

Beyond Leadership

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“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

– Thomas Paine, 1775

Prophetic words, indeed. Today, we will attempt to address some of the causes that have stoked today’s tensions, fears and uncertainties – leading to the same sense of urgency that moved Thomas Paine to sound the alarm of Common Sense almost 250 years ago.

But first, a confession. We have been a bit quiet lately because, frankly, our very own souls are being tried as we search for answers within the world of leadership. During the early years of UPDATE, we made a commitment that our articles will focus on topics pertinent to the world of business, and we would follow the time proven naval wardroom rule of no conversations at the wardroom table about religion or politics. There was a reason for that commitment: we were not in the business of offending our readers, and we still maintain that commitment, but there is such fertile ground to expand our viewing angle beyond just business that this UPDATE article and perhaps future articles will depart from the wardroom rule. We are trying to be real about what we see as major leadership problems that are affecting us all and causing corporations and governments to stumble and sidestep major issues that must be confronted in order to avoid calamity and ensure a future.

The context here is; problem solving is the stage, and in our leadership sessions we include lessons on Problem Solving. With that said, below is a brief summary setting the stage.

An Overview of Classic Problem Solving

Business begets problems. Today’s business seems to offer a wealth of them. In fact, businesses 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 companies’ biggest problems can be traced to an inability of management to properly dispense with the issues their companies face. Now let’s substitute or include government, and consider problems of efficiency, accountability, productivity and profitability (no surprises here). There is no incentive for government at any level to incorporate these standards at the highest operational and managerial levels. This seriously complicates the issue.

Successful Problem Solving from a Leadership Perspective

Leaders must be able to prioritize. They must 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, and set aside time to work on the biggest issues facing their businesses. Governments, like some businesses, too often tend to address problems that are easy or convenient rather than the big problems

that need to be addressed. The philosophy of “we can look like we are doing things if we address a bunch of little (and sometimes meaningless) things” rather than work to address the big problems. Historically governments at all levels have been able to achieve results by working out compromises. In our current environment, compromise is often completely off the table on major issues. Compromises are solutions that can satisfy all parties, but no one gets all of what they are seeking. Compromise can be an acceptable solution or it can merely be a solution that no one is happy with and doesn't necessarily solve the problem.

Boomerang Problems are another dynamic of Problem Solving and leadership. These are problems that are a result of the decisions made previously. This is why we keep solving certain problems over and over again, while ignoring others. Most companies never solve the biggest problems facing them. When CEOs are asked to write the five biggest problems they face and then to indicate whether any of them were top problems of three months or six months ago, most admit many problems persist. Finally, reports on this issue indicate most leaders/companies have had two or three of those problems for three years or more. Once again, problems persist in government settings as well.

We're including the well-documented Eight Step Problem Solving Process to focus our discussion:

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



This is classic leadership and problem solving fare. The challenge is not simply about implementing the process. We see the challenge as understanding the **type** of problem. Our sessions define two types of problems, and the distinction becomes obvious when one watches news broadcasts, however one receives their news.

There are two types of problems:

Convergent Problems – The type of problems that the more you study them, the easier to resolve they appear to become. Several alternative solutions arise and one emerges as the most desirable.

Divergent Problems – The type of problems that the more you study them, the more complex and daunting they become. Analysis actually leads the team further and further from an acceptable solution.



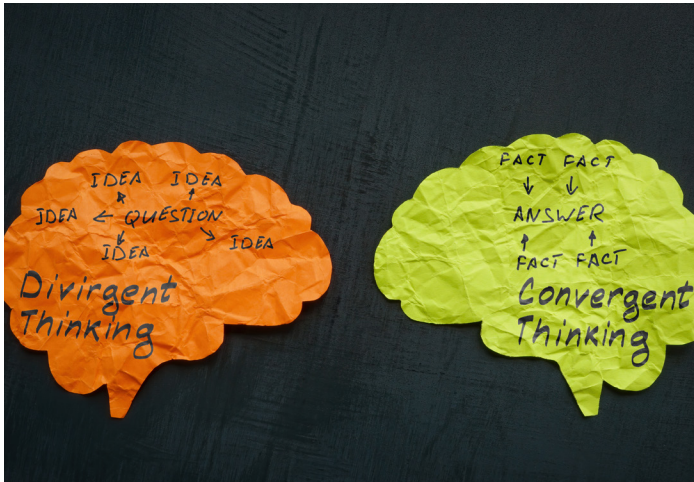
Convergent problems resemble problems previously solved. They typically have several alternative solutions that are readily recognizable. The team or the leader can rely on what they've learned in the past to help make a decision, and finally, the most feasible method or approach is easy to determine.

