

## Looking at Leadership Beyond Our Own Horizon

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When church people consider images and concepts of leadership, I inevitably hear them attempt to separate the ecclesia from the rest of human riffraff. “The church is not a business.” “We are not like the military—we are a community of faith.” “The church is not just any old nonprofit organization—it is the mystical Body of Christ.”

And yet we find that the church knows no more about effective leadership than other human organizations, institutions, and movements. Or, at least, we know no more than other institutions how to put into practice what we might actually know about effective leadership. In some cases, it seems that we know far less than other human organizations about how to identify, foster, and strengthen leaders—particularly leaders who will in turn help strengthen and shape our communities of Christian mission and witness.

After only three months, a congregation moved to dismiss their new rector, who since her first day on the job did not leave the church grounds. She reported not being comfortable talking to people, and preferred emails to phone calls and personal contact.

A parish has a history of selecting priests that need their care and then organizing themselves around the work of “bringing up Father,” working to minimize their chief pastor’s anxieties. An interim priest attempts with the diocese to raise people’s consciousness of this pattern. She is thanked for her efforts, and the parish returns to the pattern it knows best.

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Over four decades, a congregation moved between poles of selecting warm and effusive clergy who had difficulty maintaining proper boundaries and more acerbic, authoritarian clergy who alienated groups. A young priest came to the parish with the solution: “I will be neither of those.” This apophatic *modus operandi* continued for years, which did not help the community find for itself a third way.

A diocese with a history of alcoholism and other problems in its leadership moves toward selection of a new bishop. People choose to search primarily for someone who seems balanced and who will not disappoint them—and this occludes discussion of the kind of leadership that might help them move toward greater goals of ministry and mission. The new bishop (not an alcoholic) selects a canon to the ordinary who is an alcoholic—and the system continues. Eight years later, a consultant at a clergy conference asks why clergy and their bishop are not really talking to each other, and why so few attend clergy conferences.

What are we to make of these all too familiar, if difficult, situations? True, there are many situations in which leadership—both lay and ordained—has resulted in significant growth, strength, and energetic commitment in Christian life and witness. But in the *Faith Communities Today* study excerpts focused on the Episcopal Church, one of the most common reasons for conflict cited by congregations is difficulties emerging from clergy “leadership style.”<sup>1</sup> While outcomes might not be as extreme as in these situations, many congregations and religious organizations struggle with challenges emerging from leadership behavior, and slip into patterns of “muddling along.”

Education for more effective leadership remains a challenge in the church. This article (and a sequel to be published in the Winter 2010 issue of the *ATR*) emerged from a request for a review of contemporary leadership literature. It quickly evolved into a thematic exploration of competencies for leadership, based on four premises. First, leadership is in no small part learned. It might better be defined

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<sup>1</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, *A Report on Episcopal Churches in the United States* (New York: The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 2002).

in terms of skills and competencies to develop, rather than abstracted ideals and ultimate aims to attain. Second, leaders across human enterprises have committed themselves to learning better strategies and skills for effective leadership; the church proceeds at its own peril of foolishness if it ignores this body of learning. Third, leadership is indeed a relational reality, but is most effective with a primary focus on creating an environment of continuous development rather than control or warmth. And fourth, the work of continuous development in leadership has some of the qualities of spiritual practice—a *habitus* of mindfulness, a continuous “study” of one’s context, a commitment to development, and a learned discipline of change.

In reviewing the literature on leadership, I have identified different skills, competencies, and qualities of leadership. These are drawn from leadership development literature in a variety of fields, including business, nonprofit management, the military, education, community development, and religious ministry. I have focused on a core set of competencies present and developed in strong leaders across a variety of human institutions and endeavors. These include:

- mental habits of intentionally altering frameworks and helping others reframe their perspectives, asking Socratic questions of oneself and one’s decisions;
- behavioral habits of focusing energy and effort on projects most valued by the organization—and saying no to distractions;
- directional habits of setting clear paths to meet clear objectives and engaging in review and adjustment as needed;
- interpersonal habits of perceiving people’s networks and interests, communicating consistently, providing intentional feedback;
- emotional savvy in managing personal anxiety and perceiving others’ emotional signals; and
- abilities to perceive and work fluidly and creatively with informal groups and networks within an organization in order to develop new patterns, develop internal leadership, and find new ways to introduce new ideas into the culture.

The discussion of habits and skills for effective leadership must begin with mental habits. How leaders think about, pay attention to, and interpret their organizations’ life and context has a direct effect on communication and behavior—their own as well as that of the people

whom they are asked to lead. This article offers a thematic review of some literature illuminating best mental habits. These include perceptual framing and reframing (and the intentional seeking of new perspectives), identification of patterns and reflection on their implicit meaning, and continuous loving but honest reflection on one's self and on the organization. Here I also touch on the themes of the anticipation and planning needed for effective elucidation and use of conflict, the awareness of how cultures and organizations can distort and misuse their core values, and a consistent assumption that people are able and willing to engage in critical self-reflection and improvement. Related practices entail a vulnerable openness about one's own learnings and failures, a non-anxious Socratic practice of inviting self-reflection and systemic reflection from oneself and others, and a fundamental stance that places no value in hiding.

