

# Leadership: Intimations of spirituality

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My first introduction to the value of considering leadership as a personal capacity and inner experience was in the 1980s in South Africa with multicultural youth groups. That experience led to a belief in the notion of open conversations as being essential to leadership. Further experience of working and researching with organisations and individuals in various stages of development, or lack thereof, have led to a realisation that leadership, as a generic term, is incommunicable. Leadership manifests differently according to the range of organisational and personal needs and predispositions. Ongoing research and working with organisations, an immersion in and the attempt to understand leadership in the broadest and most unimposing fashion has led to the crystallisation of a new theoretical framework for working with and understanding leadership. It is called Confluent Leadership. The words reflect how leadership transpires through becoming CONscious of particular inFLUENces. At the foundation of this conceptualisation of leadership is a spiritual orientation that informs and is continuously informed by this work. The question that this paper addresses is: how can leadership be imbued with a spiritual dimension? With consciousness integral to this leadership framework, the process of engaging with Confluent Leadership is shown to be a spiritually engaging and enhancing process. The designs of the categories of experience that form the underbelly of Confluent Leadership, offer a further spiritual dimension.

**Key words:** leadership, creativity, confluent, spirited, personal and collective

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I begin with defining and situating meanings of leadership and showing that current thinking on the subject is both uncertain and complex. I situate leadership within an organisational setting, as both a personal and a collective experience. This is followed by a conceptualisation of spirituality that avoids any particular denomination and which addresses the sense of urgency facing people who are consciously interacting in the world. I will then describe the three categories of experience that are central to the theory of Confluent Leadership: synchronicity, clarity of intention and co-creativity, and show how engagement with these categories provides leadership that is non-prescriptive and a quality of experience that is engaging, expansive and spiritually satisfying.

## LEADERSHIP AS A COMMON CONCEPT

The quantity of emerging literature on the subject of leadership testifies to the importance felt in

these times for understanding it. Each new book or article on the subject brings entirely new attempts at defining what leadership is and offers the authors' particular orientation to the subject – as revelation. The phenomenon of leadership is both subtle and broadly understood and most authors are at pains to justify their particular slant on its nature.

This paper shifts away from trying to find essential qualities of leadership that are generically applicable and instead considers leadership, as it is experienced. Leadership is here examined as a personal phenomenon, recognisable through the experience of those who are present to its influence. This includes any practitioner, regardless of role or position, for whom the experience of leadership is necessarily personal and the expression of leadership, evolving rather than static.

Leadership, as a subject in itself, has to be distinguished from the experience of leadership, which is the focus of this work. The experience of leadership is a form of inner positioning where individuals author their engagement or can be said to take lead of themselves. The opposite of this is a reactive state where there is little awareness of self-directing or conscious responding to the needs

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of the situation.

The experience of leadership is thus a way of being, a quality, more than specific actions that are taken. The nature of the experience is described by what the person reports. Thus, the experience of leadership comes about through a personal reflection, reporting on and describing an individual or a group's engagement with a task or with a role.

Leadership is more often suggestive of its presence than substantive in its expression. It may be evidenced rather than known directly. Its expression seems to come out of the in-between, like a third presence between the first person and the other. Like the denouement to a plot, it is the outcome of the conversation. Expressions of leadership take varied forms depending on the landscape in which they operate. Leadership is emergent, like a precipitation. Its language of expression is dynamic (in that it shows a current or movement within), continuously re-authored and because of its open, unstructured and variable individualistic expression may be said to be more poetic than practical.

In *The Dance of Change*, Senge (1999) introduced the idea of leadership that is generative. He states (2001, p.1):

The essential insight for me is that we are getting closer to understanding the generative territory at the heart of all leadership..... the capacity to sustain change that brings forth new realities in line with people's genuine aspirations.

Generative leadership bears similarities to Confluent Leadership. They are part of a prevailing genre of leadership understanding, where consciousness and responsiveness supersede a prescriptive kind of leadership; where leadership is understood as a presence in the workplace which enables others' leadership to manifest; where financial bottom lines and the appearance of a harmonious environment are not enough; where each person feels more intensely alive and aligned.