Divergent problems on the other hand are big, complex and unfamiliar. Therefore, their solutions usually carry significant consequences. Feasible solutions are difficult to imagine early on or are easily dismissed as unworkable. Pursuing one specific option early on in the process may have a negative "domino" effect. Interestingly, subtle moves can spell the difference between success and failure, and the more you consider alternatives, the more time and resources they consume.

The dilemma becomes testing for Convergent vs. Divergent Problems. Actually, this part of the process is rather straightforward. Just start asking questions. If the path becomes clearer with questions, the path is convergent. If the questions are mounting without a clear path to a solution, the problem is most likely divergent, requiring a paradigm shift, a change of context, or the introduction of an entirely different set of variables, conditions or data points.

In sum, conquering divergent problems almost always requires some form of paradigm shift. Here's where the government part comes in. Anyone who has watched the U.S. Congress operate has seen convergent problem-solving techniques applied to divergent

problems, and witnessed the disastrous results. Traditional problem solving training, as a rule, sees all problems as convergent, where – the more one studies them, the easier a solution becomes. Therein lies the problem: Studying the problem is a huge waste of time and the worst thing to do with a divergent problem. It makes the problem seem insurmountable. That's why the reports issued to help Congressional leaders are often useless in legislative deliberations. The solutions they propose are compromises where no one is satisfied and a true solution is not being proposed. A similar effect happens in the business world.



Where are we going with all this? We are suggesting there are very few convergent problems and many divergent ones. These divergent problems challenge conventional leadership practices, theories, norms and training. As the Grateful Dead song Truckin goes, “what a long strange trip it’s been.” It seems to us that from a leadership perspective these last several years have been just that, a long strange trip – a trip that has challenged many traditional leadership norms. In both business and government, at all levels, we historically witnessed strong leaders and weak leaders but in general leaders who accept their responsibility for decisions both good and bad. We now seem to be in a world where leaders who make a bad decision or have something not go their way immediately point the finger at someone else. Nothing seems to be their fault. President Harry Truman’s adage “the buck stops here” is long gone. Now, we certainly don’t include all leaders in this condemnation, but it is becoming too prevalent to ignore.

Finding someone to blame has always been a sport enjoyed by some, but it now appears to be becoming the norm. Few seem willing to accept responsibility for a bad decision or a failure of some sort. Again, we are not saying that every leader is guilty of passing the buck, but it has become way too pervasive. Have we moved beyond traditional leadership and begun to create a new norm? Scary if we are. In this article we want to look at this trend and try and understand how it has taken root, and what can be done to bring back traditional leadership norms, which though definitely flawed, have some clear definitions, lines of responsibility and measures of effectiveness.

Back to Thomas Paine:
“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

What are conventional leadership theories, practices, norms and training?

1. **The behavioral theory of leadership** – The central premise of this leadership model is that anyone and everyone can hone effective leadership skills by mimicking leader behavior.
2. **The contingency theory of leadership** – Sometimes called situational leadership theory, this model suggests different leadership styles are necessary for different situations.
3. **The great man theory of leadership** – Also known as the trait theory of leadership, the great man theory asserts that great leaders are born with all the right personality traits to attain position, power, and authority.
4. **The relationship theory of leadership** – This participative leadership style revolves around treating so-called subordinates as equal team members essential to the decision-making process.
5. **The transactional theory of leadership** – Also known as management theory, is task-oriented and operates off the premise that effective leaders should treat their employees and team members transactionally.
6. **The transformational theory of leadership** – Group performance is paramount in transformational leadership theory.

Because there are varying numbers of leadership styles, the issues become:

- No one theory works for the full spectrum of leadership challenges.
- No one person can possess all these traits/styles.
- As a society can we achieve any consensus under conventional/traditional leadership models? If we can, will the consensus be a real solution or just a way to placate the various participants?
- Is there the potential to rally intelligent, critical thinking in a constructive and effective way to affect change?
- Are the divisions, so noticeable in society, irreparable, and can a new leadership paradigm change that?
- Is there an historic component necessary to understand the origins of our challenges and discontent?
- Is it possible for any individual or a consortium of like-minded influencers to bridge divisions?
- Government and some large companies tend to operate on consensus decision making. That may be fine for smaller issues but is it an acceptable model for the large problems that are faced?

Are there points within these theories and conventions that can be connected? Is there a frame of reference for any of these theories/conventions? Or, are these just like so many leadership initiatives: just another flavor of the month? Are these theories like an Elixir of Leadership – drink this and you too shall be a good leader?

The irony is that leadership development is elusive, and difficult to quantify overall effectiveness.

A way to characterize the current leadership challenge is to look at the variables and consequences facing today's leaders. When we overlay the divergent problem solving challenges we ask, are we beyond conventional or traditional leadership skills, capabilities, training? Certainly, in the past there were complex and serious problems that were appropriately addressed. Why is it that today similarly complex problems seem to stop any decision making and bring about uncontrolled mudslinging and rhetoric instead of decision making?