### *Habits of Perception and Framing*

First in importance for leadership is a leader's perception of the institution s/he serves and of the people that are part of that institution. Perception is, in part, a matter of choice—and unfortunately, the choices made by leaders in how they perceive the groups and people they serve are not always conscious. What leaders choose to perceive, where they direct their focus, and how they interpret those perceptions not only frames their thinking and behavior; it also gets reflected back to the community they are serving in their verbal and nonverbal interactions.

The Pygmalion effect is a well-documented effect of a leader's perceptions on the lives of people being led. It might, in contemporary terms, be called the "WYSIWYG Effect": What you (choose to) see is what you get. The Pygmalion effect was first documented by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968/1992) in a short-term classroom experiment with teachers.<sup>2</sup> Teachers were told that, based on results from standardized tests (which were fictionalized), students A, B, and C scored within the ninety-fifth percentile, while students X, Y, and Z scored in a much lower below-average percentile. After a

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (Williston, Vt.: Crown House, 1968, 1992).

short period of time, students began to perform as the teachers were told to expect them to perform: A, B, and C rose to new heights, while X, Y, and Z faltered. But this change in student performance was not the result of their inner abilities. It was a direct result of how their teachers began to treat them differently, based on changes in the teachers' expectations. What you see is what you get—or, you get what you choose to look for, find, and focus on.

The Pygmalion effect is one example of the power of mental framing. It appears in many contexts beyond the classroom, in business and corporate life,<sup>3</sup> in community development,<sup>4</sup> in sports, in school administration,<sup>5</sup> in youth development,<sup>6</sup> and in congregational leadership.<sup>7</sup> It begins with a fundamental perceptual stance that focuses more on strengths and assets than on deficits and needs, and is further refined through the intentional focus on positive qualities and reframing of negative qualities as challenges. This combines with personal interest in the person or group and a belief and expectation that the person or group will deliver high-quality work. The combination of affirmation and expectation (as found most effective in school administration) or challenge and support (as shown in recent studies of family health and of youth religious involvement<sup>8</sup>) results in an

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<sup>3</sup> J. Sterling Livingston, "Pygmalion in Management," *Harvard Business Review*, reprint no. 88509, in *The Best of the Harvard Business Review* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago, Ill.: ACTA Publications, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Brookover, C. Beady, P. Flood, J. Schweitzer, and J. Wisenbaker, *School Social Systems and Student Achievement: Schools Can Make a Difference* (New York: Praeger, 1979); Patricia J. Dignan, *The Pygmalion Principle: The Impact of High Expectations on Student and Staff Achievement* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Francisco A. Villaruel, Daniel F. Perkins, Lynne M. Borden, and Joanne G. Keith, eds., *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies, and Practices* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> John Dreibelbis and David Gortner, *Markers of Strong and Effective Clergy Leadership*, research report (Evanston, Ill.: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihlyi and Barbara Schneider, *Becoming Adult: How Teenagers Prepare for the World of Work* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 130–135; Linda C. McClain, *The Place of Families: Fostering Capacity, Equality, and Responsibility* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Carol Lytch, *Choosing Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

investment of energy that affirms, awakens, and energizes the person or group. People in all sorts of settings and endeavors respond positively to such perception by a leader, when communicated as confident expectation of great things. As Susan Heathfield summarizes in her web article, “The Pygmalion effect enables staff to excel in response to the manager’s message that they are capable of success and expected to succeed.”<sup>9</sup>

The Pygmalion effect can work in a negative manner as well, as the literature clearly demonstrates. Very simply, a leader forms expectations and assumptions about people she is leading. The leader communicates these expectations in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, both verbally and nonverbally, with or without being conscious of what she is doing. People register these cues, with or without consciousness of what they are reading from their leader. And people begin to perform according to the expectations they have picked up—for good or for ill. My colleague John Dreibelbis and I found evidence of this in our study of Episcopal clergy leadership and congregational vitality<sup>10</sup>: how rectors and vicars talked about their first impressions of people when they were interviewing with their congregations was predictive of later outcomes. On the one hand, it might be tempting to say that this validates priests’ initial assessments of the congregations they serve. But our evidence suggests that the *choices* priests make in their perceptions and first impressions set a roadmap for their interactions with people in their congregations, and very different results begin to emerge. The recognized power of the Pygmalion effect is what lies behind Arthur P. Boers’s simple little book by the Alban Institute, titled with advice that should not have to be given: *Never Call Them Jerks*.<sup>11</sup>

In her web article, Heathfield further notes that, building on the benefits of the Pygmalion effect, the Galatea effect points to another related function of leadership: the immense value brought to a community’s endeavors when leaders help people learn to believe in themselves and their own abilities. In businesses, when a culture of strong support leads to greater employee satisfaction and self-esteem,

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Heathfield, “The Two Most Important Management Secrets: The Pygmalion and Galatea Effects,” <http://humanresources.about.com/od/managementtips/a/mgmtsecret.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Dreibelbis and Gortner, *Markers*.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur P. Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 1999).

customers themselves express higher satisfaction in and loyalty to the company and its products; and this in turn leads to an increased customer base.

