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# It's Not About the Leaders: It's About the Practice of Leadership

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This article explores the mythology of leadership as residing in particular individuals. It argues that given the complex requirements of 21<sup>st</sup> Century management, we can no longer allow the rest of the organization, other than its managers, to sit idly awaiting orders from detached bosses. It looks at leadership, consequently, not as manifestly being about individual leaders, but about the collective interactive practices that accomplish the choices we make together in our mutual work. After deriving the grounds for our myopic charismatic approach to leadership, it calls for a transition to a leadership-as-practice, and names some of the vital activities associated with this approach. Undergirding them is the essential practice of dialogue in which through dedicated listening, new ideas can be generated never thought of prior to the dialogue. The article also illustrates the sustainable benefits of the practice approach and shows how leadership development needs to be altered to take advantage of learners' active collective engagement within the work setting. Action learning with reflective dialogue is viewed as a superior alternative to classic competency training. By the end, readers might appreciate that leadership can be usefully shared among those doing the work.

# **KEYWORDS**

leadership-as-practice, dialogue, action learning, leadership  
development, collective leadership

## **It's Not About the Leaders: It's About the Practice of Leadership**

What's wrong with our leaders? With no measurable change in the vital statistic compiled by the Gallup organization for over a decade that some 70 percent of our employees are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work, why haven't they done more? Haven't they provided their employees sufficient security, lucrative benefits such as time-off, more opportunities to work from home? Haven't they taken care of them effectively? Well, maybe it's not about the leaders anymore. Employees aren't necessarily looking to be taken care of. Most of them, given the chance and the time to get their confidence back, wish to participate in the enterprise through their own collective practices. When engaged in this way, the practice of leadership becomes less about what's residing in the hearts and minds of named leaders and more about how to facilitate the dedicated activities of those doing the work.

### **THE INDIVIDUALISTIC APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP**

In spite of a misconception that employee engagement requires leader largess, we continue to hope that our individual leaders will lead us to the promised land of well-being and productivity. There are elements of the American psyche that predispose us to this individualistic mentality. First, our culture sustains an

ethic of individual achievement against the odds. Cross-cultural studies have consistently pegged Americans as being self-reliant even at the expense of one's in-group. However, this singular devotion to the self, as captured in the unique American expression, "rugged individualism," can have negative consequences as foreseen by famed French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, and more recently by the authors of the now classic social commentary on American life, *Habits of the Heart*. What Durkheim saw was that any overemphasis on what he called "egoistic" individualism would paradoxically lead to a decline in moral individualism, meaning a collectively shared respect for the individual and his or her personal dignity.

Second, many of us prefer the security of someone looking out for us. This tradition has a long history in Western thought that Keith Grint refers to in his Durkheimian reference to the "sacred." Monarchs have consistently legitimated their rule and even their mystique through their connection with God. For this right, they are accorded a degree of distance and reverence in exchange for followers' obedience.

Third, there is a certain glamour or even romanticism in basking in the spotlight and enjoying the credit that accompanies the designation as top-dog regardless of the contribution of others. At times, charismatic leaders beget the social inference process that sustains their reverence in the eyes of followers.

In other instances, in the words of James Meindl, followers promote a "social contagion" of the charisma of the leader whose stature is not necessarily bolstered at the podium as much as it is among the "carriers" in the crowd. These carriers drum up a veneration oftentimes prior to the celebrity's ultimate entrance.

### **Follower dependence**

Continuing to rely on our top leaders, many of us are content to reside in a state of followership. If you think of yourself as a follower, what does it mean, however? Does it mean that you are content to be dependent on others and that you have chosen a state of, call it, "learned helplessness?" And while in this state, do the leaders need to know more than their followers? Are leaders needed to provide continual motivation, without which, followers would remain listless until an order is conveyed? What does this say about independent contributions that "followers" can make to the company? Consider, for example, Whole Foods' well-known "tap room" - an in-store beer and wine bar that lets customers sample foods while tasting local wines and beers by the glass. According to Katie Hope, business reporter for BBC's CEO Guru series, it turns out that the idea had been hatched by an employee for a store that adopted it as an attraction and promotion. Whole Foods' decentralized structure allowed the idea to bubble up to a point where it has now been rolled out to more than 100 stores.