Leadership can thus be seen as a phenomenon, always in relation to someone. Although leadership is palpable in its presence both to the one who is leading and often to those who are present to its influence, it is only subtly identifiable and experientially known. It thus requires an equally subtle method to locate it. The method of choice for researching the phenomenon of leadership is phenomenology, for its locus of research is that of

human experience (Polkinghorne 1989). When a phenomenological analysis was applied to the researching of leadership in a large industrial organisation, the analysis resulted in a valuable framework for understanding the experience of leadership. The details of the analysis and evolution of the terms are outside of the scope of this paper. Leadership is usefully described through three groupings or constellations: synchronicity, clarity of intention and co-creativity. Phenomenology is sometimes called the clarification of the life world. It offers an attempt to get to the heart of a matter. This framework, called Confluent Leadership, has the enhancing of leadership as its goal. This approach offers a spiritual direction to leadership.

## LEADERSHIP AND SPIRIT: BEING AS HUMAN

In his address to the U.S. Congress in 1990, Vaclav Havel spoke of the suffering that his country, Czechoslovakia, had endured over many years of living under a totalitarian system. He suggested that true democracy is an ongoing ideal to be aspired to, even for the United States, for whilst the theory may be clearly worked out, the reality of what it means in the treatment of fellow human beings is complex and a constant goal for which to aspire. Moreover, in the long journey his country has endured, he appreciated the lessons he had learnt which apply to the human spirit:

The specific experience I'm talking about has given me one certainty: consciousness precedes being, and not the other way round as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as human.

Leadership has nothing to do with attending conferences or courses on leadership, unless one gets inspired. Leadership is not about what one knows or how much one knows; it is what one embodies and thereby expresses in oneself. To be inspired is to allow the breath, the idea, the meaning to penetrate into one's body and then act. It is to take things into oneself, to question oneself and enable oneself, as substance, to be embodied. Inspiration moves one to action. The spirit is itself

driven to express itself.

Consideration of spirit is not an attempt to invoke a deity. Spirituality is a complex word to define and most dictionary definitions are in terms of action examples to illustrate meaning. The definitions of inspired point to the idea of being imbued with, and then motivated, to act. The following definitions reflect the movement between a felt sense (driving force) and a resulting action:

- to fill with enlivening emotion: an artist inspired by Impressionism
- to motivate: a sales group inspired by the prospect of a bonus
- to affect or touch: the director's words inspired her to work harder
- to elicit or arouse, affect or touch: a manager who inspired respect
- to be the cause of; bring about: an invention that inspired imitations
- Archaic: to breathe on; to breathe life into.

Inspiration or inspired action reflects a personal and creative relationship with the world. Inspiration appears to arise from an individual who is acting from an inner directedness or directive which appears to be more than personal.

### INSPIRED AND EMBODIED

People discuss leadership and conduct intelligent workshops on the subject of leadership without feeling affected. The routine ways of operating easily remain unchanged as people maintain the comfort of their known ways of operating. By maintaining these divisions, people speak of things without feeling them and seldom notice what happens in their bodies. Leadership training is conducted as a skill to be learnt. The emotional life and the body's wisdom are ignored.

Inspired means imbued with spirit. Spirit is breath, life or force. William James (cited Bly 1988, p.70), philosopher and father of American psychology, discussed how the spiritual and the sensual aspects of relating tend to part company. This is reflected in human behaviour and reflects a social mindset. It is generally thought preferable to keep the thinking about our spirituality apart from and not sullied by the sensual, the experiential.