Choice in perception is one of the most critical skills in effective leadership. Equally important to choice in initial perception, or the ability to frame the situation one is entering, is the ability to help re-frame perceptions and perspectives, both one's own and those of others. In *Reframing Organizations*, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal argue that managers consistently run into their own limitations of perceptual framing. That is, most managers become "Johnny One-Note" because their perceptual repertoire is limited to one framework for examining organizations, and they apply this framework over and over again across situations, despite poor or inconsistent results. Effective leadership requires an ability to shift perceptual frames, to look at challenging situations through different lenses. To develop this ability requires intentional learning of new analytic and perceptual frameworks and intentional practice in applying one's learning. Essentially, effective leadership is marked by a willingness to learn and to expand one's "toolbox" for assessment and perception of organizations—and an ability to move from one frame to another in order to enrich one's understanding of the many facets of human experience involved.

Managers who master the ability to reframe report a liberating sense of choice and power. They are able to develop unique alternatives and novel ideas about what their organization needs. They are better attuned to people and events around them. They are less often startled by organizational perversity, and they learn to anticipate the turbulent twists and turns of organizational life.<sup>12</sup>

Bolman and Deal summarize four major perceptual frameworks for reading and understanding different aspects of organizational life and health. The *structural* framework views the organization as a social machine with clear outputs and the leader as one who builds or adjusts structures to facilitate smooth movement. The *human resource* framework sees the organization as a family or community and the leader as one who fosters a culture of optimal personal development

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<sup>12</sup> Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, second edition (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 17.

and interpersonal accord in service of an organization's needs and interests. The *political* framework views the organization as a jungle or an arena, where the leader enters the fray of conflicts and alliances as an advocate who shapes, hones, and prioritizes the conversation and pursuit of multiple, often competing interests. And the *symbolic* framework sees the organization as a theater or temple or circus, in which the leader serves as the central interpreter, story-bearer, ritual-maker, and broker of meaning.<sup>13</sup> Each framework offers different perspectives on what is most critical for organizational thriving, what are the barriers to growth and change, and what are effective strategies to move an organization in new directions.

It does not take flights of imagination to see how these different frameworks have been used in different ways—both artfully and poorly—in congregations, ministries, and dioceses. There are distinct skills needed for effective application of leadership in each framework; but it is also possible for a leader to get stuck in a rut of overapplying one framework to his/her reading of a human endeavor or institution. For instance, a religious leader might keep offering vision and evocative symbols and stories as a way to move a church culture, when what is really needed is some clear adjustment of structures that can help people get things done, or some clearing of adversarial alliances from the arena. An artful leader can change perceptual lenses so as to get a richer picture of organizational life, and then draw on skills that would be most useful to address what is needed.

Framing and reframing situations for others is a third essential feature of this critical aspect of effective leadership, to help people develop new perspectives or adjusted understandings of the realities in which they are living. Reframing positions is an especially critical skill when engaging with individuals or groups that are in conflict. As Bernard Mayer shows in his classic book, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, effective leaders engage in a process of helping conflicted parties frame and reframe the issues at stake using detoxification, shifting metaphors, and adjusting definitions to arrive at more integrative language, so that people can begin to “tell a different story, one that is less hopeless, less polarized.”<sup>14</sup> Beginning by helping

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<sup>13</sup> Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 14–15.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 134–136.



parties to frame their own stories and to hear each others' stories, a leader moves parties through an iterative process of discovering one another's core interests in critical issues, exploring and assessing options that move toward resolution, and then reframing remaining issues and beginning the process again. Here, the competencies for framing include skilled communication and a Socratic form of counseling and instruction for the purpose of reframing.

*Looking for Patterns, Hidden and Obvious*

In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz points to a key ingredient of highly effective leadership: the ability and disciplined effort to step back from immersion in the daily grind of one's organizational life in order to get a more wide-angled perspective on the movement of the organization as a whole. Heifetz uses the analogy of a ballroom and the challenge of knowing how to move best when one is down on the dance floor.<sup>15</sup> Getting up on the balcony allows one to see the patterns that play themselves out—patterns of which the various dancers are unaware when in the midst of dancing. For Heifetz, the intentional reflective pause and change in view is essential when looking for solutions or new directions that are not simply incremental.

