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# Personal Philosophy of Leadership

This précis tables a preliminary statement of a personal philosophy of leadership. The statement is informed by theoretical perspectives on leadership—themselves based on new-wave leadership literature; key leadership influences; cultural identity; trends in the development of post-bureaucratic organizations; and sundry work experiences.

**Olivier Serrat**  
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The old chestnut that organizations are over-managed and under-led needs repeating. Management is a maturing, seemingly omnipresent technology that has witnessed few genuine breakthroughs since Frederick Winslow Taylor and Max Weber set the ground rules 100 years ago in response to and in tune with the emergence of corporations in the 20th century. To be sure, management remains necessary: especially when they are big, organizations must predictably do what they are supposed to be good at. However, in an increasingly competitive and volatile world beset by interconnected challenges, we must kindle individual and, especially, collective leadership. (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2011) More change always demands more leadership but erstwhile popular theories about "successful" leaders or their special relationships with followers are fast losing traction in the hurly-burly of the 21st century. So, if leadership is not "focused" but—as more and more want it to be—an "outcome", how might we multiply the occurrence of it?<sup>1</sup>

### **Formative Experiences of Leadership**

This is not to say—far from it—that we can learn nothing from the past: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," said Isaac Newton. The past is to the present what the future is to the present: it is intimate part of it. Nor is it that Bolden, Gosling, Hawkins, and Taylor's categories discreet or mutually exclusive. Analogously, but from a humbler standpoint, what leadership means to me stems naturally in large part from professional and personal experience, modulated by afterthought: two examples, outlined below, bear this out.

In my professional life, in the wake of the 1997–1998 financial crisis, I had the good fortune of working closely with—we never felt we worked under—a senior Japanese civil servant tasked by the international community with reducing poverty in Asia and the Pacific (a region that is still home to nearly half of the world's poorest people). He was a very approachable (and singularly humane) person: a senior official in a large bureaucracy, he resisted the illusion of positional power and control to draw leadership from every one and re-engage people. He beckoned and hosted leadership: Who works here? What do they know? If they contribute fully, how might their insights engender solutions to problem? From him, I learned about distributed leadership, which means that leadership at all levels matters and must be drawn from, not just be added to, individuals and groups in organizations. He was Tadao Chino (1934–2008), the seventh President and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Asian Development Bank between 1999 and 2005.

In my personal life, I had the privilege of learning from a self-made man. From underprivileged circumstances that should not have seen him continue studies beyond the age of 14, he rose to senior positions in the Ministry of Public Works and the National School of Public Civil Engineering in France; he was responsible among others for promoting French works and services in West Africa and then the whole of the Asian and Pacific region. In recognition of remarkable success, he was awarded the National Order of Merit. "Si tu veux, tu peux," he

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<sup>1</sup> Bolden, Gosling, Hawkins, and Taylor (2011) grouped theories of leadership in three categories: (i) leadership as a property of leaders, with related consideration of the traits of leadership, leadership behaviors and styles, situational and contingency approaches, and leadership skills and functions; (ii) leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers, with related consideration of leader–member exchange theory and follower-centered perspectives, transformational and charismatic leadership, and servant and quiet leadership; and (iii) leadership as a social process, with related consideration of shared and distributed leadership, and discursive and constitutive leadership. (Bolden, Gosling, Hawkins, & Taylor, 2011)

would repeat. (If you can will it, you can achieve it.) A scrupulously honest man who stood against privilege, he believed fiercely in self-actualization. From him, I learned about servant leadership, a practical, altruistic philosophy that supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead, as a way of expanding service to individuals and organizations. He was Pierre Serrat (1931–2014), my father.<sup>2</sup>

### **Next Steps for Leadership**

Much as the past, the present, and the future, theory and practice are inexorably intertwined: to plumb organizational leadership one must continuously fathom the evolving nature of leadership itself, successful expressions of which coevolve with, when they cannot anticipate, the changing environment. This is not easy because, quintessentially, the study of leadership must often focus on the challenge of change. Stephen Hawking holds that the 21st century will be the "century of complexity": one size will not fit all and we should use the right tool for the job, which as the case may be can include older notions and practices of leadership; accordingly, complexity leadership theory that eschews entity and constructionist perspectives, espouses relational leadership,<sup>3</sup> and frames modes—not styles—of leadership in multiple contexts, e.g., simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic, should with knowledge management find a place in new-age organizational development. (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2011) The purpose of leadership, rather than its definition, must be the focal point of leadership in the 21st century. (Hickman, 2010) Bolden, Gosling, Hawkins, and Taylor's related insights appeal too: they proposed to recast leadership as "(1) a process, (2) of social influence, (3) to guide, structure, and/or facilitate, (4) behaviors, activities, and/or relationships, (5) towards the achievement of shared aims." (Bolden, Gosling, Hawkins, & Taylor, 2011, p. 39)

