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“Thinking Leadership: Perspective and Counsel for Public Relations Practitioners”

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Recently, we've been hearing more and more about "leadership." In an era in which we seem to know more and more about less and less, this should perhaps not be remarkable.

The famous Austrian psychologist, Otto Rank, who was an early associate of Freud, observed that we already have too much "truth," more than we could possibly use. Whether these recent truths we've been hearing about constitute but one more instance of adding to the broth but not to the stock, remains to be seen.

What we can safely observe is that the making of theories about any aspect of human behavior whatsoever depends not upon the size of the lode of "truth" that is being mined, but rather upon the size of the market for such theories. What the recent flurry of talk about "leadership" tells us is not that we are finally closing in on the secrets of leadership, but that there is a vigorous and growing market for talk about leadership.

We might perhaps be endangering our civilization in some unknown way by trying to apply one or more of these new-found "truths" about leadership in our political and social affairs were it not for the little piece of wisdom captured in the following Spanish proverb: To talk of bulls is not the same as to be in the bullring. To talk about or to read about leadership is not the same thing as leadership.

So we may be safe on that score. The average manager today knows more about leadership than Hannibal, Hitler and Henry Ford knew among them. But knowing about how something is done is not the same as doing it.

The only immediate danger I can see from this growing market for new and better "truths" about leadership is that, unchecked, we will one day have more analysts and commentators on leadership than we will have leaders. If you think that's ominous, try to imagine some of those analysts and commentators actually in charge. The most honored of our current writers on leadership did not, in nearly 500 pages of print, find space to consider the possibility that entrepreneurial activity might be a form of leadership.

So should we be concerning ourselves at all about the idea of leadership? Yes. I think not only that we should, but that we have to. The question is not whether, but HOW.

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I'd like first to share some thoughts with you about how we should perhaps be thinking about leadership when we think about it. And second, to share some thoughts with you about what we should be thinking about when we think about leadership.

Spinoza once said: "What Peter tells me about Paul tells me more about Peter than it does about Paul." In the same way, perhaps, the real lesson in all of this recent talk about leadership may be not what it tells us about leadership, but what it tells us about ourselves.

For example, many Americans have come to believe that there is, or ought to be, a quick fix for any problem or shortcoming. So we end up making a lot of things sound much easier than they actually are. The same mentality that supports a multi-billion dollar fast food industry also makes a best-seller of the "One-Minute Manager." Don't bother us with the details, which mentality says: what we want is the recipe for success. Like many television commercials, much of what we hear and read about leadership these days offers us the expectation that we can provide just that.

One of the main differences between what Machiavelli had to say about leadership and what we currently hear about leadership is that Machiavelli assumed that the leader had to be wise. We assume only that he or she is able to afford the book or the consulting fee. Americans spend 10 million dollars a day on cosmetics, all with great expectations. Add to that much of what we spend on books about leadership.

Another example: We Americans are also into what Carlyle called "hero-worship" -- now become celebrity worship. So it seems natural to us that a leader has to be some person and that leadership is what some person says or does.

So we overlook the fact that we are "led" by words and by ideas and by images and by beliefs, that we are "led" by public opinion, by fad and by fashion, that we are "led" by folklore and by habit and by the conventional wisdom, that we are "led" by the politics of the situation, by our friends and by the media and by our presumed wants and needs and desires, and that we are, finally, "led" not so much by what's possible as by what's available or what's expedient. And are we not also "led" by our ignorance, by what we know "that just ain't so"?

Our cultural bias is to believe that leadership redirects the course of history. What we are not told is that "the course of history" leads people far more frequently than do leaders. Whatever the case, the leader is an interventionist -- one who would have things other than they are, or other than they are likely to be. And what we are not told is that people who do this are probably not going to be liked for doing it, even if it were to bring universal benefit.

We're "led" to believe that leaders can lead where followers can't or won't follow. But the kinds of leaders that are possible depend upon the kinds of followers that are ready, willing and able to follow. Those internal forces that push and pull most people most of the time also determine the kinds of leaders that are even possible.