At this point, we'd like to introduce the notion of benchmarking, defined as:

"A continuous, systematic process for evaluating the products, services, and work processes of organizations that are recognized as representing best practices for the purpose of organizational improvement."

Benchmarking is employing the knowledge and experience of others who may have addressed the same problem before. While this is a tried and mostly true approach, the conditions/variables of previous solutions may dictate changes to an approach. In today's world the inter-connectedness of global resources and economies and the rapidity and freedom of communication coupled with geopolitical motivations increases the variables and consequences of decision-making almost exponentially. Hence the 'divergentness' of problems. Continuing with this, the notion of "a leader," one who has a grasp on the range of variables and potential consequences, we believe presents serious challenges. Benchmarking has proven to be effective in business when properly used. However, when is the last time you heard about benchmarking at any level of government?



Is the conventional/traditional concept of leadership still a viable construct for businesses and nations? Volumes exist addressing "what makes a great leader." It used to be Jack Welch on the corporate side, until his ideal was shattered and he landed in the dustbin of corporate history. On a national level, for the post

WWII generation, it is men (not yet women!) like FDR (ancient history); JFK (imperfect, but charismatic a great speaker, good-looking, and refreshing following the stabilizing Eisenhower years) – equally worshipped and demonized by many; and, Barack Obama – a family man, intellectually advanced; the first black U.S. president, with explosive reactionary results that changed this country. Can we redefine Leadership for the post-Trump Era?



Variables (Please note, this is a representative listing, we are not attempting to cover all the variables.)

1. Distrust of leaders. Escalating distrust of leaders.
2. Widespread disrespect for big business, government, even the Supreme Court (Some merited, some not)
3. Generational and dynamic workforce challenges
4. Expanding employment mandates, e.g. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
5. Focus on short term financial goals/results vs. long term strategic corporate development
6. Post pandemic workforce issues and subsequent leadership challenges
7. Climate challenges across a broad spectrum of industries
8. Refusing to accept documented and verified facts and/or proven data
9. Globalization at a crossroads
10. Realignment of major geopolitical powers

Consequences (Please note, as with the variables, above, this list is also meant to be representative in nature.)

1. Lack of credible and effective leadership
2. Tendency for the most capable to avoid leadership roles
3. Loss of institutional knowledge and experience
4. Inability to effectively problem solve toward reaching acceptable, proactive strategies. Legislative Paralysis, Climate Change, Equal Rights.
5. Widening socio-economic/political divisions
6. Direct and indirect organizational dysfunction
7. "It's my way or the highway" thinking with a refusal to even consider opposing viewpoints
8. Tradition and rules should be followed only when convenient to our point of view

What do we mean by Beyond Leadership? Honestly, we are having a difficult time coming up with a concise definition. To move toward some construct, we have generated lists of questions such as:

- Are inspirational and political leaders mutually exclusive – both business and governmental?
- As a society can we achieve consensus under conventional/traditional leadership models?
- Is there the potential to rally intelligent critical thinking in a constructive and effective way such to drive change?
- Is Beyond Leadership more about ‘creating an environment for people thrive and self-govern’ rather than leading in conventional terms?
- Are today’s exceptional divisions irreparable, or might a new leadership paradigm change that? And if so, how can we help move a new paradigm forward?
- Is an historic component necessary to understand the origins of social discontent? Or is history already over politicized?
- Is it possible for any individual or a consortium of like-minded influencers to bridge divisions?
- How do we heal when some are unwilling to accept the need to heal or to accept that someone else might have valid ideas?
- Why do some have “I’m right and you’re wrong” thinking? Why are there some who refuse to even consider other ideas or approaches? Is there a bridge?

Conclusion

Conventional leadership theories have become very limiting and one dimensional. Beyond Leadership is a concept that considers an evolving spectrum of variables along with requiring a different leadership paradigm to effectively address them. We see an ever-widening chasm between traditional leadership and our current

leadership environment. We are dedicated to helping improve leadership but the current leadership environment is something that we have not experienced before. There have been times of angry rhetoric and division in the past, but strong and effective leadership has always been able to overcome such divisions. That is not happening now. Is this a consequence of a lack of capable leadership, or the need for a new leadership paradigm? If the answer is the need for a new leadership paradigm, where do we find those leaders and get organizations and governments to accept the need for this necessary, perhaps uncomfortable change?



We want to continue this discussion and welcome your thoughts and inputs. You, our readers, work or have worked in a wide spectrum of industries and organizations. Maybe you share the concerns we are expressing, and maybe you do not and think that we are way off base. Either way, please share with us your thoughts!



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