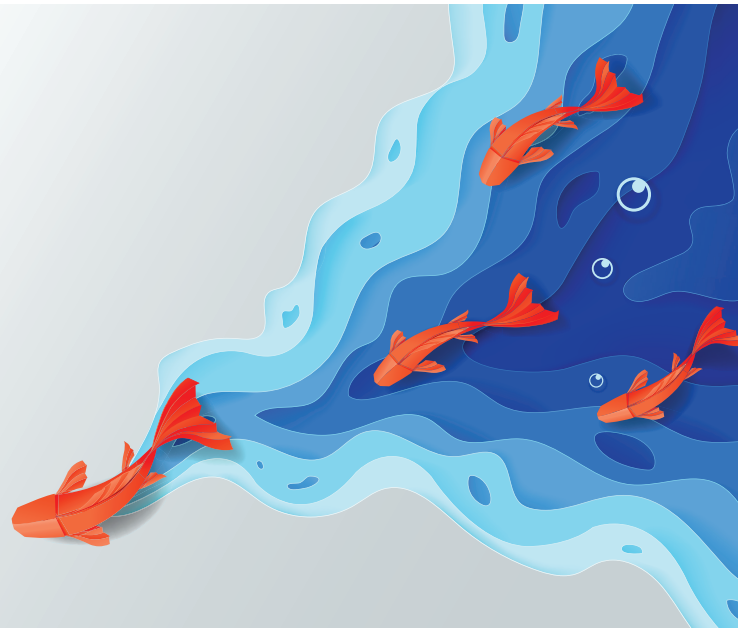# Is Leadership a Lost Art?

A. C. Macris & Larry Reiter

Introduction

The focus of our articles is to try and better understand leadership and how to build and form better leaders. We refer frequently to annual studies done by DDI and other respected organizations that show year after year that trust in leadership is declining, as is the ability of leaders in general. We frequently discuss the "mechanics" of leadership, but in this article we want to look from a different perspective. If we asked you to define leadership at the base level we would probably get responses like: Leadership is a skill set; an exercise in power; telling people what to do and how to do it; directing others to achieve the goals of the organization; establishing the direction of the organization; leadership is about achieving the goals of the organization and nothing else.

In 1989, Max DePree published a monumental little book titled Leadership is an Art. He attempted to humanize leadership. He stressed that leadership is not power but that power is something the leader shared. We think Max had some really good ideas and decided to take that perspective looking at leadership. Moreover, if he was correct, do today's business, religious and political environments clearly show that leadership is a lost art? Obviously being a leader is a complex job. It requires many different skills, a broad knowledge of many things and hard work. We have written in the past about overdependence on numbers in making decisions. Likewise, we have discussed dehumanizing the organization and running it like an oligarchy. Let's look at what we see as shortcomings in our leaders today. We do not focus on any particular industry or business, any particular religion or any particular political party. The shortcomings transcend all of these segments. We do feel that leadership today is significantly lacking.

To digress slightly, being independent consultants, many thoughts go through one's head, am I doing the right thing. Am I good enough? Do I like what I am doing? Plus many, many more haunting one's psyche. Similarly, for leaders, we feel they should constantly be self-checking. Several years ago, we advanced the concept of Contextual Leadership. The point, in short, is leadership is not cookie cutter, there are no born leaders, and there is a schema we believe can help leaders self-assess, identify areas for improvement and move forward.

There are three dimensions of leadership: Attributes, Experience, and Competencies.

Attributes
Attributes are qualities or characteristics of a person.

Attributes of a strong leader would be things such as:

- Vision
- Faith
- Integrity
- Humility
- Common sense
- Initiative
- Accessibility
- Consistency
- Ethical behavior
- Balance
- Trust
- Respect
- Professionalism
- Role model

This is not an exhaustive list, but provided to explain how important Attributes are to a strong leader. Weak leaders will have few if any of these types of attributes.

