Leading in Perspectives for Tomorrow

About 400–500 years ago, we in the Western world went through a renaissance of thought, religion, business and even nation-sense. Armed force and war also evolved significantly. René Descartes, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas More, Niccolo Machiavelli and Isaac Newton, for example, stimulated new perspective on, appreciation for and understanding of the world around us: that we could in fact reduce things to their component parts, understand fundamental dynamics (i.e. Newton’s Laws, Cartesian geometry), and thus predict or even engineer outcomes.

This analytical and mechanistic frame-of-reference gave us many advances: the industrial revolution, big c Capitalism, the modern scientific method, sanitation and clean water systems, reduced infant mortality, and increased life expectancy/standard of living. Several generations later it further stimulated James Watt, Marie Curie, Henry Ford, Albert Einstein, J.P . Morgan, Steven Jobs, and Bill Gates and all their attendant applications. At the same time, this frame of reference has given us the atom bomb, great disparity in wealth, deforestation, massive national debts, polluted oceans, global warming, depleting water tables, germ warfare, ethnic cleansing, ‘Developing World’ infant mortality and child labour, populations that live beyond their county’s natural carrying capacity, plus ever-increasing drug resistant and stress-related diseases.

With great mechanistic efficiency we have grown our production and environmental impact to such a degree, that we can no longer operate in isolation of each other or make decisions ignorant of the systems around us, or more crucially, global network implications. Yet we often arrogantly cling to the notion that we can be islands unto ourselves, create unabated narrow growth for the sake of our own wealth or shareholder value, and rack up huge debts and toxins for our children and grandchildren to deal with in the future.

If leadership is fundamentally about sensing and identifying the need for adaptation, followed by the mobilization of people to adapt toward a more sustainable future-state, then leaders of 2001+ must help us to shift our perspectives and adapt our frames-of-reference. The trouble is, with the speed of today’s change, the systemic and network implications are often moving and complicating faster than our ‘scanning’ can identify. It may also be difficult for people actually to perceive the need for changing frames of reference, especially if they are personally benefiting from their current frame. Surely 2001 and 2002 has given us enough signals for some of us to recognize we cannot continue to operate solely by our past mechanistic models.

Today’s world continues to evolve very quickly. Knowledge is doubling about every five years. Satellites and tele-technologies are such that there are few places where you are not able to connect to someone else. And, of course, the marketplace is now global. A Network is basically a system of systems—however, the most important aspects for understanding a network are the inter-connections and inter-relationships among the systems and components. Our global network, (Earth), has become increasingly inter-connected, ever more complex, and unavoidably integral to leadership thinking and decision-making. Leaders should truly act with the awareness that everything is indeed connected to everything else.

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Today we are faced with an opportunity of orchestrating a ‘Leadership Renaissance’, in ourselves, in our organizations, communities, and society at large. We must change the hero models that have taken root in our cultures, and we must create new frames of reference for everything from how we live our personal lives to such things as the global economy, sharing of freshwater supplies, copyright law, organizational design and management, consumerism, and the definition of success.

Leadership in today’s networked world requires attention scanning, intellectual capacity, emotional resilience and physical stamina that are in even shorter supply than the relatively simple ‘knowledge work’ that is a current topic throughout the media.

What is Your Dominant Operating Frame-of-Reference?

While at The Banff Centre my research into leadership competencies showed that one can view and operate in the world on several different planes:

a) WIIFM View:
The ‘what’s in it for me’ (WIIFM) view looks at life and organizational systems as revolving around the individual. Projects are undertaken, jobs are done, and decisions are made to satisfy immediate personal needs.

Very little attention is paid to the longer-term consequences of action, or the impact on others.

b) Traditional View:
The traditional ‘cause and effect’ or analytical view works well in a world where the family, workplace, and community define clearly the parameters within which to operate. As employees, people with this view tend to manage and make high quality, high intensity contributions. This traditional frame of reference also contains an assumption that you can control or are in control of the world around you. However, when the world changes beyond your control and/or ambiguity sets in, individuals in this category often become quite anxious.

c) Self-Authoring View:
Those with the ‘self-authoring’ view are characterized by systems thinking and initiative-taking. They are creative and innovative individuals who function well in teams and across organizational boundaries - these are the people to whom we want to ‘push responsibility to the front lines’. This frame of reference also creates individuals that function well in self-directed teams. Indeed, they include the scarce ‘knowledge workers’ that organizations are seeking today.