Whole Foods Chief Executive, John Mackey, who, by the way, shares his role with co-CEO Walter Robb, commented that their leadership model is unusual because most chief executives "are afraid of handing their staff this level of responsibility mainly because they fear they will lose control."

### **Loss of control**

Any fear about releasing followers to exert autonomy, even in their sphere of influence, is usually associated with abdication of the control function of leadership. But in the contemporary organization, controlling all aspects of the operation is an illusion and over the years, a number of prominent executives, such as Herb Kelleher when he was CEO of Southwest Airlines, have suggested that doing so can even be detrimental to a company's growth. But how far do you go in allowing others to run their own operation, even if not as successfully as you may think is required? Here's what former CEO of the Hanover Insurance Company, Bill O'Brien, said when asked how to endure errors from staff who were simultaneously being exposed to more democratic practices:

...what kept me up at night? It was when I had to deal with poor performance. I said to myself, "If I'm going to do this, I'd rather take a little more time and do it too late than do it too early because I have a human being's life here." Finally, you get signals that tell you you've waited too long. Some of your direct reports are coming to you, trying to drop hints that ... there are missed deadlines - a whole host of things. I erred by being too late. I was late partially by design because I wanted to minimize the fear. For the most part, the fear in corporations today is very debilitating so I wanted to keep us at a very low level of fear. I would rather have a lot of other people say, "It's about time

O'Brien woke up!" than having people say, "Where is O'Brien going to strike next?"

What this example demonstrates is how damaging it may be to take back control once it has been released as a mutual endeavor with employees. As we continue to question issues of leadership and control, let's move on now to consider the foundation for a new way of thinking about leadership - not as a set of traits among particularly gifted individuals, but as a set of collective practices among those engaged together in realizing their choices.

### **THE PRACTICE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP**

Initially, we will need to accept that the practice of leadership cannot be separated from its context. After all, doesn't leadership occur when we interact with others in our own environment rather than when leaders create visions for us? This revelation about leadership occurs as we begin to challenge even basic things like reality. Is reality "out there" ready to be viewed or do we create it as we engage with others? If things like leadership and reality are mobile, we can change them. Consider for a moment one of the components of our created reality, that being the rules that we come up with to govern our behavior. In the medical world, one such rule has been that nurses do not perform particular medical procedures, such as a prostate examination, because they are reserved to the primary care physician. However, the shortage of attending physicians may

require the nurses to do so in order to sustain the care of the patient. In this case an exigency required a change in a once enshrined practice.

### **Leadership-as-Practice**

The practice approach to leadership has been formally developed through a movement called, leadership-as-practice or L-A-P. Its underlying belief is that leadership occurs as a practice rather than reside in the traits or behaviors of individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome. It is, accordingly, less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.

When you observe leadership-as-practice, it may seem at times disorganized. Things may be proceeding normally without much disturbance, but then something may interrupt or subvert the flow of activity. A member of the group may disagree with the current approach because it conflicts with his or her preferences, role identity, or even self-concept. This may lead to a new round of activity to reframe the issue. As you can see, at times, the agenda appears to move ahead; at other times, it may be stymied by lack of agreement. Similarly, the participation of those involved may be

fair and equitable or it may reflect advantage to those who hold more sway or resources. So, the activity may end up as a collaboration or a dispute. It may be unified or it may be contentious. Leadership in this instance refers to explicit efforts to build and maintain the community, which at times may require accommodation to nurture relations or confrontation to bring out disagreements.

### **Leadership practice and the "koosh" ball**

In an account of leadership practices in a medium-sized IT company, Brigid Carroll, a leadership scholar at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, gives the example of an unusual team meeting.