Experience
Experience is responding or reacting discriminatively to (a set of events within the environment). Experience is critical to a good leader. That experience may be in other fields or areas but the total of the experience provide the leader with the knowledge and skills to apply in different areas or industries. Experience cannot be downplayed but as we are trying to show, experience by itself does not make a good leader and likewise, experience is critical but only one factor.

Examples of Experience include:

- Diverse industry background and business experience
- Multiple successful leadership positions
- Strategic planning
- Track-record
- Evidence of learning from past failures

Competencies
Competencies are skills that are taught and practiced; and knowledge that are gained through education and on-the-job training.

Examples of Competencies:

Business Knowledge	Emotional Intelligence
Motivation	Risk Management
Delegation	Team Development
Negotiation	Employee Development

The Contextual Leadership schema is unlike the proliferation of other 'guru produced' elixirs of leadership approaches. Max DePree's Leadership is an Art we also feel, is not a quick fix, do-as-I-say leadership tome. If we examine the three dimensions then ask: "Am I good at this? Do I have the skills and capabilities for the job? Do I like the function of leadership? Am I willing to put in the hard work and introspection to become a good leader?" we begin to gain insights into our leadership strengths as well as areas to focus on improving.

We suggest that initially leaders like the idea of being a leader, primarily because there is a misunderstanding that leadership is an entitlement position. As long as the entitlement aspect is alive and well, they may continue liking being the leader. When they find themselves without the requisite skills and knowledge behavior changes, particularly if the deficiency is in areas such as Emotional Intelligence and Team Development. Now overlay Attributes. While when we indicate the attributes above, we think of them as positive. When they go negative, the whole thing comes tumbling down. Fortunately, there are many good leaders, at all levels of an organization. However, as the DDI surveys tell us year after year, there are way too many poor, incapable and incompetent leaders. Common sense would say that the organizations would weed these out. But as we know there are enablers who have their own agendas that allow such poor leaders to remain in their positions and sometimes even receive promotions.

In 1969, Laurence J. Peter published a satirical book called the Peter Principle. The premise was that too often people who are good at their particular job, are rewarded with a promotion to a level where they are not competent – their level of incompetence. Now the book was a satire but unfortunately, repeatedly we see this happening. Good workers advance to supervisor and fail; good salespersons to Sales Manager and fail; good managers to General Managers and fail; a businessperson runs for political office and fails. The examples are endless. The Peter Principle is alive and well in 2020.

So many times leaders find themselves as leaders without the commensurate Competencies and Attributes even though they believe they have the appropriate Experience. The difficulty is that if they do not know introspection, self-assessment and are not willing to accept constructive inputs or criticism, they will continue to lead deficiently. Being a successful leader takes hard work. This level of work becomes excessive for someone going into a completely different field.

In general, we might suggest that most people would not think of leadership as an art, or a leader as an artist. How does one reconcile this? To do this we should look at the distinction between art and skill. As one might expect there are several perspectives on this distinction

We will share a few:
- Art implies applying a skill to create something that moves people and stirs emotion.
- Art is talent, but where does talent come from? Is it something you are born with or can it be learned and developed?
- Art equals the outcome/result of a skill.
- Skill equals the execution of art.
- Art requires skill, purpose and an idea.
- Any artist needs to have a throbbing heart, an opinion, courage to express it and imagination to choose the form of expression.
- Skill requires practice, as does art.

Leadership makes this distinction even more difficult. Let us think of some examples.

Max DePree gave us a number of observations about leaders who don't want to recognize the art needed in their positions. DePree tells us that the three key elements in the art of working together (which is what leadership is) are how to deal with change, how to deal with conflict and how to reach our potential.

Over the last number of years as consultants and observers of leadership, we have seen things like to following, which fall in line with DePree's observations:
- Leaders look to diverge away from solutions rather than converge to a solution.
- Leaders and people in general don't know how to compromise or don't want to compromise due to some questionable or jaded principles.
- People don't want to think for themselves. They don't want to take the time or spend the energy to analyze facts. They want to be told what to think. Maybe the product of our age of instant information – accurate or not.
- Leaders look for self-gratification rather than focusing on leading.
- Leaders don't or won't listen to their subordinates or any suggestions they get.
- Leaders reach their leadership position and just want to rest on their laurels. (Probably another case for the Peter Principle.)

