Herding Tigers: Leading the “On-Behalf-Of” Organization

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A few years ago I participated in a trouble-shooting meeting in a school district. Teachers, principals and School Board members were terminally deadlocked over an extremely thorny curriculum issue, with three absolutely incompatible views on what to do. Each group had presented its viewpoint and rationale, and opened themselves to questioning from the others (keeping that from turning into bloody warfare had been challenging). To conclude this round of information sharing, the facilitator asked each group to answer one question: “At the bedrock level, what do you believe makes your solution the right solution?”

All three groups responded without hesitation: “It best serves our customers.” All three had different “customers” in mind.

For a moment I wondered if we had stepped into the Twilight Zone. Then the thought flashed through my mind: “Welcome to the wonderful world of the ‘on-behalf-of’ organization!”

Our economy is filled with on-behalf-of organizations, and their number is growing. An on-behalf-of organization is one which provides services to a group of people who have little say about the nature of the services provided to them (that’s determined by a second group), and who do not directly pay for the service themselves (often payment is made by yet a third group). Sound familiar? Education is provided by on-behalf-of organizations in the USA, as are all government services and, increasingly, health care. Less obviously, virtually all internal service organizations in large organizations are on-behalf-of organizations. For example, testing organizations in the automotive industry perform tests for parts and systems engineers; they are paid from an overall budget within the product development division: and the standards for the tests they perform are established by, among others, the quality office. An all, of course, are striving to “satisfy the customer.”

But who exactly is the customer? Simple market-based organizations have customers to whom they provide goods and services. These same customers make their own decisions about what to purchase, and they themselves pay for what they get. Satisfying the customer of a simple market-based organization is—if not easy—at least conceivable. “On-behalf-of” Organizations, on the other hand, don’t have it so easy. Depending on how you look at it, they have multiple customers — or no
customers at all. The requirements of these different groups almost certainly do not align neatly; indeed, they frequently conflict with each other, as do the views and efforts of the people within the “on-behalf-of” organization, who champion with tiger-like ferocity different “customers” as “the real customer” of our organization. Welcome, indeed, to the wonderful world of the “on-behalf-of” organization!

How does one lead such an organization? As with anything having to do with tigers, the wise leader proceeds carefully and with great respect for the teeth and claws. The good news about “on-behalf-of” organizations is that these passionate members will work tirelessly to achieve the organization’s mission. The bad news is, if they see a leader ignoring or selling short their customers, they will work equally passionately to resist the mission or get rid of the leader.

A great deal of our common lore and academic theories about leadership comes from “command and control” organizations like the military, or from the experience of simple market-based organizations. Since neither is a particularly good match for on-behalf-of organizations, we should not be surprised to find that these leadership approaches notoriously yield disappointing results in education, health care, and the like. But, lacking an alternative formulation of leadership that fits their reality, leaders in on-behalf-of organizations continue to do what they know how to do and live with the less-than-optimal outcomes.

Descriptive Psychology may offer us some help with this dilemma. An intellectual discipline founded by Professor Peter G. Ossorio at the University of Colorado in the mid-1960’s, Descriptive Psychology has a substantial track record of articulating complex concepts in ways that substantially improve pragmatic results. Practice areas to which Descriptive Psychology has contributed useful conceptual articulations include psychotherapy (Bergner, 1991; Wechsler, 1991; Marshall, 1991), clinical case formulation and diagnosis (Zeiger, 1991; Roberts, 1991), teaching of moral judgment (Holt, 1990), virtues (Popov, 1997), theology (Shideler, 1992), multicultural psychology (Ossorio, 1983; Lubuguin, 1998), business management (Bergner, 1990), organization theory (Putman, 1990a), marketing (Putman, 1990b), artificial intelligence (Jeffrey, 1998), automated document retrieval (Jeffrey, 1991), and economics (Jeffery & Putman, 2013). This paper represents a Descriptive Psychologist’s formulation of leadership with specific focus on leadership of on-behalf-of organizations. Along the way, we will attempt to offer some help in herding those tigers.

Leadership: The Descriptive Psychology View

Let’s begin by taking a closer look at our core concept: leadership. Leaving aside all our theories and images of leadership for the moment, let’s look at how we actually use the term itself. What exactly are we committing ourselves to when we say, “That was effective leadership?” As it turns out, we are committing ourselves to quite a lot. [NOTE 1] We are say that:

1. **We have observed an action by the leader** – or at least have knowledge of the outcome of the action – **and the leader’s action was successful.**

2. **We have observed a subsequent action by someone else** – or at least have knowledge of the outcome of that action – **and this other person’s action was also successful.** (Let’s call this second person the participant. For reasons that will soon become apparent, I am deliberately avoiding the common
command-and-control practice of labeling this person the “follower.”

3. The participant’s action was significantly dependent on the leader’s action — without the leader’s action, the participant’s action might not have occurred or might not have been successful.