Physically, the team is structured as a pod within a 100-person open space room. Although members face each other, they typically work individually or may spontaneously consult with one another. In this meeting everyone assembles once one of the members named Dan takes out a koosh ball from his desk and at the same time intently moves some post-it notes on a board. This leads to some spontaneous banter as people point to the post-it notes. Dan then informs people where the work stands. Thereafter, he throws the koosh ball to someone else who recounts what she is working on. The process is repeated, but one of the older guys upon catching the koosh ball becomes very animated as he tells about his attempt to solve a glitch in the system. After he finishes, Dan joins in again saying,

"So, there are two ways being suggested to move on this thing." He looks at the older guy who nods and leaps in, gesticulating wildly, adding yet some newer dimensions in the search for the bug. After further conversation, Dan tosses the ball in his hand one last time and says, "We all good to move on?" He leaves and some people go back to their stations while others stay on to pursue the debugging problem.

What this account demonstrates is the richness yet also the unpredictability of leadership practice. Some of it is routinized, other parts are filled with ambiguity. Nevertheless, the participants seek to co-construct their sense of direction through their own form of social interaction. In doing so, they rely as much on physical artifacts (the post-it notes, the koosh ball, etc.) to exhibit leadership as their conversation - a facet which differentiates the practice approach from "relational" leadership. In their moves to design their approach to a problem or project, they discard any pre-fixed leadership roles - such as leader and follower - as might be the case in "shared" leadership theory. Although Dan, for example, may have a senior role, he seems uninterested in authority. Leadership emerges (or not) from the collective encounter in which those involved play a contributor role, whether they acknowledge it or not. Further, leadership occurs not merely from unfocused spontaneous assembly, such as from implicit "crowdsourcing" or even from more strategic "jams"

involving innumerable participants, but most critically from a concerted activity resulting in a shift or change in trajectory of the practice(s) at hand.

### **The activities of leadership practice**

What are some of the activities that can be isolated as familiar moves when viewing leadership as a practice? First, let's acknowledge that given that practice concerns how work gets done to achieve an outcome, some of the activities are tacit and, thus, very hard to describe. Some of the activities are, however, both observable and learnable. If one were to observe a group engaged in a practice, such as the aforementioned koosh ball episode, one of the first things you'll notice is how people discuss their varying approaches and then decide on respective responsibilities - e.g., who is going to do what. Accompanying this, we'll call it, (1) designing role, might be a (2) scanning activity that identifies resources, such as information or technology that can help develop a program or project or get a new one off the ground. After designing and scanning, some other likely activities would be:

(3) Mobilizing, that can redirect the attention of others to work on a given project. At times, this takes the form of meaning making as particularly attentive members draw on the organization's memory, to achieve a level of cognitive consensus and facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

(4) Weaving, that can create webs of interaction across existing and new networks to focus on mutual activities and build trust.

(5) Stabilizing, that offers feedback to the project to evaluate its effectiveness, leading, in turn, to structural and behavioral changes and learning.

The above activities focus on the "what" of practice, but there is another dimension, the socio-emotional, that is required within teams to support and sustain the members while engaged together. Among these are the following three:

(6) Inviting, that encourages those who have held back to participate through their ideas and sentiments.

(7) Unleashing, that ensures that everyone who wishes to has had a chance to contribute, without fear of repercussion, even if their contribution might create discrepancy or ambiguity in the face of decision-making convergence.

(8) Reflecting, that in the presence of one another invites open challenge to current assumptions so that everyone can learn to meet their mutual needs and interests.

These activities occur, of course, within conversation, but are enriched by a special form that we call "dialogue," a subject that we turn to next.

## **DIALOGUE AS THE ESSENCE OF LEADERSHIP**

Most of us might accept that to be human is to be in interaction with others. This is how we come to know about ourselves. But this interaction must be meaningful; it must allow us to learn more about who we are. The philosopher Martin Buber talked about the contrast between what he called the "I-it" relationship from the "I-thou" relationship. The I-it is functional and instrumental as in "what I can do for you in exchange for what you can do for me." The I-thou, on the other hand, is based on knowing yourself as seen through the other. It is a dialogue based on a shared sense of caring, commitment, and mutual responsibility. Further, in the I-thou, both parties may be transformed by the relation between them, and in that transformation, there is the chance to change a course of action which we associate with leadership.

