

EXPONENTIAL LEADERSHIP

The phenomenon we refer to as leadership is the subject of countless articles, books, research studies, novels; even Hollywood movies. We are taught how to practice leadership in workshops and graduate programs, and it seems that every author who writes about leadership has the one definitive set of rules that will make each of us a great leader. And yet, despite all of this attention, while many seem quick to define leadership as a simple linear process, very few authors or researchers have stopped to ask what seem deeper questions; what *is* leadership, what *can* it be, and how can it serve us?

I would like to suggest that leadership is more than what we academics call “dyadic influence”; that is to say, one person influencing another or a group of others to accomplish a task or a goal. Rather, leadership can be much more. If the processes of leadership are shared then creativity and the quality of decision-making can be multiplied by however many people are involved. Rather than relying on just one mind, there are multiple minds, multiple perspectives, and multiple talents contributing. This new paradigm is what I have begun to refer to as *exponential leadership*.

It is easy to think of leadership as heroic and dominant. We turn to one individual to lead us safely through the complex and daunting challenges we face. We look to our organizational leaders and our political leaders. We look to our spiritual leaders and celebrities who have risen to positions of influence. We read about leaders in novels and we see them on the movie screen. Research has shown that less than 15% of American men are six feet tall or taller, but that 58% of Fortune 500 CEOs are six feet tall or taller. This statistic says nothing of significance about those “leaders”, but says something profound about our perception of “leadership”.

Leadership need not be about the tallest man, or the most charismatic. Rather, it can be about our ability to work together, and when we shift our perspective like that, we become more effective. A shift to this fresh perspective on leadership can be particularly effective in situations in which those often under-represented voices might not otherwise be heard. While a great deal of excellent work has been done to destratify societies around the world; to give voice to those so often ignored, our efforts must go further. The areas of mental health leadership and disability leadership, like other areas, could benefit from this emerging paradigm.

When more voices are heard, more strengths are represented. When more voices are heard, more perspectives are brought to light. These are the ingredients of excellent leadership. After all, the great hero has done us few favours. It is by working together that we will overcome our barriers and limitations. It is through collective action that we will be able to raise the bar and achieve what has so long seemed unachievable.

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With this notion in mind, beginning in 2010, I spent two years conducting research into the phenomenon of what at the time I referred to as “leadership as a system-wide construct”. I found people from around the world who had experienced success in groups or teams or whole organizations, and without formal or informal “leaders”. What I found seemed significant. I found that in most cases, and particularly in more complex, even crisis situations, creating or perceiving a power differential between leader and led diminished the system’s ability to navigate the nuances of a continually changing world; that shifting context within which we all work.

In our modern, mainstream views of leadership in the developed world, we tend to think of power and control as critical elements of effective leadership. And yet, research – mine and that of other researchers – consistently suggests the opposite is more effective. It has been shown that in complex environments, and particularly during crises, managers are more likely to tighten control than relax control in a way that allows for meaningfully distributed leadership, and this has been shown to be ineffective. Rather, in times of crisis, and at any other time for that matter, it is more effective to relax control and allow more decision-making at all hierarchical levels; indeed the focus on hierarchy itself is diminished.

A great deal of good work has been done in the areas of mental health leadership and disability leadership; and there are still barriers to overcome. Like so many fields, this one has the potential of being dominated by only a few strong voices. And as in so many other fields, in mental health

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leadership and disability leadership, unlimited potential lies in our ability not to use power effectively, but rather to find ways of sharing power; hearing different voices with different

perspectives, and weaving together our strengths. It might just be time to let go of our reliance on heroes. We might just be the ones we’ve been waiting for.



The duality of leader versus led is unnecessary and potentially limiting