4. The leader knew that the participant’s action depended on the leader’s action and, in fact, knowing this provided one of the leader’s primary reasons for acting.

5. Both the leader and participant are participating in a social practice — an intentional pattern of interaction — as members of a particular community. In other words, they are engaged in a mutual endeavor and their actions reflect that.

To put the matter succinctly: Leadership is deliberately making it possible for someone else to make their contribution to the mutual endeavor.

We should also note some things we are not committing ourselves to in calling something “leadership”.

1. We are not saying that the leader occupies some special place in the organizational community that makes what they did leadership. What makes an action leadership is its intent and its outcome, not the place from which it was performed. Many roles explicitly or implicitly require the person in that role to lead — Chairperson, Principal, Teacher, Superintendent, Coach, etc. all come immediately to mind. But Jan (for example) being in one of these roles does not automatically make whatever Jan does an act of leadership, nor does the fact that Kim occupies no “official” role mean that Kim cannot lead. Again, to belabor the point a bit, it’s the intent and outcome that makes it leadership, not the role.

2. We are not saying that any particular type or style of action was performed. Familiar mass-media images of leadership often involve passionate exhortation or crisp commands followed by an immediate scrabble to follow. These are clearly examples of leadership, but leadership in the “on-the-behalf-of-organizations” is rarely so dramatic (and media seldom show crisp commands that are roundly ignored, which is not infrequently the case in real life). Decades of research have shown what common sense tells us: leadership is not a matter of any particular style.

What we have done so far is to articulate the concept of “leadership” we started with as speakers of the English language. While conceptual clarity is in itself useful, the real benefit of this articulation lies in its implications for those who would lead. Let us turn our attention to some of those implications now.

What Can a Leader Do?

Since leaders concern themselves with making it possible for others to make their contribution to the mutual endeavor, leaders obviously must pay attention to the mutual endeavor at hand and how it is progressing. A maxim of Descriptive Psychology states: Behavior goes right unless it goes wrong in one of the ways it can go wrong (Ossorio, 2006). Therefore, leaders must pay careful attention to ways in which the mutual
endeavor at hand can go wrong, and act to prevent or alleviate that.

The Intentional Action (IA) paradigm of Descriptive Psychology (Ossorio, 1981) provides a succinct framework for seeing how behavior can go right – or go wrong. A full IA analysis of leadership is well beyond the scope of this paper, but here are some cogent points for leaders of on-behalf-of-organizations. When it comes to contributing to our mutual endeavor, a participant’s contribution can go wrong if:

- **The participant does not have reason enough to act.** Persons who have reason enough to make their contribution, do; persons who do not have reason enough either do not act or do something else. Leadership in this case can focus on extrinsic, “carrot and stick” reasons – providing rewards for acting or punishments for not acting – or on intrinsic reasons, such as structuring the endeavor to allow participants opportunities for achievement, problem solving, teamwork, or service.

- **The participant does not have the perspective, knowledge, or information required to succeed.** Physicians understand clearly the medical implications of treatment decisions, but often have little knowledge of the financial or organizational implications. Clinic directors may understand the organizational and financial implications of treatment decisions but do not have the knowledge required to assess the medical implications. Leadership, in this case, might consist of ensuring that physicians and clinic directors either make these decisions jointly, or else that each group has the information it lacks.

- **The participant does not have the requisite skills.** Improving quality of products and services has been “top-of-mind” for many organizations over the past few decades. “Six sigma” is a well-known, proven method for quality improvement which requires, among other things, skill in systematic process analysis and statistical methods. Leadership of “six sigma” endeavors requires, among other things, developing these skills among the participants.

- **The participant lacks experience in this endeavor to know what to do.** Planning methods which include interactive “futuring” have been shown to create significantly superior results (Lippitt, 1989). Many participants in planning exercises, however, have never been involved in interactive futuring and have no clear idea how to do it. Leadership in this case involved step-by-step facilitation and behavior modeling.

- **The participant’s contribution requires coordination with the contribution of others.** Orchestra members are all highly skilled musicians. They don’t typically need anyone to tell them how to play their parts. But their parts are played while other musicians are playing their parts, and they do need leadership from the orchestra conductor to make sure their playing is coordinated into a musical whole. Peter Drucker (1982) pointed out that “knowledge workers” require leadership that resembles the orchestra director and, indeed, most significant endeavors in on-behalf-of organizations
require leadership in the form of coordination.

- **The participant is not eligible to act.** Any organization has a complex set of formal and informal eligibilities. Courts of law have many roles and activities, but only the presiding judge is eligible to pass sentence. Anybody can suggest a new work method, but only certain old-timers’ suggestions will be taken seriously. Advice may be welcome, but only from people who have demonstrated that they share the core concerns. Leadership may require giving a participant formal eligibility to act – authorizing a level of expenditure, for example – or discerning when participants in their own minds lack eligibility to act. (Peer mentoring programs, for example, often fail when the “mentors” do not feel they have the informal standing to comment on their peer’s performance.)