The definitions of spirituality all point to a felt sense of being imbued with a quality that moves one to action. Steindl-Rast (2009) refers to the meaning of spiritual as 'moments of heightened aliveness' which he describes as a 'common sense'. Author of *ReEnchantment*, David Tacey (2000) says that spirituality is a very normal experience that is

available to all people. It provides the sense of being connected to a greater whole with the accompanying realisation there's always more than meets the eye. Both these thinkers allude to the action of 'making conscious' through attending to one's immediate experience. The action of leadership, as a conscious making, clarifying process opens up a kind of enthusiasm, clarity and understanding that brings a renewing quality to one's engagement. Confluent leadership offers three broad categories of experience towards a conscious-making process that engages both spirit and body.

I believe there is a general fatigue with the conventional 'training' for leadership as a generic type of skill. People appear hungry for an approach that clearly respects the individual and the group (or organisation) in its particularity. Confluent Leadership stands alongside a few other studies and research about leadership (Senge; Cooperrider; Heifetz) that bring a kind of intellectual imagination with a personal empowerment that is desirable in this modern time.

### CONFLUENTIAL LEADERSHIP AS SURRENDER TO PHENOMENA

Working with this model of leadership is a seeking process without a clear or definite sense of what is sought. Leadership is a phenomenon! It appears that in order to find 'leadership', an intention towards what is being sought, needs to be brought to the seeking. This represents an anomaly. Ancient wisdom says that the reward for patience is patience; to find patience, one needs to bring patience! The idea of seeking a phenomenon through an integral seeking is a surrender to that phenomenon. An intensive phenomenological analysis resulted in the three categories that constellate the framing of confluent leadership. This notion of surrender towards grasping understanding continues to be relevant as each person reflects on their particular working role or position. What each person brings to their role, is their leadership: this is the phenomenon referred to by the researcher as Goethe says (in Bortoft 1996, p.242):

So the researcher, in directing attention exclusively to the phenomenon, is in fact surrendering to the phenomenon, making a space for it to appear as itself. How leadership arises for each person, group or organisation, is individually determined and becomes a quest, with its own spiritual focus.

## THE CONSTELLATIONS

Each category of experience has characteristics similar to a constellation: aspects of it are seen, others are unseen; some brighter, some more vague, some yet to be revealed. These are described comprehensively, allowing imagination and reflection to mix with the bodily memory of the experience. The psychological dynamic of the constellation is expanded towards appreciating the boundaries of each term's operation and its influence. The three categories are:

- synchronicity
- clarity of Intention
- co-creativity.

Consideration is given to the contribution that each of these constellations makes to the structure of the whole phenomenon and how each is part of and essential to an emergent framework of leadership.

## THE SENSE OF TIMING...SYNCHRONICITY

Jaworski (1996) speaks of his path of life and leadership and how, at times, outer events unfold and appear to meet an inner readiness from for just those events. It is as though the timing were somehow designed to fit the needs of the individual, the community and the task concerned. How events will unfold is unpredictable. There is no guarantee of success for actions embarked upon but it is as though, on reflection, the order and meaning for what has arisen, is clear. It may appear that the universe directly conspires to provide experience that is serendipitous and synchronous in a way that one could never have consciously created.

Arthur Koestler (cited Jaworski 1996, p.185), paraphrasing Jung, defines synchronicity as 'the seemingly accidental meeting of two unrelated causal chains in a coincidental event which appears highly improbable and highly significant'. The kinds of phrases that accompany this type of phenomenon include: doors seem to open; a kind of magical flow happens; like a coherence in the field; the right people appear; jobs are inexplicably easily completed.

Like a subtle sign that is given, it intimates, in William James's phrase, 'something more'. The discovery carries a sense of personal import and because it brings new existential possibilities, it

may even carry transformative consequences for the person experiencing it. Synchronicity is first sensed as an experience and then recognition is made of the connections. Such events are like repeated endorsements of a venture. The universe seemed to be providing for and supporting the venture. This is the action of synchronicity.