So the current outpouring of observations on leadership is indeed valuable. But not so much for what those observations purport to tell us about leadership as what they can tell us about the predispositions of our culture -- something we need to be very much aware of if we are to think seriously about leadership.

Let me offer briefly just a few more observations on the kinds of cultural predispositions we need to think about.

There is, first, our unwillingness to separate the facts of power from the facts of leadership. What Lee Iacocca was presumed to have accomplished at Chrysler was not separable from his almost dictatorial position. So what shall we talk about: such a person's "leadership"? Or the reach and the depth of his power? What good might it do middle managers to read everything that has ever been written on leadership if they do not have the power to make what they want to happen, happen? The kind of leadership most of our current commentators talk about is the kind you can exercise only if you first accede to a position of power -- meaning simply that you are in a position with respect to others, and in respect to resources and other kinds of wherewithal, such that you can make what you want to happen, happen. Are those who are presently telling us all about leadership telling us this?

Second, our predisposition to hero -- and celebrity -- worship has "led" many of those who write about leadership to focus almost exclusively on those who enjoy high levels of authority or visibility.

This bright lights syndrome -- this penchant for wanting to attribute even the most trivial conditions of our lives to those in the highest positions of authority -- has "led" many of those who propose to tell us about leadership these days to ignore another pertinent fact: that is that leadership -- perhaps the real leadership in a society such as our own -- is something that happens every day in our homes and our schools and on our street corners and in our coffee klatches and at every level of every institution and organization in the country. How parents "lead" their children has in the aggregate more bearing on what kind of society we're going to be living in the next generation than perhaps anything Mr. Reagan might do or say. Everybody is always being led, or misled, in some direction, every minute of every day.

Most of what constitutes leadership in our society is so mundane that it does not interest those who have stars in their eyes. There are many small companies -- like Johnsonville Sausage Company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin -- that are just as "excellent" as IBM. And I've worked for both. But if you want to write a best-seller, you have to people it with celebrities. So we end up with the impression that our leadership comes primarily from those who are media celebrities. This is very wrong.

Third, we are as a people very confused about what a leader's function in a democracy such as ours should be. Given our tendency toward a radical egalitarianism, we seem to want to believe not only that all people are equal, but that all ideas and all truths are equal. So some of our experts on leadership tell us that the leader's task is to intuit what the followers want and to help

them get it. There is a Sufi saying that describes how many Americans feel about leadership: "Tell me what you want me to do," they say. "And if what's I want to do anyway, I'll do it." The fact that more and more Americans are growing up as spoiled adolescents weighs heavily on how we think about leadership in our society. The thing which seems to correlate best with the health and vitality and longevity of people everywhere is not leisure and comfort and labor-saving devices and "entertainment." It is meaningful work.

And making work meaningful in a culture where work for most is just a means to buy leisure and entertainment is a task of considerable dimensions. If we thought of a leader as a person who would not default himself or herself, and who would not permit those around him or her to default themselves, would we find this characterization in the flood of current recipes?

Listen to the words of the great British eighteenth-century statesman Edmund Burke. Does this sound like what we are hearing about leadership today?

Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfaction to theirs -- and above all, ever, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure -- no, nor from the law and constitution...

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

I leave it to you to judge whether or not Mr. Burke could get elected to any office in twentieth-century America.

Fourth, our cultural drive to scientize everything has "led" us to be much more literal about many things than the people of most other cultures -- past and present. So our observers tell us that leadership is something that leaders do, rather than something that leaders are. In most other human cultures, an understood prerequisite for leadership is wisdom. Since wisdom cannot be measured and quantified, we gloss it. You don't have to be wise to buy a copy of the "One-Minute Manager." You simply have to be willing to part with the 15 bucks, or less, believing that for that amount of money you can buy a reasonable substitute for wisdom. We get mainly recipes for how to do leadership. Little is said about the fact that the kind of creature the leader is makes a greater impact than what the leader does.