We see failures in leadership everywhere. Whether it is an Enron on a global scale, redefining the Post Office without understanding the basic functions and that it is a service not a business, promoting someone you like regardless of skills and attributes, etc. We see failures in business – large and small, religious institutions and in politics – local, statewide and national.

Rather than try to deal with all the Max DePree related observations, we will address the first bullet regarding divergent and convergent solutions here and the remainder in subsequent articles.

Problem Solving

To begin, let us clarify what we mean by problem solving and decision-making and how they relate to one another:

Problem solving is a set of activities designed to analyze a situation systematically and generate, implement, and evaluate solutions.

Decision-making is a mechanism for making choices at each step of the problem-solving process. *Decision-making is part of problem solving, and decision making occurs at every step of the problem-solving process.*

Business, and certainly government, begets problems. Today's environment seems to offer a wealth of problems. In fact, organizations and government are crucibles of problem-solving opportunities. As leaders, many believe their role is to sort out and tackle these problems. "The common belief of management is that it's management's job to come up with all the answers." Experts tell us that is a mistaken thought. In fact, many organizations' biggest problems can be traced to an inability to properly dispense of the issues their organization face.

To succeed more fully, leaders must be able to:
- Prioritize and understand what problems to let go
- Know whom to enlist in solving which problems
- Learn new skills for problem solving and decision making
- Have processes in place to handle decision making
- Set aside time to work on the biggest issues facing their businesses

Boomerang Problems

A study by a CEO member organization reports that most problems CEOS experience today are a result of previous decisions. That's why most people solve certain problems over and over again, while they ignore others. Most companies never solve their biggest problems, perhaps because every time they make an attempt, they find themselves diverging from a solution.

The same studies show when CEOs write the five biggest problems they face, and then asked, 'How many have two or three problems on their list that were your top problems from three months to six months ago?" Most CEOs report that they have had two or three of those problems for three years or more! (Vistage International)

Eight Step Process to Address A Problem

You have probably seen this or similar lists before. The issue is not the details of the list but actually following a process to the end – the solution.

1. Define the problem
2. Analyze the problem
3. Generate objectives and alternatives
4. Select an approach and develop an action plan
5. Troubleshoot
6. Communicate
7. Implement
8. Monitor and verify

Divergent / Convergent Problem Solving

The above describes the fundamental process of problem solving. The difficulty arises, and this is where art and skill come into the overall process, what happens when the solution appears to miss the mark. Initially we discuss identifying the problem correctly, but the success of the process is knowing whether the problem/

solution is divergent or convergent. It is essential that leaders possess the ability to recognize the difference.

Convergent Problems are problems such that the more you study them, the easier a solution appears. Several alternative solutions arise and one emerges as the most desirable. The process iteratively converges on a solution. Divergent Problems are such that the more you study the problem, the more complex and daunting the problem becomes and the more confusing identifying a solution is. Analysis takes you farther and farther from an acceptable solution.

Convergent problems have these characteristics:
- They resemble problems that previously solved.
- Several alternative solutions arise readily.
- The most feasible method is easy to discern.
- It is possible to rely on what was learned in the past to help make a decision.