- **The participant is contributing to a different endeavor.** Here we come to the distinctive leadership challenge of the on-behalf-of organization. An organization is a community with a mission (Putnam, 1990). The organization’s mission is to make a specific beneficial difference in the lives of a particular group of people. In the simple market-based organization our mission is to serve one particular group over and above anyone else – the group we identify as our customers. Any mutual endeavor in the simple market-based organization will be an attempt to benefit our customers, and participants strive to contribute to the endeavor. But an on-behalf-of organization has multiple “customers” – that is, its mission is to make a beneficial difference in the lives of more than one distinct group. Participants strive to contribute to endeavors that make a difference in the lives of the “customers” they identify – and the more passionately they believe in the mission, the more passionately they strive - like “tigers.”

This is not a mere problem, to be solved by keen analysis. It is a true dilemma, and as with all true dilemmas, it requires one who would lead to acknowledge the reality of the dilemma and find a path – not around it nor through it – but including it. The path forward must make it possible for all participants to contribute to their endeavor while at the same time contributing to a mutual endeavor. What can a leader do?

**Leading the “On-Behalf-Of” Organization**

Let’s return to the trouble-shooting meeting mentioned at the beginning of this paper. For the teachers, the ultimate customers were the students; the ultimate customer for the principals were the state and district administrators who set policy and guidelines; and the School Board members took as their ultimate customers the parents and other local taxpayers who ultimately paid everyone’s salaries. With such diverse “customers,” it is not surprising that the best curriculum looked very different to the three groups. As one observer remarked, they might as well have been living in three different worlds.

While “living in three different worlds” may be a bit extreme, we can straightforwardly take it that we are dealing with three distinct views of the world. This situation is depicted in Figure 1.
Each circle represents the set of good answers to the question, “What should our curriculum be?” from the viewpoint of (a) teachers, (b) principals, (c) School Board members. The best answer from each group’s viewpoint is represented as A*, B*, and C*, respectively. Note the obvious:

- The best answers are not the same from group to group.
- The best answer from the School Board’s point of view, C*, is not even among the good answers for the other two groups.
- No “best answer” is a good answer for all three groups.
- Any answer that does not fall into the “good answer” category for one group will not receive commitment and participation from that group.

Notice also that there is a small area, D, which falls within the “good answer” category for all three groups. Based on our above understanding of leadership, one who would lead in this situation will direct the group’s attention and help them choose a path from among the D answers – because all three groups can commit to and participate in D. And note that not just any answer will do – it must be one that looks good to all three.

This strategy—looking at the issue from all viewpoints and searching only for answers that look good from all viewpoints – can give all the tigers what they need. With hard work and good will, it enabled the curriculum trouble-shooting session to come to an unexpectedly productive conclusion. Indeed, this strategy has been used to such good effect that an eminent Descriptive Psychologist in his work with medical leadership coined the useful slogan: “Take a three-world view” (Peek, 1994).

A Final Caution

We should be careful here to avoid confusing this strategy with two seemingly similar but actually very different strategies: “compromise” and “least common denominator.” Compromise – if it works at all – requires each group to give up something they believe is important in order to get something else they believe is more important. Notoriously, compromise often results in “solutions” which nobody sees as a good answer, but which each group sees as the best they can get. For example, if you wanted pizza and salad for lunch while I wanted egg-drop soup and General Tso’s chicken, our compromise lunch might be either an artery-clogging combination of pizza and General Tso’s chicken, or perhaps a mind-boggling General Tso’s chicken pizza.

“Least common denominator” takes all the elements in common in each groups position and proposes a “solution” that includes them all.. Based on our lunch
preferences above, our “least common denominator” lunch would be something like a few ounces of oil with a generous pinch of salt and a glass of water.

Both compromise and least common denominator solutions fail to recognize the true complexity of people’s views of the world. They take A*, B*, and C* as given and try to give each group something, not recognizing that the task is to find a solution that every group sees as a good solution (so everyone can commit to it), and that getting only part of our best solution is probably not a good solution. If you and I just keep talking about lunch, we may discover that we would both be pleased with taco salads.

Summary and Conclusion

The “on-behalf-of” organization presents some difficult leadership challenges. Using the conceptual power of Descriptive Psychology, we can see leadership as “deliberately making it possible for someone else to make their contribution to the mutual endeavor,” and can see a number of specific strategies for successful leadership.

[NOTE 1]: These statements may appear to be inferences or theoretical statements, but they’re actually nothing so grand. They are simply writing down – articulating – a part of what we commit ourselves to in using the common, everyday term “leadership.” As a mental exercise, try assuming the contrary. For example, “We call it leadership, but know nothing about what the leader did nor about the effects of what the leader did “or “We call it leadership, but nobody did anything in response.” etc. It seems apparent that we would be inclined to respond: “That’s not really what we mean when we call something leadership.”

References


References
Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.