On the other hand, perhaps wisdom (in our Western civilization, at least) has nothing to do with it. The correlation between eminence in various fields of endeavor and intelligence is practically zero -- .14 if you have a special affection for standardized partial regression coefficients. This means not only that 86 out of 100 of those in authority in the Western world get there in spite of

their intelligence, but that it may even be possible in our civilization that a person can be too intelligent to attract the allegiance of followers. Or that intelligence maybe a handicap in a leader¹.

If you find that amusing, you will be equally pleased to know that the relationship between leadership and education in our culture is even worse -- almost inverse. Presumably, then, the practical advice that our older leaders would be offering young aspirants is:

- (a) Don't try to lead when you've been intelligent, and
- (b) Education and leadership don't mix.

I've not seen much such advice in our best-sellers on the subject.

One final observation: Our attempt to "scientize" everything has "led" us to believe that the way things happen in the world is a good bit tidier than they actually are. We're convinced that everything that happens has a "cause," and that if we can't explain something simply, and then we don't know what we're talking about.

So we oversimplify. Our search for "the" cause of this or that may be misleading. There is a saying amongst historians that goes something like this: "Most things don't happen at all, and all the rest happen at the wrong time. But a clever historian can correct all these defects." Like every Monday morning quarterback, a clever historian -- or leadership theorist -- can tell us precisely why this or that happened.

D'Arcy Thompson, one of our great 20th-century biologists, made a cogent parting observation on this cause-and-effect thinking in our culture: Things are the way they are, he said, because they got to be that way. But we keep a deus ex machina up our sleeves: we say the leader did it.

We need to think about how we think about cause and how our way of thinking about cause affects our thinking about leadership. Consider this: When the first Japanese motorcycles were marketed in the U.S., the only U.S. manufacturer left was Harley-Davidson. In that year, Harley sold about 10,000 motorcycles. Last year, some 20 years later, Harley sold 33,000-odd motorcycles. To whom or to what do we attribute that "success?" How much of Chrysler's success was due its Japanese competitors? Or the changed economy? Or what G.M. did or didn't do?

There are two other twists on this:

One is that we pretend that what happened had to happen that way. But things happen the way they did, and we have no test of what the outcome would have been had they happened in some other way: We don't know that things would have been worse had something else happened, nor do we know that the way things happened is better than the way things might have happened. We don't know, for example, that, if Euclia Finkelheimer had succeeded to the Chrysler throne, he wouldn't have done even better than did Iacocca. There's no test of that.

The other little twist on all this is that eight out of 10 new products fail -- almost without regard to how they are researched or promoted. So we may want to consider the possibility that eight out of 10 would-be leaders also fail. Are the two products that do turn out to be successful the "best" of the 10? Or the "best" for us or for mankind or for the quality of human life in some future generation? If the answer to this must be "No, not necessarily," then the answer to the question of whether our present-day leaders constitute an adequate model for thinking about leadership must be the same.

People accede to positions of power and authority for all kinds of reasons other than their abilities as true leaders. What it comes down to is this: Do we want to think leadership the way we do because we happen to have the people we have in positions of power and authority? Or would we have different kinds of people in those positions of power and authority if we thought leadership differently?

All the preceding comments are intended to bear upon those two crucial questions for thinking leadership.

What I would like to do now is to offer some ideas about how we might think leadership differently if we were to take some of the implications of those comments and examples seriously.

First, there is something very provocative in a look at how traditional and so-called "modern" societies differ on this matter of leadership.

Many traditional societies have no concept of leadership at all, and others only a vague sort of notion about headship which differs remarkably from what we talk about when we talk about leadership in our culture.

The difference is this: in a traditional society, the future is known. The function of the head or the chief is to do what has to be done to make sure that how the future is supposed to be is the way things will turn out.

In a traditional society, both the leader and the follower are stewards -- stewards of a way of being in the world that must be preserved. In a traditional society, the head or the chief is selected by his fellows as the best person available to conserve the present and future truths of that society. In a "modern" society, such as ours, the leader's function is to change things, to lead people in the direction of his ideas about what things should be like.

This is a remarkable shift. That we have identified leaders with a change in the status quo is full of implications for thinking leadership. But what I want to draw your attention to here is even more important.