A classic pitfall in leadership and organizational life is the tendency of individuals and groups to look for the quick fix. In *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Chris Argyris calls this approach "single-loop learning": when some kind of mismatch or error results from one set or pattern of actions, people attempt to fix the problem simply by changing the actions. But—as the authors cited throughout this article note repeatedly—the quick, incremental, technical solution tends to produce only temporary results and can often allow for deeper errors and problems to continue unchecked. People tend to keep revisiting this loop through "skilled unawareness and incompetence," unhelpful routines of perception and action so well practiced that people are unaware of them in themselves. What is needed, according to Argyris, is "double-loop learning," stepping back from

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1994), 252–253.

quick-fix action adjustments to examine and explore the values operating behind and guiding the choice of actions.<sup>16</sup>

Double-loop learning is a Socratic, reflective process, and is one example of what Heifetz calls “adaptive work.” Unlike “technical work” that applies known solution strategies to well-defined challenges (as when a doctor prescribes antibiotics for a bacterial infection), “adaptive work” involves the more muddy work of discerning points of conflict and constraint in a system—competing values between groups, differences between cherished ideals and situational realities, or repeating barriers that intrude upon or undercut efforts—and then helping the system become conscious of itself and the choices it is making. Heifetz stresses the skillful “exposure and orchestration of conflict—internal contradictions—within individuals and constituencies” as a critical component of adaptive leadership, whereby a leader provides “the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways.”<sup>17</sup> The intentional surfacing and use of conflict seems counterintuitive to many leaders, especially to clergy who have a marked preference for conflict avoidance and accommodation.<sup>18</sup> But using conflict is recognized as an essential tool not only by effective executives and the most effective clergy, but also by community organizers like Kim Bobo and her colleagues, who follow a process by which they raise community concerns to light, collect and focus people’s energy, and direct it to leverage change among political and economic decision-makers—a process they call “agitation.”<sup>19</sup> As outlined by Cambridge Leadership Associates (the consulting and executive training group that grew out of Heifetz’s work), adaptive leadership means raising awareness of an organization’s need for new approaches that it

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<sup>16</sup> Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 21–23, 92–94.

<sup>17</sup> Heifetz, *Leadership*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> John Dreibelbis and I found a consistent pattern among Episcopal clergy to favor avoidance and accommodation as primary approaches to conflict. In ecumenical settings, clergy from other denominations recognized this pattern in their own churches as well. See David Gortner and John Dreibelbis, *Talented but Tenuous: A Profile of Clergy Temperaments and Leadership Skills*, research report (Evanston, Ill.: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, third edition (Santa Ana, Calif.: Seven Locks Press, 2001).

does not yet know. This helps to direct and encourage challenging new learning and experimentation and the formation of new habits, while facilitating a process of making difficult choices and grieving what is given up as people identify and choose what is most central. This process also assists stakeholders in developing new approaches that help them become integral to discovering and implementing solutions.

For both Argyris and Heifetz, the process of looking for patterns is the starting point for systemic change. And when people within the system are invited to step back and reflect, to examine and explore patterns in their own behavior and in the functioning of the whole and its various groups, systemic change has already begun. All of this work requires leaders to anticipate, engage, and use conflict effectively.

Working with patterns involves two processes: identifying patterns, and reflecting on the meaning, value, function, and purpose of those patterns. Both processes are helped immensely when one has practiced skills and has learned to use different lenses through which to view a community or organization. There are some particularly helpful methods used by community organizers to identify—and to encourage a community to identify—patterns. Following the model developed in Chicago by Saul Alinsky, community organizers like Bobo, Kendall, and Max work with a team from the community to engage in one-on-one conversations with community members, focusing primarily on finding out their interests, concerns, and passions. Another valuable approach emerges from the work of John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight at Northwestern University and their asset-based method of community development. Here, a team works with people in the community to take inventory of the assets, strengths, and untapped real potentials of individuals, groups, and structures in a community.

Bolman and Deal outline other approaches, such as looking at the informal as well as formal rituals and scripted drama that groups and individuals enact in their life together, and the symbols and words they use to give their shared culture meaning, thus reading the “hidden economy” of a community’s networks of social, intellectual, and political influence.<sup>20</sup> Processes offered by practitioners of

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<sup>20</sup> J. P. Kotter, *Power and Influence: Beyond Formal Authority* (New York: Free Press, 1985); J. Pfeffer, *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School, 1992).

Appreciative Inquiry can also be helpful, in that they allow a group of people to move beyond needs-based or problem-based assessment to mutual appreciation of the best that their organization currently provides. However, none of these approaches in isolation is a panacea. Indeed, absolute allegiance to the processes of Appreciative Inquiry or Alinsky-like community organizing in isolation from other perspectives can lead a group down a path of avoidance through niceties or of crossing the line from assertiveness into nonartful abrasiveness.

Leadership literature from a variety of human enterprises—business, nonprofits, education, community development, politics, and health, to name a few—can help leaders develop other lenses through which (or balconies from which) to look at organizational life. For instance, James Collins's books, *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*, all offer insights into the qualities and practices that mark the best-performing corporations, industries, and nonprofit organizations.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant in *Forces for Good* provide invaluable insight into the practices and habits of “high-impact” nonprofit organizations that distinguish them from other nonprofits that continue to do pretty good work or muddle along.<sup>22</sup>

These approaches can help raise leaders' awareness not only of what is present as relative strengths and weaknesses in organizational life, but also of what is absent. For instance, church leaders who read Crutchfield and Grant will come to see an absence of advocacy work in most congregations, and a systemic absence of building appreciative and strategic relationships with business (which too many church leaders consider the root of societal evil). Reading literature on the best practices of high-impact, enduring, or internally transformed organizations might help church leaders begin to look in new ways at patterns in their communities and to develop different strategies.