The self-authoring perspective recognizes that you can only control yourself, but you can (and usually do) also impact the system around you. While you may not be able to understand all aspects of the impacts or relationships of the system, you do the best you can before disturbing a system, then closely monitor and adapt as you proceed.

d) Network View:
Individuals with this ‘network’ view recognize that it is not just their own knowledge or abilities that are valued, but their ability to access and mobilize their larger network of expertise and knowledge to apply to problems, create opportunities and develop solutions for their clients/customers. They understand systems of systems, appreciate a global dynamic and synthesize a multi-component, integrated perspective.

The complexities of networks are even more difficult to understand and reliably predict. So, those with the network perspective seek to understand partnerships and inter-dependencies between systems before they accept or facilitate adaptations of the multiple elements involved. Dr. Robert Kegan at Harvard University, has observed that there may only be 5-10% of North American adults functioning at this fourth “network” level.

Our ability to navigate through and adapt to these functional “frames” may very well represent a Darwinist evolutionary or adaptation challenge for the human species. However, it is also becoming clear that “survival of the fittest” for executives today requires an ability to truly lead and mobilize colleagues within this new globally networked context.

Leadership Challenges in Networks

Once one starts to operate and lead in a Network context, you are faced by many challenges, including:

- Data, information, and even knowledge come faster and from multiple channels, making it much more difficult to absorb and recognize opportunity amid distraction.
- Access to extranets/intranets for information and "connection" is becoming universally available. Power, as such, therefore no longer resides at the top or emanates from those who try to control information.
- People with the capacity to lever knowledge and create value are in high demand, are in low supply, and have many more employment options than those you may be providing
- Paradoxes abound:
  - Collaborative processes may yield more creative, higher value solutions, increased commitment and buy-in, and yet take more time than we often feel we have.
  - Faster decision-making also can cause disenfranchisement and resistance later.
  - Distributed decision-making risks inaction, isolation, disconnectedness, and lack of co-ordination and accountability.
  - Prioritization may still leave issues unaddressed and many great ideas/opportunities unexplored.
  - Yet, it is inside these paradoxes where in breakthroughs can create new opportunities, progress, novelty (creativity), and new value.
- All the attentiveness and scanning of the Network can be exhausting!
Leaders must move from “directing/controlling” a system, to purposefully “disturbing/facilitating” the network—all the while aware of multiple interconnections and partnerships.

Technology and speed seem to be driving the depletion of social skills in organizations and communities, and the separation of co-workers, family, and friends.

Creating clarity, meaning, perspective and direction is crucial for leaders to achieve with their teams/team members who now often work amid continuous flux and innovation.

As we look at these challenges and reflect on the best role models around us, we also start to realize, that today, we and the media too often confuse our “hero” images of an outmoded frame of reference, with the “Network Leaders” image that will be required to effect the renaissance.

Past Hero Images—mythical, organizational, in the business section of newspapers—focus on conquest(s), growth, new creation, competition and power, achievement of ‘stuff-oriented’ results—the picture of the dedicated and committed “warrior”.

Today’s global Network Leader, will become known for a focus on sustainability (financial, social and environmental). This will require a commitment to exploration of alternate perspectives, the active sensing of changes in the network around him/her, collaboration, facilitation of adaptive processes, creative expression, innovation for mutual/societal benefit, and courageous push back against outmoded bureaucracy and narrow interests—in essence, the passionate integrator.

**The Work of Network Leadership**

Meg Wheatley and Fritjof Capra—both members of Banff Executive Leadership’s faculty team—are well known for their adaptation of biological science, chaos theory, and mathematics and physics to the challenges of leadership. Both emphasize the importance of meaning and human conversation to the success of fast adapting and emerging networks and human community. Wheatley goes on to emphasize, that it is meaning that motivates people, not money. Capra has emphasized that leadership is about facilitating the emergence of novelty in our communities. Leadership also needs to occur throughout the community, at all levels.

So what might this “Network Leadership” work actually look like in action?

1. **Create your Leadership Dashboard**

   First, I believe Network Leaders will have to construct for themselves some kind of “Leadership Dashboard.” Convergence of technologies and broadcast signals are starting to make this a possibility, and we are not far away from the leader being able to create something like the following on their computer desktop:

   ![Dashboard](image)

   **Interactivity:** Telephone/Video-conference, Web groups, Exploration of different “fields” or detailed knowledge sources, (i.e. electronic libraries, magazines, etc.).

   For leaders to scan and connect for high impact interaction, it will require various information sources to be integrated and channeled together to ease the apparent disjointedness of current scanning modes. Network Leaders simply cannot afford to waste their time looking for the various channels, then trying to integrate them, only then to attend to them and sift for the nuggets. Successful use of convergent technologies will be important for Network Leaders.