It is that, in either case, the leader is a moral agent. That's a small "m," meaning simply that what leaders do bears upon the goodness and badness of human life. The leaders who are selected or permitted to exercise themselves on behalf of followers will do things that will have good or bad

consequences for those followers' lives, and the followers are therefore as morally obligated as the leader.

We are seemingly timid on this point. I don't think we should be -- or can afford to be.

Second: Each of us is ever and always either leading others, or being led. Leadership is not something that only the boss engages in when he talks; it is as well something that every employee engages in when she or he listens. Because it has to do with how one listens, with how one takes others into account. It has to do with what one thinks one is doing when one commits a social act, or fails to do so.

What this means is that we need to do a much better job of leading -- and of being led. We need to be much more astute -- especially in our kind of culture -- at discerning those who enhance our humanity, and those who demean it. The best training for moral leadership inheres in learning how to follow well only those who are worth following -- for one's own good, and for the good of one's community and one's society.

Third, the morally conscious leader (and the morally conscious follower -- without whom the former is either without portfolio or merely the person who exercises power over the other) -- the morally conscious leader is one who knows that what moves or constrains people lies in the meaning of things and not in the things themselves. So the tools of the true leader's trade are not those of position. They are not those of power or authority or credentials. They are words and what can be done with words to create the kinds of worlds which others may advantageously inhabit with their minds.

The best single book that has ever been written on leadership, in my opinion, is entitled, in French, *Citadelle*², which means, roughly, our consciousness. That is our real habitat. The things of the world may have a kind of material existence. But we are stuck with dealing with them as we understand them, as we imagine them, in terms of what they mean to us.

The author's intent was to suggest that the leader must first build the place where people dwell -- in their consciousness of the world. His job is to help them see and understand themselves and the world in a way that would be of long-range benefit to them as people, so that they might better lead themselves.

Fourth, the leader's task is to help others to think greatly of themselves and what they do. Not to tell them they're great when they're not, for this is pure charlatanism -- but to help them or require them to undertake the discipline of mind or of body that would be necessary to do really great things, to be worthwhile, to be a net positive contribution to human society.

So the leader is one who sees himself or herself engaged in a great human drama. A great human drama to make the best of everything, to perfect oneself and all around one in such a way that all who come after will be benefited. And he asks, or requires, others to play their own special role in that human drama, by making the best of themselves and everything around them.

Fifth, the true leader differs not so much in terms of what he or she does, but in terms of how he or she thinks about what needs to be done.

The true leader thinks differently. Or maybe the difference is that the true leader is the one who thinks at all. Thomas Edison once said,

Five percent of the people think.
Ten percent of the people think they think;
And the other eighty-five percent would rather die than think!

One of the many ways in which true leaders think differently is this: They know that what we refer to as human "motivation," and that what drives all the social machinery, comes down to two very simple questions: Who's responsible? And for what?

One of the notable differences between the Japanese and the American ways of doing business in manufacturing organizations is that the Japanese worker understands that he or she is morally responsible for the diligence, the safety and the quality which he or she gives to one's work. And the Japanese manager accedes to higher positions in the organization not because he or she is a better "manager," in the Western sense of that term, but because he or she is capable of assuming more responsibility for the human wants and needs of those with whom one works. The Japanese supervisor is elevated because he or she demonstrated a capacity for being responsible for the meaning of others' lives at work.

We have an expression which goes, "Rank has its privileges." The Japanese version might be something like, "Rank has its responsibilities."

That's quite a difference. Nor is any Americanized version of "Quality Circles" going to accomplish the same thing. Because the difference is in the way people think about things, in the way they posture themselves and grab hold of the world.

So the true leader is the ultimate human strategist. He asks the difficult and the onerous questions -- of himself and of all of those around him. And then, because he would think greatly of himself and of all those others, he defines or redefines who's responsible. And for what.

If this turns out good for people and for humanity, then he was a good leader. If it turns out bad, he was bad.

But if it turns out bad for us, which would merely reflect an inadequacy on our part, as followers, to discern the good leader from the bad. Our complicity as followers for the quality of our leaders cannot be forsworn.