To be more specific about the connection between dialogue and leadership, in dialogue, we learn about the world by talking with others who join us in being critical about what we observe and do. As we talk, we adapt current themes in our mutual work or create new themes. In due course, a situation may be talked into existence as the basis for collective action. Our dialogue is not just designed to have us learn from each other but also to help us organize our way of acting together. It is often thought that

change in organizations occurs, consequently, when people begin to talk differently!

Dialogue, then, provides the opportunity to think together on critical challenges that can lead to breakthrough reasoning that can convert the mantra of "business as usual" into a co-created future. Consider as an example the efforts of Bob Veazie, at one point a company-wide safety consultant with Hewlett Packard, charged with mobilizing a safety initiative that engaged some 50,000 people in HPs manufacturing plants around the world. As explained by authors Thomas J. Hurley and Juanita Brown in *Oxford Leadership*, rather than approach participants - who were at every level of the company - with answers, Veazie met them in their regular work settings and hosted conversations aimed at tapping into each person's and group's own experience, relationships, and collective intelligence in the domain of safety. He and his core team cross-fertilized ideas and stories from one plant to another and brought people from different parts of the company together to learn from one another. According to Veazie: "Each of the employee meetings I attended was like a table in this large, ongoing safety café - this network of conversations." Veazie's reference to tables and a café was a metaphor based on the world café, a conversational process designed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs. In the end, an overall company accident rate reduction of

33 percent was in part attributed to the dialogic efforts of Veazie and his team.

### **The process of dialogue**

The dialogic process is straightforward. It contains three principal ingredients: that the parties display an interest in (1) listening to one another, (2) reflecting upon perspectives different from their own, and (3) entertaining the prospect of being changed by what they learn. It is the last point about being changed that most relates to leadership practice. Although participants to a dialogue may initially have intentions regarding their preferred outcomes, the practice needs to be open-ended such that the parties don't truly know the end results. If the outcomes were to be predetermined, we would not characterize the exchange as a dialogue. There needs to be the give-and-take of open human discourse. The result of the engagement may either broaden or transform the subject in question, and the participants through their discursive activities – giving opinions, establishing facts, interpreting meanings – are building the practice in question. It is an unpredictable process but one that nevertheless ends up with a practice that is changed from what it was or what was purely intended by any one of the participants, including the very first initiator.

Consider as an example one among a myriad of cases that could be referred to from the Mayo Clinic, the world-renowned integrated not-for-profit medical group facility that happens to be the largest practice of its kind in the world. Doctors from every medical specialty work together to care for patients, embrace a multispecialty collegial design, and govern themselves by a philosophy of "the needs of the patient come first." In this case, described by Leonard Berry and Kent Seltman in *Business Horizons*, a Mayo ENT specialist in Scottsdale assembled a team of 20 physicians from all three of Mayo's centers for a videoconference to discuss a difficult case. Here's how it was captured by the authors: "Experiencing skin cancer at risk for metastasis, a patient needed surgery that posed additional risk for nerve damage and disfigurement. The 90-minute conference was organized in a day and the team reached consensus on a surgical plan, including how aggressively to sample the patient's lymph nodes and how best to reconstruct the surgical site." What is unusual about the case is how many physicians were consulted to come together to provide their views on the eventual plan that itself was in question until mutually formulated.

#### **THE PRACTICE MOVEMENT IN LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Having acknowledged the value of leadership-as-practice and dialogue as the basis for a leadership model that maps everyday experience, the next natural question is whether such a model can

produce a more sustainable world for our future. To start, if we value democracy for its commitment to the dignity of involved persons who are given a right and voice to participate in decisions which affect them, L-A-P is consistent with democratic practices. It relies on the equal contribution and access of all engaged actors within the public forum. It endorses public free expression and shared engagement unreliant on any one single individual—qua leader to mobilize action and make decisions on behalf of others—qua followers. As Craig Pearce and Christina Wassenaar advised in their article on shared leadership in *Organizational Dynamics*, “the four most important words in leadership are: *What do you think?*”