Reading organizational patterns and discerning what is absent is a particularly refined skill, needed when, for example, the subtlety of poor communication and intended miscommunication lead to

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<sup>21</sup> James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1994); James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001). See also Collins's monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer*, self-published in 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

organizational malaise, a deep misunderstanding of fundamental values, and retrenchment of positions that perpetuate but fail to resolve conflict. In this regard, Chris Argyris's *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* is one of the more brilliant pieces available on organizational leadership. My colleague John Dreibelbis and I have each used this book in our teaching of leadership at three seminaries, and I recommend it to seminary deans as required reading for all faculty and staff. Argyris suggests the interesting exercise of writing on the right side of a page a real or anticipated conversation in which communication does not lead to improved work, and then returning to the top and writing on the left side one's own unspoken thoughts, assumptions, and assessments of the other person and the situation.<sup>23</sup> This exercise helps bring to the surface a leader's blind spots and patterns of judgment that impede more effective communication and that can create negative Pygmalion effects in others through what is said and how something is said. Similarly awakening, Mayer provides a simple introduction to the positioning strategies people tend to use in conflicts, using some brief fictional dialogues between parent and child wrangling over bedtime. Mayer offers this example of manipulation-based conflict engagement: Parent says, "Let's have some ice cream while I read you a bedtime story," to which Child responds, "OK, I'll be right there," while continuing to watch TV.<sup>24</sup>

John Dreibelbis and I have found in our research that priests and pastors are often not well prepared to listen for what is *not* being said or discussed by congregations in search processes. Likewise, congregations are ill prepared to listen for what is missing or masked in how candidates describe their leadership. Often, the errors begin with the tendency to ask unhelpful questions that focus on opinion or intention rather than on demonstrated behavior. We also found marked differences between more and less effective clergy in the types of questions they asked and the responses and feedback that they considered meaningful. Does a potential leader listen for the absence of conflict, or the presence of conflict? Does he look more for evidence of interpersonal warmth, or for risk-taking, or for evidence of honesty and self-awareness? The questions asked communicate intention, interest, and motivation, on the part of both clergy and congregation. In the

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<sup>23</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, 17–18.

<sup>24</sup> Mayer, *Dynamics*, 40.

dance of search processes and later meetings, each quickly learns what is acceptable to say, what is acceptable to keep hidden, and what is to be avoided. Only when leaders are aware of this possibility of hidden and broken communication—and of their own motivations and interests—can they model a different set of interactions and behaviors, and then discern whether or not the congregation or organization will be able to become a dance partner.

In the throes of conflict, the bustle of responding and reacting to ministry needs, and the energetic efforts to foster and nourish new development, the reflective process can break down. Leaders and organizational players alike can forget to take the time to step back not only to observe patterns but also to reflect on the meaning and purpose of such patterns. A discipline of naturalized reflection-in-action is invaluable for leaders to keep learning and directing their own learning, to receive helpful challenges as well as support from peers, and to prevent slippage into simple reactivity and reliance on old scripts for past situations.

#### *An Excursis: Not-So-Helpful “Visionary” Literature*

Because of the proliferation of literature related to leadership and organizational health, a reader does well to make some judgments about what is available. Does the literature provide some tools and practices that will help you develop new frames of perception and guide organizations through a similar developmental process? Do the writers or consultants offer grandiose promises of earth-changing shifts in how you should think about leading and being an organization, without offering clear smaller-step processes for how to move from one approach to another? Do they avoid the seductive lure of overinterpreting cultural changes and their supposedly vast implications for how the world will never be the same? Are the authors basing their claims in reality, citing more than a few clever anecdotes or pleasant stories? And are they able to step outside their own organizational cultures enough to raise questions about some basic but flawed operating assumptions? Is the book basically a form of institutional cheerleading, perhaps even theological cheerleading for the ultimate God-given wonder and rightness of the institution? Finally, are you learning something new that will legitimately affect how you work with people and help lead an organization, if you integrate and put into practice what you are reading?

Given these criteria, some books and concepts, even while they have been popular among leaders, are less than optimally helpful. Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*, Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*, and Leonard Sweet's *Soul Tsunami* and *AquaChurch 2.0* are examples of leadership literature that rely on getting mileage with readers by painting stark contrasts between then and now, and equating *then* with bad and tasteless and *now* with good and juicy.<sup>25</sup> Whether it be modernism/modernity versus postmodernism/postmodernity, or Newtonian physics versus quantum physics and chaos theory, or linear print-based learning versus associative web-based learning, these books tend to work by way of analogy, borrowed concepts, and versions of simple thesis-antithesis contrasts to look at topics of leadership, mission, education, and pretty much anything else in society in light of the perceived earth-shattering changes brought on by rapid developments in technology and science, postmodernism, and globalization. *The World is Flat* is the most data-rich of these books, and the author points to real cultural, geopolitical, and economic shifts that call for some level of creative and reflective adaptation by leaders. But the general temptation of this literature is to overstretch analogies, overemphasize contrasts, stir up a sense of immediate need, suggest some level of disaster if readjustments are not made, and offer a quasi-mystical invitation to a new and better way of being.