### **On Personal Philosophies of Leadership**

Quite literally, the term "philosophy" means "love of wisdom" (from Greek *philo-* "loving" + *sophia* "knowledge, wisdom"). Notwithstanding, from the general to the particular (and with an eye to keeping the list short), philosophy is severally defined by Merriam-Webster and other dictionaries as (i) all learning exclusive of technical precepts and practical arts; a search for a general understanding of values and reality by chiefly speculative rather than observational means; the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct; a system of principles for guidance in practical affairs; a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior; the most basic beliefs, concepts, and attitudes of an individual or group; a personal foundation or belief in human nature; an integrated, comprehensive view of life; etc. It follows that a personal philosophy of life is, self-evidently, personal (in the sense that it concerns one's private life, relationships, and emotions); something one chooses (meaning, that adherence springs from reflection and concomitant determination); and foundational (that is, a core of theory and allied principles), thereby providing the bedrock of sense- and decision-

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<sup>2</sup> Springing from background, education, and sundry work assignments, the principal driver of my cultural identity is that of a global citizen; the tags of other drivers would be male, well-traveled, polyglot, multidisciplinary competencies, interested in post-bureaucratic organizations, and keen on organizational leadership. Apart from the immediate family history recounted, I do not sense that facets such as religion or culture have influenced the personal leadership philosophy delineated here: my views owe principally to experience in Africa, Europe, and the Asian and Pacific region, leavened by much reading of history.

<sup>3</sup> Citing Ospina & Uhl-Bien: "We have characterized relationality as the understanding that individuals and collectives constitute a *field of relationships*, which in turn implies that each individual represents the intersection of multiple relationships." (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2011, p. 6)

making. A personal philosophy of life draws from purposeful reflection over, let us say, what one values, truly believes, often does, cares about, respects, is curious about, is comfortable with, listens to, spends time on, and hopes to inspire.

Philosophy and leadership may seem an odd combination: but, leadership without philosophy is a rudderless ship sailing for distant lands. Consolidating from the above, leadership needs:

- Theory—which evolves as new data and information are processed and one learns from individual and collective experience.
- Principles—which keep us grounded and consistent in how we lead.
- Attitude—which influences fellow knowledge workers in such ways that meaningful results are jointly desired.
- Behavior—which is where actions match words (and vice versa) and trust is gained (or lost if they do not).

### **My Personal Philosophy of Leadership**

Of course, we can cite famous people: but, the essence of leadership is that it is about what is inside each of us; if we are to live it every day we must all define leadership in our personal ways. "The basic practical–moral problem in life is not what *to do*, but *what kind of person to be*."<sup>4</sup> (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 94) What is more, the by the organizations we work to build must contextualize the purpose of our leadership: organizing is a key activity in life and organizations are its most visible manifestation.<sup>5</sup> An organization happens when people come together and match up with commitment and trust; this said, we know that pursuing a mission without achieving results is dispiriting and that accomplishing results without a mission is meaningless. Unappreciated or dispirited knowledge workers cannot strive, let alone take part, in a highly competitive world: to unleash what synergies come from shared responsibility, the leader in each of us must build diverse and dispersed leadership, distributing leadership to the outermost edges of our organizations.

Anchored in the foregoing discussion of theory, principles, attitude, and behavior, what follows is a—perforce simple—personal philosophy of leadership, that I try with character to model consistently in such ways that encourage collaboration toward shared purpose:

*Organizations exist to make people's skills and capabilities effective. From the philosophy that leadership is a responsibility that must be shared by all parties to the act of organizing, I aim in a process of social influence to grow more leaders to bring out the best in fellow knowledge workers so they accomplish more together, in more meaningful ways, than they imagined they might. Implicit in this statement are directions about how I lead and choose to*

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<sup>4</sup> Cunliffe's (2009) related reflections on the theme of the *Philosopher Leader*—in which leadership becomes a process of thinking more critically and reflexively about ourselves, our actions, and the situations we find ourselves in—are engaging. To develop leaders, she recommends actions along three threads: (i) relational experience (meaning, the phenomenological way of understanding who we are), (ii) ethics (meaning, the unfolding of the moral process of recognizing that we are accountable for our self, our actions, and our relationships), and (iii) reflexivity (meaning, self-reflection to understand, be responsible, and be true to ourselves in relation to the pressures and influences around us). (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 87)

<sup>5</sup> Change is an inevitable part of life and the 21st century certainly has its share of it. But, we need to do more than simply respond; we must ask: "What can I contribute that will significantly affect the performance and the results of the organization I serve?" (Lest we forget, we must reach beyond the walls as well.)

*influence, what I value, what I expect from partners, what I do not accept, and—especially—what type of environment I am committed to creating.*

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