The relationship between participatory processes and sustainability is exemplified at DuPont in its longstanding commitment to integrate environmental, health, and safety management (EHS) into its operations. Not only has it led to lowered injury rates among employees, but they and the company have both realized increased financial rewards. EHS management was initiated as far back as the early 90s by then DuPont CEO Ed Woolard, who commissioned a discovery team to come up with a means to achieve sustainable improvement in safety while building business value. One of the outcomes from this activity was the creation of the so-called Bradley Curve, which enabled the company to analyze where it stood along a spectrum ending in effective EHS

management. Reaching the ultimate stage of team interdependence required, according to Jim Weigand of DuPont Sustainable Solutions, a leadership with "less over-the-shoulder management of employees and more freedom for smaller groups of individuals to work independently on tasks." Further, the norm in such endeavors that require collaboration across teams, according to Weigand, writing in *Reliable Plant* magazine, is to encourage "distributed teams of employees working with colleagues across practice areas or groups, rather than to have the same set of co-workers stay on a single project or task."

### **Sustainable outcomes**

Besides the emphasis in L-A-P on democratic processes, it is also equally concerned with democratically derived sustainable outcomes. This claim originates from a core property of dialogue - that it tends to produce outcomes that are often new or unique because they are not conceived prior to the engagement. As something new, furthermore, they are typically subject to more scrutiny than those positions or consequences already endorsed by members of a group. At the same time, their advocates will face the usual long-standing institutional pressures, especially from power elites, who may try to manipulate the discourse and resist democratically derived outcomes. Nevertheless, by banding together in community, participants in social critique tend to have a better chance to resist inequitable social conditions than attempting to intervene on

their own to alter extant social arrangements. Together, they may acquire the needed intellectual humility, empathy, and courage to challenge standard ways of operating.

Perhaps no collective challenge against corporate greed has equaled the collective protests during the summer of 2014 by thousands of Market Basket workers and managers against a new group of officers put in place by the family board of directors. The new executives fired eight managers for their insubordination but the protests continued for two months until a company sale to the prior employee-friendly executive team was completed. Business analysts were stunned by the protests. Why would people put their livelihoods on the line for an executive team? Is not business an instrument for realizing shareholder value, or might it serve the interests of other stakeholders, such as employees, customers, and the community? It turned out that the new board had underestimated the commitment of these stakeholders. But the latter's commitment arose from more than the generous benefits and profit sharing enjoyed by the employees, the low prices savored by the customers, and the generous giving appreciated by Market Basket's communities. The commitment came from a loyalty predicated on a range of progressive leadership practices, such as its promotion-from-within policy. Those in vital managerial and staff positions are seasoned pros who have worked for the company for decades and who see the company as an extension of their family.

The company, consequently, operates with very low turnover and a thin executive team. Leadership is spread around!

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

If we are interested in developing leadership along practice lines, the entire face of leadership development will need to change. Rather than locating it away from the office at pristine offsites, leadership development will need to return to the very setting where the practices are going on. So, rather than learn best practices, skills, or competencies using case examples other than their own "case," participants would need to learn how to address and solve their own problems in their own settings. Further, they need to confront these problems with those who are directly and mutually engaged.

Leadership development thus requires an acute immersion into the practices that are embedded within the lived experience of the participants. The engagement would likely need to occur within a group that is attending to its own work, but perhaps using novel forms of conversation that would be aimed as much at learning as at task accomplishment. By learning, I refer to the participants focusing on themselves, on the dilemmas they may be facing, and the processes they use. Any training provided would be delivered "just-in-time" and in the right dose to be immediately helpful to those involved.

## **Action learning**

The intervention at the practice level would be accompanied by critical reflection leading to review of one's actions, choices, and the values that guide both. We might refer to this kind of conversation as a reflective dialogue that has the potential to not only propose new skills and attitudes but to open up space for innovative ways to accomplish the work, or even to re-conceive how the work is done in the first place. Among the methods available to instigate this kind of reflective dialogue would be the use of action learning in which participants work with fellow colleagues on real-time projects within their own work environment. They come to view learning as capable of being acquired in the very midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand. Learners work in peer learning teams to support and challenge each other while demonstrating a learning-to-learn aptitude that values fresh questions over expert knowledge.