Hillman (2000) discusses the essential link between leadership and timing. 'This capacity to recognise the occasione (sic) is crucial to the exercise of leadership and grants it power over circumstances.' He compares the human action of leadership to that of an animal's, for it unites thought and action in a single gesture. Leadership for Hillman is like an instinctual drive that cannot but express itself when its time comes. It is often hidden and its power will then manifest as an influence that is more like a tilting in a direction than a force. But metaphorically it lies in hiding until its time comes, and then when its time comes, the leader will be the embodiment of ideas, a most powerful force.

The word synchronicity is applied in relation to timing more than the co-incident factor with which it is usually associated. The application of the constellation synchronicity in a leadership context aims at situating the particular role or position, within one's past and future towards appreciating how this position 'fits in' as an integral part of one's biography. It is a process of making sense of how the particular work/job/position/role corresponds to or is consonant with the direction one's life is taking. Work positions may not be appropriate for any number of reasons. If this is the case, there is little value continuing for it is unlikely that a full and satisfying engagement with that work will occur. There may be subtle signals indicating the misfit or the mistiming. Sometimes these are only recognised in retrospect. Actual synchronicities can also be noticed that offer guidance towards a deeper sense-making.

Timing is an important force which historically has been neglected. This aspect of living and working cannot be directly controlled, but has to be respected and incorporated. When one's consciousness is open to the possibility, synchronicities as coincident events do occur. These seem to validate a chosen pathway. Through this action of noticing and making conscious, the sense earlier named as 'common sense', brings with it renewed understanding and knowledge whose nature is 'spiritual'. This sense-making activity generates a deeper engagement than had previously been the case and makes a significant

difference to one's relationship with one's role or position.

### UNWAVERING WILLINGNESS...CLARITY OF INTENTION

Ideas can sometimes take hold with an almost unwavering attachment and commitment to the idea. Like the experience of knowing something definitely, there is a willingness for taking action that is seated deeply within one's body accompanied by a belief in the purpose of what is needed. Intention is mixed with deep knowing and a preparedness or readiness for action. This does not imply the knowledge of how to fulfil the task but rather the preparedness to meet the challenge of finding out what is needed. Like an 'inner agreement' for a role or task, this aspect of leadership is often neglected.

Clarity of intention is differentiated from the concept of purpose used by many authors on the subject of leadership. Jaworski (1999) refers to 'clarity of purpose' as an essential ingredient of leadership. He relates this to terms such as 'vital design' or 'longing to serve a higher purpose'. This is more like 'life purpose' rather than simply purpose. It assumes a somewhat grandiose sense about the purpose of one's life and life designs. Other than the Mozarts of this world, it is quite seldom that people do have a clear sense of what their life purpose is. One may have a sense about the rightness or suitability of embarking on a particular project at a particular time, but to stretch this into the realms of higher purpose adds surreal religious expectation. Clarity of intention is equally powerful but a more accessible notion and perhaps gentler to embrace.

Clarity of intention for taking on a role or position comes out of a belief in the nature of the work or position. Hillman (1990) discusses the idea of 'mythological certitude', a notion that well elucidates the meaning 'clarity of intention'.

Hillman argues the case for a certainty of actioning (sic) that goes beyond the level of knowledge and extends to what he calls mythological certitude. This response is to a kind of inner drive that is as 'everyday and direct as our immediate belonging to the world' (Hillman 1990, p.225). Akin to an inner sense of certainty or inner knowing, the experience is like a responding that is closer to the instinctual or animal mind than it is to a measured or considered response. Yet it contains no objective certainty about what one is doing or is about to do. This most interesting notion has great bearing on leadership for it describes a state of operating that is deeply accepting and receptive.

Confined to a moment-to-moment actioning, mythological certitude is not about planning for the future or finding a formula for the best form of action. However, within each moment, discrimination and acts of choice are exercised. This is the case as long as that engagement is retained without deferring to generalisations or deductions. As soon as the moment is transcended, the mythological certitude is no longer enacted. Varela (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2000) calls this the active present. Hillman compares this state of engagement with the experience of languaging. As one's language springs forth, it comes ready-made from ourselves as the source. It has no existence before it is spoken; usually not consciously thought through before it comes into existence; and arises spontaneously out of the body. Hillman (1990) cites Isaiah Berlin who refers to inner certainty as a sense of reality, for the reality is itself a result of mythological consciousness. It is myth that actually authorises actions as just like language, action does not derive from or require any other system of truth. This sense of certainty can be related to the instinctual world of animal minds where the world presents itself as *anima mundi*, a world endowed with soul. Spontaneous action happens when beliefs are connected with perception.