2. **Re-think Traditional Structures and Processes**

   Second, Network Leadership success means changing the hierarchy and traditional central control structures and forms of management.

   In replacing the traditional structures, Network Leaders must facilitate the creation of highly adaptive and regularly changing organization structures, teams, and communications. (This will require Human Resources departments and IT groups to be partners in the “business” of the organization and help lead and support these adaptive structures.)

   “Employees,” “Contractors,” “Alliance Partners,” “Suppliers,” “Customers/Clients,” are labels which might all apply to the same person at different moments in time! Indeed, the Leader will need to facilitate a context of “partnership for mutual success” among all the players in the network. New structures might initially appear ungainly, even top-heavy, as larger numbers of higher level professionals and decision-makers are brought together into new forums to share context, communications and knowledge.

3. **Facilitate Connectedness, Energize the Systems!**

   Perhaps the most of the Network Leader’s time will be spent “facilitating the connectedness” of all of the elements of the network. Bringing people together (in person or virtually), decreasing the isolation, improving the confidence of the various players to take initiative, will become a key set of daily leadership actions.

   Creating the conditions or environments for collaboration and creativity will mean focusing people on paradoxes, or uncomfortable issues
that need to be addressed, while containing the issue to a reasonable size and timeline for action. Occasionally Network Leaders will need to release the tension or anxiety so that the pressures and feelings of being overwhelmed don’t become debilitating.

Energizing the network (bringing energy to the system, or removing the demotivating elements) so that trust, meaning, perspective and wisdom build “flow” within, means the leader will also need to be energetic. This critical element doesn’t mean that the only energy in the system will be the leader’s; however, the leader will need to be a catalyst—bringing together the elements—for all the partners to “spark” and release their own natural energies.

4. Prioritize the Priorities!
In facilitating this connectedness, the Network Leader will have to facilitate colleagues in prioritizing the priorities within the network. Sub-systems within the network can easily function so well on their own that they are out of balance with the rest of the network. To ensure that each part of the network is creating and enhancing value while not being destructive to the others (environmentally, service-wise, economically, resource-wise), will mean that sub-system priorities will have to be themselves prioritized within the larger network; balancing, if you will, emergent, self-directed activity with more planned and designed overall direction.

A collaborative network, like a bio-system, is robust and adaptive in its mature state, but vulnerable to unidimensional greed and conquest in its developing stage. Thus, the Network Leader’s dashboard will require information—feedback about the integrity of the Network itself.

**Developing Network Leaders**

Network Leadership requires exploration, being informed, actively scanning, and developing or leveraging pattern recognition.

Network Leadership means adapting structures, processes and communication mechanisms continually to support the success of the endeavor.

Network Leadership is also personal and itself requires initiative. It takes a higher level of engagement and demands more energy, intellect, and responsibility be rendered.

Network Leadership calls for the capacity to pre-conceive the potential consequences and implications of decisions affecting the complex systems, to evaluate the appropriateness of the decision-making framework prior to making those major decisions. “We’ll figure it out later” doesn’t really cut it anymore. And, while the complexity may often prevent leaders from understanding exactly how the network might respond, at least following this approach will keep the leader close to the network, to monitor changes and make adaptations quickly along the way.

What if the leader (or team member) doesn’t currently have the capacity for this type of work? Can it be developed?

Clearly this “Network Leadership” is not a role for left-brained dominated individuals! Indeed it requires whole-brain engagement.

This whole–brained capability includes such characteristics as:

- attentiveness
- ability to hold various points of view in the mind all at once
- sifting/pattern recognition
- prioritization and context creation
- ability to make connections
- respect for different values and culture
- ability to facilitate and collaborate
- focusing on value creation/impact/outcomes.

All can be developed in willing individuals.

However, the challenge of seeking this development and then putting together these components will always remain with the individual. Engagement to become a Network Leader will be by choice. Our humanity, community and organizational successes may well rely on a few good men and women making the commitment to evolve to this new and higher state of leadership practice.

Welcome to the prospect of creating a Leadership Renaissance for the 21st Century.

Doug Macnamara is President, Banff Executive Leadership Inc. Recently he served for over seven years as Vice-President, The Banff Centre; and General Manager, The Banff Centre for Management guiding an organization which ran approximately 150 programs and worked with over 4,000 executives and mid-level leaders in business, government, Aboriginal, and “third sector” organizations each year.

Today, Banff Executive Leadership Inc. provides public and customized programs, strategic facilitation and coaching services to senior executives and Boards across Canada and Internationally.

For more information see: www.banffexeclead.com

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1 “In over our Heads”, Dr. Robert Kegan, Harvard University Press, 1995