There is some value in what these books offer. They give testimony to what many leadership books emphasize as the value of looking at things from a broader perspective. Wheatley, for instance, describes her own "conversion" to a new way of thinking and the process of discovering new lenses through which to look at organizational life and leadership. Embracing the holistic and process-oriented vision of some contemporary scientific theorists, she calls organizations to have faith in what is most fundamental and enduring: purpose and mission, rather than "transient forms" and structures. She goes on to highlight

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, third edition (San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006); Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001); Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: David C. Cook, 2008).

the value of “things in the environment that disturb the system’s equilibrium” and that can ultimately move a system into “a higher level of complexity” and adaptation.<sup>26</sup> Thus, such books provide a gift of helping people question their own systemic assumptions, particularly about the nature of stability and change, structure and “chaos.” This in turn can energize and facilitate the emergence of discussions among colleagues, leading to creative thought and planning about how to be constructively disruptive in order to shake loose locked patterns.

These are useful functions of such literature for leaders. And at times they are important functions of leadership itself, to stir the imagination, jar the complacent, and encourage the energetic. But more is needed to help leaders and organizations translate new thinking into actions that are in the form of “adaptive work.” One of the dangers of this approach to leadership and its accompanying literature is that it can overamplify differences and set up somewhat false “us-them” dichotomies. While such a rhetorical design can help muster commitment (“I want to be like this, not like that”), it can also oversensitize people to looking for bits of evidence in order to categorize people, groups, and institutions. More insidiously, organizations who attempt such reorientation may go about their change process drawing on their same old unexamined habits and assumptions, which can result in shallow change. Nuance gets lost, as does a sense of useful means.

### *Directing and Facilitating Organizational Change*

The perceptual and interpretive habits of leaders both precede and continue to accompany their work as catalysts for organizational change. As has been found in a variety of leadership studies in many disciplines, the best practices for facilitating and directing change involve skills of anticipation, identification of co-leaders, cultivation and incubation, implementation, evaluation and adjustment, and celebration.<sup>27</sup> Effective leaders are able to anticipate organizational responses when they have learned a range of ways to perceive and interpret what goes on in their organizations. Effective leaders do not “go it alone” in directing or facilitating change, but know and work

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<sup>26</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership*, 17, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Dreibelbis and Gortner, *Markers*.



with key co-leaders who can help them tap into social networks of influence as a way to facilitate conversation and reduce potential roadblocks. Effective leaders use networks as well as formal and informal venues to communicate an idea repeatedly—in written and oral forms, with individuals, small groups, and the whole community—and to get an idea out into the culture. Effective leaders encourage and cultivate creativity in others, setting it within a wider scope of the overarching trajectory of where an organization will focus its energy. Effective leaders read feedback from others that can help them determine when to move from incubation of an idea and possible new direction to implementation and development. Effective leaders continue to give and receive feedback that helps them and others assess movement toward goals, and then adjust those goals, strategies, and actions in light of that assessment. Effective leaders celebrate the individual and collective efforts in their communities and mark points of movement.

But perhaps most importantly, effective leaders facilitate and direct organizational change by modeling in their own behavior and communication the organizational culture they hope to strengthen, foster, or create—a culture dedicated to continuous self-reflection and honest examination of its life, for the improvement of what it is dedicated to produce. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön—and, from a different angle, Edwin Friedman—speak most eloquently for this tradition of understanding leadership. Argyris and Schön worked to develop and teach a method of fostering leadership and organizational health that they called “Action Science,” an approach that does not focus on the mechanics of increased production and distribution but instead focuses on patterns of interaction and blocked interaction in organizations in the midst of their work. These interaction patterns have direct consequences for how freely people can move, adapt, and work with one another. Three books that help leaders recognize and move beyond stuck patterns of interaction are Argyris’s exceptional *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Schön’s *The Reflective Practitioner*, and Friedman’s *Generation to Generation* (or its sequel, *A Failure of Nerve*).<sup>28</sup> Since many are already familiar with Friedman’s

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<sup>28</sup> Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Jackson, Tenn.: Basic Books, 1997); Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985); Edwin

works and Schön's principles of effective learning and mentoring—and because Argyris's book is so expensive—I will focus primarily on Argyris's remarkable contributions to understanding leadership.

