turner in his book, *A Journey Toward Servant Leadership*, “that servant leadership will be the way to manage in the future, not only because it brings personal fulfilment to everyone in the organization, including the boss, but also because it can deal with change quickly and effectively”. W. B. TURNER (2000), *A Journey Toward Servant Leadership*, Smyth and Helwys, Macon, Georgia.
but of being co-creators so too. That is only possible if they have meaning transparently available to them.

Dreaming and having vision is quite simply not enough for effective leadership. If there is one thing we must have in the end, regardless whether there is a large or small organization that is strategic leadership meeting real challenges. There are times when a clear direction has to be set from above. As Rowe explains, we need strategic leaders who can “dream and do something about their dreams” (Rowe, 2001, p. 86). What is strategic leadership really, then? For Rowe, it is “the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization, while at the same time maintaining its short-term financial stability” (p. 81). But, this is just the maintenance of good culture and semblance of good structure. Strategic leadership must relate to meaning which fundamentally gives purpose to the actions of everyone in the company and gives them a chance to take some initiative in a shared vision for a new future. In doing this, the leader is providing meaning through the articulation of a vision with which the individual can identify. As Lawler puts it, the leader’s vision becomes the individual’s vision by “developing an identity through adherence to this vision and the person who promotes it” (Lawler, 2004, p. 69).

Final remarks

In summary then, real leadership is something quite distinct from management of people. It is much more akin to the provision of a sacred trust. A transmission of meaning. It is the best way to overcome the feeling of being beset in business by change, or the need to innovate for change’s sake. If everything is measured by its relationship to meaning in this sphere then the human relationships can be well founded and have the potential to flourish. What we perhaps should be most aware of is that the acceleration change and the need for vision have their basis in the same thing, namely the emancipation of the individual in the modern world. Real leadership then is a process or education not of fixed solutions. Real leaders from now on have to be the source of original solutions; they need people who can appreciate just those sorts of solutions. Above all they have to be able to communicate the meaning well, transparently and coherently.

We saw if we are to analyze the concept of leadership, the whole context in which business plays itself out, is a vital point of departure. Then, we found out that the overall context demands and draws us in the inner world of both leader and follower and that we have to find a disposition to leadership in both. We started with the assumption is in a crisis and we don’t know what leadership is. Further, we attached a concept to this problem, namely we showed that
leadership is that which creates meaning within the organization is the solution to this problem. The meaning is a conceptual framework which mirrors the problem and leads us to its resolution. We moved on broadening that concept to a pure idea, that is, we showed that creating meaning is in fact creating something which gives to people in that organization a sense of purpose or value, an ideal to achieve and fight for. Dance emphasizes that many authors consider that vision is at the heart of effective leadership and that the provision of meaning is the “central platform of the leader’s compact with the employee” (Dance, 2005, p. 21).

Finally, we concluded that the pure idea constitutes the basis for willful action in the world, which can take many directions. It is about strategic leadership, that is to say, leadership which makes the dreams come true.

Andre Malraux is credited with the often-quoted statement: “the twenty-first century will be a religious century or it will be nothing at all”. If we were to paraphrase this as it might apply to here, we would say that in the age of science, true leadership will be leadership which creates meaning or it will be nothing at all.

To come back to point where we started, we should ask “Is this giving us the secret of a successful organization in the new millennium?” One of the greatest entrepreneurs of the last century, Konosuke Matshusita, thought it did: “If a corporation could somehow be made meaningful like a religion, people would be both more satisfied and more productive”7. He had the belief that mission of a modern business should be to relieve society as a whole from misery and to bring wealth, perhaps not only of material circumstances. This new attitude to leadership holds the portent of all these things.

REFERENCES

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