Divergent problems have these characteristics:
- They are big, complex and unfamiliar.
- Much is at stake.
- Feasible solutions are difficult to imagine, or easily dismissed as unworkable.
- A negative "domino effect" may occur by pursuing any one option.
- Subtle moves can spell the difference between success or failure.
- The more consideration given to these problems, the more time and resources they consume.
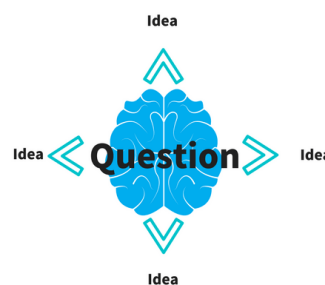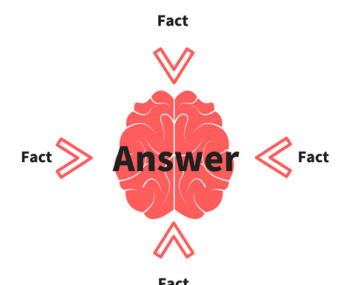
Test for Convergent vs. Divergent Problems
How does one evaluate which kind of problem they are facing? It takes about in 10 minutes to reveal that. If the path becomes clearer through the process, the trail is convergent. If the questions are mounting, this is a good indication the problem is divergent. Divergent situations require a re-characterization of the problem, or more commonly referred to as a paradigm shift.

Conquering Divergent Problems Requires Paradigm Shift
Anyone who has watched the U.S. Congress operate has seen

convergent problem-solving techniques applied to divergent problems, and witnessed the disastrous results. Culture reveals that we tend to approach problems as convergent, such that the more we study them the easier a solution becomes. Studying the problem is the worst thing to do with a divergent problem. It makes the problem seem impossible. That is why the reports issued to help Congressional leaders are often useless in legislative deliberations. The solutions they come up with are compromises leaving no one is satisfied. The same phenomenon occurs in business as well.

Paradigm Shift Addresses Divergent Problems

For divergent problems, examine the paradigms and discard them accordingly. One's assumptions about the world could stop them from finding a feasible solution to a divergent problem. Examples of paradigms include:

- Paradigm: It's boom time, post-World War II, and Americans have the best manufacturing methods.
- Paradigm: Attorneys don't advertise.
- Paradigm: Booksellers need stores or catalogues.
- Paradigm: Copiers need technicians to operate properly.
- What happened to each?

The reality is one may not even be clear about which assumptions are barriers. Typically, leaders at this juncture take their senior managers to a retreat and discuss the problem. They may have an "A-ha" moment – a great paradigm shift. They all agree it is a winning solution. Upon 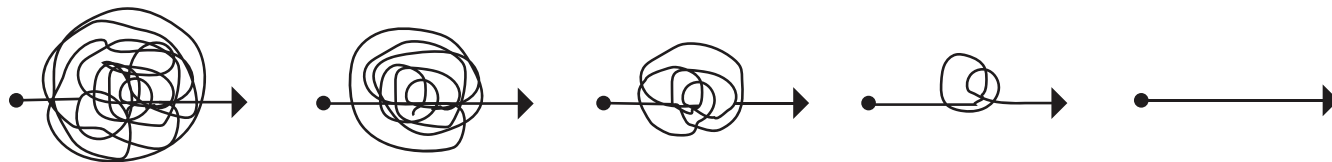their return, they announce it to the troops and a new problem arises. The excitement of the "A-ha" moment is met with skepticism. The troops find problems with the solution. The workforce believes these guys' ideas are patently stupid and will never work. So what is the chance of success?

Does all this sound familiar? Instead, it is essential to enlist appropriate stakeholders to make a paradigm shift successful! More on this in subsequent articles.

Conclusions

As with most things we talk about in our articles, there is no cookie cutter approach, recipe or one size fits all model. In the context of the art of leadership, while there exists a framework for leaders, applying one's Competencies, Experience and Attributes contribute to leadership effectiveness. Specifically for the issue of Problem Solving, the art of knowing how and when and who is essential in achieving success. We also hope this article will shed light on what many of us see in the world around us today. Beginning with defining problems to determining whether they are convergent or divergent to address these problems successfully. Our guess is there is much work left to be done here. It's only a piece of effective leadership but it is an essential piece. If a leader can't solve problems and gather the correct people to address the problems they aren't much of a leader and therefore has created a new problem – an ineffective leader.

Art classes anyone??