I am not trying to make a claim for appropriateness or best possible action or knowledge that might guarantee the results of the action. I am specifically not referring to the results of actions but focusing on the source of the actioning. A comparison for appreciating the source of action can be found in *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Herrigel, 1985). Herrigel explains how the master assessed his pupil's progress by looking at the pupil when he shot his arrows, rather than watching where the arrows fell. This reflects an inner capacity or readiness for action for which clarity of intention is an essential predisposing factor.

Working with this constellation is an ongoing process for leadership. It involves teasing out the various aspects of role and relationships with the evaluation of an individual's relationship with each aspect. To notice what is discordant, albeit slightly, is to take the first steps towards improvement thus deepening the clarity of intention. The workshop focuses on understanding the breadth and particular application of concepts such as 'role' and 'power'. This state has particular significance and relevance for spirited leadership where self-belief or conviction is essential. Infusing this level of knowing into one's working life brings heightened engagement.

## CREATIVITY AS A GROUP...CO-CREATIVENESS

Current organisational writers speak of the need to be creative and do organisational-change work differently from the way things were done in the past. The importance of meeting a situation afresh and not imposing old or habitual ways of operating is considered essential, because the needs of business and the world are changing so rapidly. My experience has shown me there is more to the idea of creativity than simply finding untried or original approaches.

Creativity is not an action in itself. Creativity seems to arise out of the relationship between the people and the work they do. A project or situation requires the participant to have a sensitivity and receptivity to the project. Through this involvement, one establishes and thereby facilitates what that particular situation requires. This is responsiveness; the capacities to be receptive and sensitive to the needs of the project and then respond to the demands that present.

While clarity of intention is the inner preparedness a person has for a task, Co-creativity is the responsiveness to a task, both in oneself and in relevant others. This sounds simple but the capacity to suspend habitual ways of operating is never easy. It is like going against one's natural tendencies. It is therefore to the source of action, in particular to the will, that it is necessary to turn for further understanding of creativity and responsiveness.

In a recently published book on leadership, Scharmer (2007) speaks of a blind spot that is within each person. This is the source of human action, the inner place from which one operates. Whilst people are quite aware of what they do and often how they do things, this inner place is unknown.

Scharmer(2007) says that the quality of an intervention is a function of the interior condition of the intervener. This condition is the individual's presence. The blind spot is illuminated by learning to use oneself as the vehicle for the coming-into-being of one's future potential. He explains that understanding learning has historically been dependent on the Kolb model that considers learning to arise out of reflection on past experience. He questions how people could instead use their beings or presence to have a sense of an emergent future and thus to create or manifest

action out of that.

This requires suspending what is currently known in the individual's thinking, feeling and willing and involves shifting from the usual reactions in judgement to opening one's thoughts as a 'gateway to perception and apprehension' (Scharmer 2002, p.8). In the feeling world, this represents a move from the usual emotional reaction to opening one's heart as a gateway to sensing. In the realm of will, the will would be inverted from being bound by old intentions and identities to 'presencing the new that wants to emerge' (Scharmer 2002, p.8). He calls this 'accessing your self' and it is largely through the will aspect of action that he has evolved the idea of presencing. I believe that this blind spot, like the focal point out of which people operate, is the source of what I am referring to as responsiveness. Metaphorically, it is like a creative heart.

