

Alternative Leadership – The Need for a Grand Unified Theory

Current leadership theories are outdated; new disciplines and disruptive changes call for a Grand Unified Leadership Theory.

Leadership Approaches so Passé

Current leadership approaches date from the beginning of the 20th century. They were developed before the following occurred:



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- The invention of modern finance (Keynesian and supply side economics)
- The emergence of mass fast-growth societies such as China and India
- The onset of global pollution and global warming
- The computer and internet age
- The invention of the nuclear bomb
- Weapons of mass destruction
- The rise of the megalopolis

Our current leadership theories and approaches arose out of a kinder, gentler, much less complex and much less sophisticated global, social, and political age. So, we call them the Gentle Age leadership theories.

The Gentle Age theories were based on psychological, sociological and anthropological paradigms that actually date from philosophies dating back even many more centuries. They had their genesis in philosophers such as Plato, Locke, Durkheim and Jung. The Gentle Age theories encompass personality, competency, emotional, 360, team functioning, and social harmony approaches. The objective of the Gentle Age theories was to get people to work better together. In this they often do a good job.

However, the Gentle Age theories signally omit to integrate financial, systems, web, and other modern factors, including political and military, to mention just a few. There are vast swathes of modern life and systems that the Gentle Age theories were not designed to address since they could not have known about them. Yet we continue to use them to address these leadership factors simply because there is no alternative.

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Leadership Performance Now So Utterly Lacking

We don't have to emphasize the obvious problems in current leadership performance, whether it is at the political, business or social level. The credit crisis and its aftermath are self-explanatorily awful and leadership performance in it can be measured quantitatively by the amounts of money written off so far by the banks – a trillion or so dollars and counting. The American public's ultra-low ranking of Congress' performance – in the teen percentage range – says it all about our political leadership. The world's opinion of the US is reflected and measured in the plummeting price of the dollar compared to other currencies.

When things aren't going well, maybe even falling down around you, you need a different approach, right? An alternative approach. As in alternative energy when conventional sources of energy dry up, alternative medicine when the current version won't cure something, maybe even alternative finance, to dodge the "silver" bullets that have been killing our financial system recently.

By their very nature it's difficult to judge alternative approaches. They are intrinsically unknown, intrinsically threatening, and intrinsically can't be judged on the criteria we have been educated in traditionally because those are simply the wrong criteria. Yet alternative approaches are what makes humans human and what keeps human progress alive, vibrant, and ultimately constructive.

So it's a good time to talk about alternative leadership. What would alternative theories of leadership look like? What would they address that our current leadership approaches don't address now? How would we measure their success or otherwise? What disciplines would contribute to them that have not yet contributed? What sorts of people and situations would they apply to that current leadership approaches do not address?

The Shock of the New

There is a list of new disciplines that need to contribute to alternative leadership. Many of these are going to be unfamiliar or even frightening to some current leadership thinkers and practitioners because they represent new worlds with which they have had little or no familiarity. But these worlds are coming, like it or not. Leaders who ignore them will not be able to survive and leadership developers who also do so will simply become irrelevant.

These disciplines include the following:

- **Finance** – so that leadership is linked explicitly with financial and market valuation issues, by focusing on business acumen
- **Behavioral finance** – so that modern discoveries in behavioral science, especially relating to mixed rationality decision-making models, are included
- **Neuroeconomics** – so that we can integrate findings at the neural level with leadership and outcome, especially financial outcome
- **Chaos theory** – so that we integrate the science of dealing with disruptive change
- **Global sustainability** – so that we can integrate the issues of the triple bottom line into leadership development
- **Cosmology, planetary exploration and entropy** - so we integrate findings as to the likely low level of sustainability of the planet and can integrate leadership approaches that provide solutions to the future
- **Cognitive science** – so that we understand the importance of the non-rational and the spiritual in leadership approaches
- **Research methods** – so that we incorporate outcome based and evidence-based techniques into leadership studies

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We cannot say for sure how these disciplines will be integrated into leadership approaches. But we can say with a high degree of certainty that they will be. And we can also say that, unless this happens, the art and science of leadership will heavily trail what is happening in the real world to the point of total irrelevance or even total tragedy.

Incremental vs. Disruptive Change

The Gentle Age theories of leadership have a subtle but powerful bias. They imply that there will not be disruptive change since a world of harmony and high social functioning will never see any disruption. The anthropological and sociological foundation of Gentle Age theories bakes in a very powerful bias in

this direction.

The alternative approach to leadership needs to focus explicitly on disruptive change. Nasim Taleb's recent book "The Black Swan" is a contemporary reflection of this emerging reality.

Leadership assessments tend to assess people on how well they cope with known environments and not how they would work in a highly disruptive or disrupted environment. That is not to say that some competency tests do not measure various capabilities that could be used to infer such capabilities. However they simply do not focus on it.

Winston Churchill would not have done well on Gentle Age assessments, but an alternative assessment that identified the capability to deal with disruptive change would have been very flattering to him. We need assessments and methods that help identify such leaders and develop others. We constantly see how disruptive change can arise unpredictably and often when it is least expected. A major challenge of alternative leadership is how to address the issue of disruptive change.

Part of the issue is that identifying leaders who can cope with disruptive change defies many of our conventional criteria. Disruptive leaders are often:

- Unpredictable
- Quirky
- Different
- Amateurs
- Controversial
- Uneducated where they are "supposed" to be educated

Gentle Age theories tend to sideline those leaders who can address disruptive change because even in an emergency, powerful social and cultural factors conspire against leaders who take us in new and uncertain directions. Alternative theories of leadership need to explicitly account for these factors.

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Criteria for a Grand Unified Leadership Theory

So what would a GULT (Grand Unified Leadership Theory) look like? It would be capable of linking a person's or a team's capabilities to their effectiveness in meeting a number of objectives such as:

- Increasing the market value of their company
- Increasing the social value of their company
- Addressing global problems such as energy, pollution, trade, globalization, weapons proliferation, and urbanization
- Having the ability to harness belief systems such as, but not just limited to, religion to meet important social and economic goals
- Being able to lead societies into new directions if sustainability and current efforts fail, including the exploration and harnessing of outer space to human endeavors
- Being able to deal with disruptive change

So far there is no GULT. But that is, or should be, the next goal of leadership research and studies. Technology, no matter how wonderful and powerful, will never be enough. Only once we find and utilize such an alternative GULT model will we be able to constructively meet the many challenges which will assuredly assail us in the future.

Recommendations

- Stretch your leadership program with different approaches including business acumen
- Ramp up programs to identify leaders who can address disruptive change
- Add alternative leadership topics to your development programs

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