As Argyris painstakingly demonstrates again and again in *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, the critical bind for any organization is its patterns of communication and problem-solving. Through a series of conscious and unconscious decisions, organizations at all levels can slide into dishonesty, obfuscation, and masking. This becomes so habitual that the organization's workers and leaders repeatedly demonstrate "skilled incompetence"—exercising well-rehearsed deflection, noninformation, and external assignment of blame that result in maintaining unhelpful or destructive organizational routines. With this "Model I behavior," organizational members further adhere to underlying rules such as "We don't talk about X," "We don't talk about the fact that we aren't talking about X," and "We proceed with the fact that we are perfectly consistent." "X" may itself be a message that gives mixed signals, which its authors defend with assurances that the message is perfectly consistent. This infuriating practice of mystification on the part of leaders is perpetuated by both leaders and followers through a series of defenses against knowing or admitting what is not being said: indirect communication, intentional unawareness and "skilled incompetence," double binds about the consequences of talking or not talking, "fancy footwork" in avoiding responsibility and reassigning blame, and "bypass and cover-up." What results is a sense of "malaise"—in the forms of hopelessness, cynicism, distancing, and blaming others—and a set of outcomes yielding mediocrity in what the organization produces or provides as service.<sup>29</sup>

This is not an unfamiliar scenario to church leaders. We found this pattern in our research on clergy leadership and congregational vitality in Episcopal congregations was particularly strong in congregations led by priests who were identified by peers as negative change agents, or "struggling." Argyris goes on to show that typical attempts to modify this are usually doomed to failure or, at best, only partial and temporary success. Such attempts may include cheerleading by "Mr. Team" who sends mixed messages about decision-making; attempts to

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Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, 12, 27, 45–46.

“go around” leaders and organizational patterns; bringing in consultants who offer insights and solutions that are easily disregarded or ignored by the system; opting for easier structural or technical solutions rather than changes in behavior and thought; and flipping to the extreme of “candid” communication in which everyone says everything they think and feel (but without adequate reflection or testing of assumptions).<sup>30</sup>

The ultimate tragedy is that this culture of defense in Model I systems prevents people from engaging in what Argyris calls “double-loop learning.” When a goal or project fails or falls short, the most simplistic attempt at problem-solving is to try to fix something technical (akin to what Friedman calls misdiagnosing and mistreating the “identified patient”). In contrast, double-loop learning involves people in an organization reevaluating their unstated assumptions and the operating values that undergird and precede the work itself.

Perhaps Argyris’s most brilliant insight involves how people and organizations perpetuate Model I behavior by reciting—but significantly distorting—core values. Most organizations, including churches, will say that they support a credo of mutual helpfulness and support, respect for others, strength, honesty, and integrity. But when organizations operate from a defensive posture, these values become distorted into mutual niceness that avoids or mollifies hurt feelings, or that resorts to deference and nonconfrontation, a “win-at-all-costs” mentality, the withholding of information without lying, and the banner-waving of principles.<sup>31</sup>

Argyris painstakingly outlines the failures of typical “solutions” in order to point leaders toward the difficult but necessary work of changing the institutional culture of anxiety and defensiveness that surrounds communication and planning. He helps leaders at various levels work together to move their organizations into what he calls “Model II” behavior. This calls for “reducing the organizational defense pattern” by fostering a culture of reflection and willingness to engage in double-loop learning, and by surfacing the behavior when it occurs, with invitation to all involved for personal reflection. There are three key steps to moving an organization toward Model II behavior:

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<sup>30</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, chaps. 4, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, 19–20, 106–107.

1. Identifying “unsolvable” problems that we wish we could solve in how we work with each other. This entails mapping out how we currently deal with such problems by looking at one specific problem. At a diocesan level, a likely candidate might be variations in honesty on parochial reports, parish contributions to diocesan budget, and clergy participation in diocesan gatherings.
2. Helping individuals to look directly at how they contribute to the current patterns and to make explicit their governing values and reasoning behind their own actions. This requires the risk of self-revelation that shows how a leader contributes to current patterns, linked with persistent but Socratic probing.
3. Helping people at various levels adopt and practice Model II patterns of interaction and planning. Change must be encouraged progressively at all levels, not simply through trickle-down or bottom-up approaches.<sup>32</sup>

Another significant gift from Argyris is his avoidance of “great man / great woman” theories of leadership that might allow readers to exempt themselves. Effective directing of change is a matter of practice, not merely of disposition. Argyris encourages processes of journaling and of committed review with peers, using real case situations and rewriting conversations with an eye for what was said and what was left unsaid. He recommends that leaders set aside time in business meetings periodically to review and correct patterns they just observed. And he presses leaders to develop a high expectation of—and trust in—people to take insights and apply them by modifying behavior in the service of generating different outcomes.

What results in time is a completely different culture. In Model II organizational culture, the same governing values of mutual helpfulness, respect, honesty, strength, and integrity are realized through the practices of giving each other valid information, helping each other learn how to examine untested assumptions and anxieties; honoring and inviting in others their “high capacity” to reflect honestly; and forthrightly stating one’s own position and values in a way that is vulnerable and open to question and that invites others to do the same.<sup>33</sup> When leaders are successful in helping organizations move to this

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<sup>32</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Argyris, *Overcoming*, 104–107.

level, there are further ways in which they can help other leaders and workers “up the ante” by committing to questioning and looking more carefully at what has been accepted as a “given”; making mutual reflective learning a priority; and claiming responsibility for self-evaluation of behavior and thought. These efforts can build organizational cultures dedicated to inquiry, curiosity, and mutual vulnerability in reflection.

