

DESIGNER, STEWARD AND TEACHER

The creation of a genuine learning organization, whether a large corporation or small enterprise, requires rethinking the role of leadership. The old model of the leader as an energetic hero controlling lesser individuals is not synchronized with the spirit of innovation, motivation and flexibility required at all levels for an organization to flourish in today's competitive climate. Peter Senge (1990) describes the new leader is a combination of *designer*, *steward* and *teacher*.

Designer

The leader-as-designer designs the systems and processes by which the organization continues to learn. Design is primarily a behind-the-scenes activity, or perhaps more accurately a "before-the-scene" process. The designer anticipates potential problems and designs systems to handle them before they ever arise, so they may well be invisible. This is consistent with the instructions of the Chinese sage Lao-tsu (Autry & Mitchell, 1998) who declares that the highest measure of a leader's effectiveness is when the people he or she is leading say "We did it ourselves!"

Steward

The leader-as-steward serves a cohesive vision, a bigger story, a set of governing ideas. This image combines Greenleaf's (1977) model of servant leadership with Covey's (1990) emphasis on becoming "principle-centered." A leader can manifest stewardship in many different ways. It may be a matter of regarding the wellbeing of one's employees or community as the primary value, over competitive speed or short term profits, for example. It may mean creating an organization that provides opportunities for learning or self-actualization, or one that is dedicated to creativity and innovation. Or it may be a highly pragmatic path, oriented toward joining ideas and action, or simply striving for professional excellence in one's products or services. Whether inclined toward the altruistic or the highly practical, in all cases the leader values others, has a clear vision of what truly matters, and instills that vision into the organizational culture.

Teacher

The role of the leader-as-teacher is to serve as a mentor to his or her colleagues or employees. Like any good teacher this means having an awareness of how others learn, and inspiring them to keep learning, whether directly or indirectly. According to Senge, it is also the role of the teacher to "define reality" for the organization, with "reality" referring to the practical parameters, the field of

operation. This is what Lao-tsu and the Chinese sages (Autry and Mitchell, 1998) called the "earth principle." Interestingly, the earth or reality principle can be seen either as a limiting factor, or as the set of constraints necessary for any creative process to flourish. Put another way, any situation that arises can be seen as either a problem or an opportunity. In any case, the earth principle must be respected, whether it takes the form of available resources, market forces, or ecological considerations, if an organization is to survive and excel.

Lao-Tsu also speaks of the "heaven principle," which refers to vision, ideas and creative possibilities. By acting as designer, steward and teacher, the leader ultimately facilitates the process of joining vision and practicality, bringing dreams and ideas into being. As Lao-Tsu would put it, it is the role of the leader to join heaven and earth, and we can understand this to apply to any process from a solitary entrepreneur creating a new product to a CEO leading a multinational organization. As Hawken (1987) points out, even a huge corporation is most effective when it functions not as a bureaucracy but as a grouping of small businesses, each with its own entrepreneurial spirit.

References

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