In the leadership domain, then, the practice movement calls for a different approach to learning. Learning is not derived from transferring knowledge from one mind to another, as in a classroom; rather, it is acquired from the activities, and oftentimes instant improvisations, that come up in the work itself. Even the consultation of "best practices" may fall flat since it is this instant practice within the immediate setting that requires most attention. Consequently, work-based developmental experiences, such

as peer mentoring, coaching, apprenticeship, group process reflection, and action learning using learning teams, are likely to be successful because they help learners acquire a situated understanding of what works, what doesn't work, and what might work.

At Kentz, the global 15,500-person engineering firm specializing in Engineering, Construction and Technical Support Services (TSS), action learning was used to support its transition from a national to a global business unit (GBU) strategy. The firm's development approach, designed to embed a culture of learning among its employees, featured multi-level, global action learning, especially in the use of projects assembling cross-functional teams making use of reflective questioning. Among the immediate outcomes of action learning was its contribution in breaking down silos and building cross-firm knowledge, as reflected by one of its participants - a construction supervisor:

I have been involved in various issues such as engineering, which have involved me in many of the commercial aspects of construction which previously I wouldn't have given a second thought to.

Since such methods as action learning are not always within the field of vision of talent developers, supporters of the practice view of leadership may need to spur the process through the activity of change agents who can encourage the endorsement of a culture of learning and participation within the system in question. Change agency also needs to occur at multiple levels of experience, namely

at individual, interpersonal, team, organization, and network levels. It encourages both autonomy and collective behavior among its learners.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, in the end, it's not about the leaders. Those of us working together on projects and enterprises of import are not reliant on the directions of a single person in authority to launch us into action. We are - if committed to our mutual endeavor - already in motion. Our leadership occurs collectively amongst us in the moment and over time as we engage in unfolding activities that change how we approach our ongoing challenges.

We conclude that to find leadership, then, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring. Participants to leadership through their practices decide on what they hope to accomplish and organize the tasks that need to be performed to achieve their mission. In this leadership, we may find people talking together, acting together, thinking together, fighting together, playing together, all toward creating their own useful and sustainable outcomes.

The practice approach to leadership as exemplified in this article offers many advantages to practitioners. Most potentially useful is the opportunity to spread leadership to those activities and participants where it is most needed. People don't curtail their contributions until receiving their marching orders from the

top. They act out of their own craftsmanship when and where needed. In exhibiting a necessary level of autonomy, they become collectively engaged, not because of the benefits extrinsic to the work, but because of the sheer enjoyment of accomplishment.

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The ever-popular World Café technique can be further explored in *The World Café: Shaping our Futures through Conversations that Matter* by Juanita Brown with David Isaacs and the World Café Community (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

The unusual participative Mayo Clinic culture has been portrayed in a number of publications. The example depicted in this article was drawn from Leonard L. Berry and Kent D. Seltman's "Building a Strong Services Brand: Lessons from Mayo Clinic," *Business Horizons*, 2007, 50, 199-209. The EHS case recounted at Dupont was adapted from the article, "The Role of Leadership in Promoting a Safety Culture," by Jim Weigand in *Reliable Plant* magazine, available at:  
<http://www.reliableplant.com/Read/29786/safety-culture-leadership>

The now famous Market Basket case received huge media coverage. The information in this article's account was based largely on a series of articles in the *Boston Globe*, such as Adam Vaccaro's "What the Heck Happened at Market Basket?" in the August 25, 2014 issue, available at:  
<http://www.boston.com/business/news/2014/07/21/what-just-happened-market-basket-this-weekend/vZc828jbvG5lak5CHtd6yM/story.html>

The field of action learning originates from the pioneering work of Reg Revans while he was director of education for the British National Coal Board from 1945 to 1950. Further details can be found in Mike Pedler's, *Action Learning in Practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Surrey, UK: Gower, 2011) and Joseph Raelin's *Work-Based Learning: Bridging Knowledge and Action in the Workplace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). The Kentz engineering and construction case

was drawn from Takis Karallis and Eric Sandelands's article, "Building Better Futures: Leveraging Action Learning at Kentz Engineers & Constructors," in *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2011, 8(1), 57-64. More applications of change agency at multiple levels in leadership practice can be found in Joseph Raelin's *The Leaderful Fieldbook: Strategies and Activities for Developing Leadership in Everyone* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2010).

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

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