If one internalizes Argyris’s insights and recommendations, then tools from Donald Schön, Edwin Friedman, and Howard Gardner can help build powerful skills for organizational change. In *The Reflective Practitioner* (and in the sequel, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*), Schön offers a tremendously helpful example of mentoring through a kind of Socratic method.<sup>34</sup> Schön uses examples from psychotherapy, architecture, engineering, city planning, and management to demonstrate that it is possible to develop a disciplined approach to improvisational learning by encouraging people to reflect on their work and their operating assumptions, and by helping them learn habits of flexibility and adaptability in order to achieve the goals for which they are striving.

With his family systems perspective, Friedman provides a foreground to Argyris but also gives some additional perspectives on effective leadership. Friedman shows how our attempts to “fix” situations can result in deep resistance and even sabotage from the people we are trying to help. For Friedman, an effective leader steps beyond trying to change people and instead focuses on and pursues goals in a nonaggressive manner, while still remaining connected to people and groups in the organization, even those attempting sabotage. Thus, for Friedman, as for Argyris, organizational change results from leaders modeling new behavior themselves.

Gardner likewise points out the long, challenging process involved in personal and organizational change in his book *Changing Minds*. Gardner begins from a position that might seem obvious to religious leaders: people actually do move through significant changes in their thinking, perceptions, and fundamental assumptions. But this *metanoia* is complex and takes time. An effective change agent, in

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<sup>34</sup> Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

Gardner's terms, helps provide opportunities for people to encounter and engage new perspectives through new stories, ideas, theories, and practices that suggest different reasoning and evidence, resonate with personal life experiences, and elicit personal investment. Perhaps his most challenging, humbling, and important chapter is "Changing One's Own Mind," in which he draws the reader into a space of patience and forbearance. Minds change gradually, and "occurs largely beneath the surface." We often may be surprised to find how much we have changed and may not even remember that we "ever held a contrary point of view" or when we changed with the spirit of the times.<sup>35</sup> This forgetfulness, combined with an inner desire to appear to ourselves and others as consistent and consistently right, can create difficulty in admitting or even recognizing when and how we have changed. It is remarkable when a leader in any field acknowledges a change of mind. It is even more remarkable when a leader is able to chart for others the process of this change and its consequences.

### *Conclusions*

As indicated by the authors reviewed in this article, effective leadership requires some key mental disciplines and habits. These habits and skills can be learned. They are, fundamentally, perceptual choices and modes of interaction rooted in practiced cognitive patterns and habitualized motivations. Looking for, naming, and expecting the best from people elicits the behavior leaders seek. Socratic interactions that draw people into loving but honest self-reflection and model ways to reframe their own perceptions and interpretations help to reshape the nature of relationships in an organization, as well as to examine the values that underpin (and at times undermine) their actual and intended behavior. Intentional expansion of a "toolbox" for examining human enterprises expands a leader's potential for understanding and helping others understand a community's life. It also helps leaders anticipate (or at least not be completely surprised by) organizational behavior.

Unfortunately, these skills are too seldom learned, internalized, and practiced on a regular basis, either inside or outside the church. As we might suspect, the picture of leadership is as mixed in other human enterprises as it is in the church.

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<sup>35</sup> Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 195.

All too often we experience the darker side. Organizations often frustrate and sometimes exploit people. Too often, products are flawed, students don't learn, patients stay sick, and policies make things worse instead of better. Many organizations infuse work with so little meaning that jobs have little value beyond a paycheck. Almost everyone, every day, receives services or goods from someone who obviously doesn't care. . . . We have certainly tried to make organizations better. Legions of managers go to work every day with that hope in mind. Authors and consultants spin out a steady flow of new answers and solutions. Policymakers develop laws and regulations to guide organizations on the correct path.<sup>36</sup>

Upon fuller reflection, we might recognize that in its leadership the church has not fared much better—or worse—than other human institutions or organizations. As Bolman and Deal suggest in *Reframing Organizations*, the ability of humans to create increasingly complex organizations and bodies politic for the achievement of various purposes seems to exceed our ability to grasp the complexity we have created.<sup>37</sup> As human societies emerged, their organization and direction required a shift from tribal sensibilities of leadership to more complex forms of leadership and delegation. Unfortunately, our own capacity for understanding and working with such complexity has not grown as a natural adaptation to our more complex societal realities. Leadership literature can at times be helpful—as can Scripture and Christian tradition—but not without the actual practice of what is read.

Leadership—and followership—in these multifaceted organizations and institutions does not come naturally to many. It must be learned. And it cannot be learned effectively in an idiosyncratic, on-the-job basis alone. Leaders need mentors, coaches, mentoring communities, and disciplines to follow in the company of peers who will keep them accountable and offer mutual challenge and support.

My next article will review leadership literature in areas related to communication and behavior. I will look at some approaches to naming, using, and resolving conflict, as well as some effective practices of leadership development and community development. I will also focus on deep and long-term transformative mission. The article will

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<sup>36</sup> Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 7–8.

examine intentional disciplines of effective leaders in relation to time, creativity, and networking, as well as anxiety management and self-differentiation. I will raise some issues of training. And I will ask questions about how most effectively to bring Scripture and Christian tradition into mutually informative discourse with the profound insights to be gained from the leadership literature from many fields and human enterprises.