The will that Scharmer refers to is both an individual and collective phenomenon. Will goes far beyond the individual and yet is accessible to the individual. When the individual is open to the collective will or to what Buber (1961) calls the grand will, the higher self is a gateway for the new to emerge. Instead of drawing on one's own will for taking action, and thereby imagining that each person is like a separate entity, one sees oneself as part of a grander network of relationship whereby the self is not apart from the other or the group or the organisation. The will acts more as receptor than actor, and the world becomes less of a final product and more as evolving and coming-into-being. In this dynamic system, each will participates in a larger will and the will becomes like an instrument of participation. Bortoft (1996, p.242) discusses Goethe's ideas of the will:

When the will becomes receptive, then consciousness becomes participative. It is when the will is assertive that the scientist is separated thereby from the phenomenon, and consciousness becomes onlooker consciousness.

In order to explicate this further, Varela's thesis on awareness offers a rich understanding of the place of the will in the coming-into-awareness. I believe this cycle is at the basis of any creative action for it includes the reflexive/redirection and the reception/letting-go. The first is characterised by a turning in on oneself and the second is characterised by an opening up to oneself. Whilst they are both rooted in a pre-reflective consciousness, the first has intentionality and

Varela (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2000) therefore refers to it as the cognitive axis of becoming aware, where the will is used. The second axis is an involuntary dimension of experience and the gesture of letting go is like the revelation of a receptive availability, the affective axis. Noticing the cognitive and affective dimensions, the reception and letting go, the reflexive and redirection show the complexity of capturing such an experience.

This creative response is based in experience and rooted in intention. Without the primary intention, it cannot occur. It is voluntary and yet it requires giving way to the involuntary. It is therefore a rather paradoxical system; both complex to describe and complex to learn. The source of inner directedness, Co-creativity recognises that any response is not a private phenomenon but always includes others' creativities.

### CONFLUENTIAL LEADERSHIP

The three constellations, synchronicity, clarity of intention and co-creativity, have been described in some depth. Whilst each has been considered separately, their influences overlap. It may be impossible at times to tell which constellation is enacted at a particular time, simply or in concert, individually or in combination. The three constellations make an essential contribution to a new and emergent framework. This is not an achievement to be reached but an ongoing way of reflecting on operating that is expansive; bringing learning, growth and spirituality to one's practice.

The centre where they overlap is a place or point from which one operates; this point is present as

the source of action. This is a point of leadership or a place from which leadership operates. It comes about through making the influence of these constellations conscious. They then provide a gateway to a kind of authorship or authority whose influence goes beyond the individual and into the collective. This is Confluent Leadership, consciousness and influence.

Senge (1999) speaks of the need for the transformation of human consciousness in order to save our planet. He says that such a transformation means creating a world that is not governed by habit. Spirituality, as described earlier, can be seen as the opposite of habit.

The phenomenon of Confluent Leadership makes no assumptions concerning how one should behave or what ought to be done. Confluent Leadership cannot be ordered or demanded, although its presence will be noticed. One of its manifestations will be a spread of leadership through many levels of an organisation, for the Confluent leader takes on the role as a channel not as a single hero leadership figure. Such a leader is responsive to the need for others to bring their leadership to bear. They are sensitive to their relationships with the various aspects of the job, and are ready to take and share personal and collective responsibility. This leader embodies their role because their thoughts, feelings and wills are aligned. Such a person has an understanding and clarity about why they are in their particular role and realise that the influences of the constellations continue and change as circumstances change. The process of working with one's conscious awareness of these influences is an ongoing 'spiritual' practice, a continuous pathway rather than a point of arrival.



**Dr Claire Jankelson** has over two decades of teaching experience in a number of major tertiary educational institutions, and brings a passion for educating and training that promotes understanding and brings results. Currently working at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management, she is working with a colleague supervising PhD students using dialogue in a hermeneutic circle. She employs a range of approaches including theatre, narrative, writing, drama for more embodied responses; towards getting to 'leadership'. Confluent Leadership, a consciousness model of leadership, was framed through the course of her PhD. Newly developed is 'The Leadership Project', an intensive practitioner-based research and leadership program.

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