We're not going to learn much about leadership until we begin to learn that leadership is not something that someone does for us, but something that we have to do for each other.

So. What are some of the implications of all this for the public relations practitioner?

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First, there is the need to acknowledge that the indispensable machinery of our society is everyday leadership and that everyday leaders have no voice. A free and democratic society doesn't have one big hero. It has hundreds of thousands of little heroes. The publicity releases may come from the loci of big business and big government and big bucks. But when it ceases to be the little guy who makes America great, then our greatness will be no more. I can't tell you what to do about this. But you need to think about it.

Second, we all of us need to understand that all leadership and all followership are in basis a matter of morality. We're all in the business of making the future. Those people and those ideas and those images of the future we follow are leading us somewhere. And in casting our lot as followers with one rather than another, we are casting our destiny, both as individuals and as a people. Leadership and followership are weapons that can be even more powerful than all of our armaments -- because they are the seedbed of the future. They are not the stuff of holocausts. But they are what lead us toward, or away from, human greatness, human calamity.

Third, we need to figure out how to teach people to be intelligent and moral followers. An intelligent and conscientious follower will always be a good leader, so we can go about making good leaders by making good followers. The real danger is always stupid followship, as history has given us ample evidence. Because a bad leader is no leader if there are none who will follow. If we want our leaders to be the instrument of our destiny, then we must be the instrument of theirs. Public relations practitioners could lead the way in changing our whole way of thinking about leadership and followership in this respect.

Fourth, those who are in a position to explain things to others are, wittingly or not, those who most influence the world in which we live -- past, present and future. It is the stories people tell us that influence our lives. Big stories, little stories. Stories about what happened, and why, about what causes what, about what should be done about what. In this sense, public relations practitioners even tell us stories about leaders, or about leadership. If you do, and whatever else the story may be about, you will be telling us how you understand leadership, how you think about it. So you need to think hard about what you want to mean by leadership, and about the kind of leadership we need to revitalize and energize this society of ours. For how we think about leadership will determine the kinds of leaders we are going to have.

Fifth, I believe we need a national and ongoing dialogue about what kinds of leaders we want and need in America and for America, and about what all of us followers have to do -- and have to be -- in order to discern and enable those kinds of leaders. No one is in a better position to bring this fruitfully to the national consciousness than the public relations practitioner.

Finally, whatever else we may say of leadership, the bottom line is that the leader "reads" the world differently than do others. Perhaps we could say that he or she "reads" the world more intelligently, or is better informed. Or is able to inform himself or herself better with respect to what is going on in the world that bears upon what should be going on, that bears upon making the right things happen. The vital leadership role in the future, in human organizations of every sort, will be provided by those who are equipped to sense what is going on in that organization's

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environment and in that organization's inner-workings, those who are equipped to "read" these goings-on as they bear upon the interests of that organization and its many categories of stakeholders.

That leadership will be provided by those who know how to listen, and to interpret, the human interests and needs of employees, of customers, of suppliers, of investors, of the public-at-large.

That leadership will be provided by those who are uniquely equipped to translate the goings-on of the world for those who make the decisions of the world and by those who are uniquely equipped to explain those decisions and their human and social implications to every one who has a stake in the consequences.

This vital information-communication-intelligence-strategic leadership in the future could and perhaps should be provided by today's public relations practitioner. If that is to come to pass, you must first lead others to see you in this more global, vital role. And then you must lead the nation's decision-makers -- in business and industry and labor and government and education, in social affairs and the arts and in science and technology -- to make those decisions that will further our best and most human interests.

The task is to help others to make the right decisions. That's real leadership. And that is the urgent, profound challenge before you.

I hope it will inspire you.

Endnotes

¹These and the following observations on how leadership presumably correlates with "intelligence" and education are drawn from D.K. Simonton, Genius, Creativity and Leadership: Historiometric Inquiries (Harvard University Press, 1984).

²Written by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the translated version is entitled, The Wisdom of the Sands, (University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1950]).