Understanding Leadership:
An Experimental-Experiential Model

George T. Hole, Ph.D.
SUNY Buffalo State

Books about leadership are dangerous to readers who fantasize about being leaders or apply leadership ideas as if they were proven formulas. As an antidote, I offer an experimental framework in which any leadership-management model can be tested to gain experiential understanding of the model. As a result one can gain reality-based insights about leadership and oneself. The experiment is described; resistances to engaging it are considered; and examples from a leadership group implementing Covey's "Eight Principles" are summarized. In the course of discussing individual's experiments objections were voiced against this Socratic approach to understanding leadership. Finally, I sketch a perspective for understanding the fit between leaders and followers. Overall, the experiment brought into view one's sense of leadership and authenticity and tested them.

Introduction

I was asked to give a talk about values from a philosophical perspective to a group studying leadership for several years, a group composed of college professors and professionals in social services. I resisted their invitation because I thought that what philosophers have to say about values is often viewed as abstract or irrelevant to people pursuing practical issues. After listening to several members describe their commitment to understanding and practicing leadership, I made a bold proposal to the group: To have each member formulate an experiment to shift their attention from books and ideas to their own experience and realities. What emerged as experiments, follow-up discussions and theorizing about leadership surprised all of us.

I entered the group with a bias against reading more about leadership. There is, it seems, a constant stream of new books from new or old leadership-gurus, with supposedly new ideas. These books provide a rich array of personalities, stories, cases, terminology, insights, and theories. But, how useful are they to people who desire to improve their own understanding and practice of leadership? It is intellectually stimulating to read and discuss books like Steven Covey's *Eight Principles of Principle-Centered Leadership (1992)*. When reading about the trials and accomplishments of a powerful leader in a powerful corporation, like Jack Welch, CEO of General

Electric, it is entertaining to fantasize about oneself acting similarly. However, without a catalyst of practice and critiquing, leadership books can give the reader shallow second-hand knowing and untested ideas—Too often, "book reality" is not sufficiently connected with the reader's own experiences and ideas of leadership. Our plan was to act "outside the box" and to commit to some action outside "one's comfort zone." Beyond these clichés, an essential part of the plan was to discover what is inside the box—to discover and reflect on one's own assumptions and beliefs about leadership. So, a dose of the Socratic ideal of the examined life was built into the experiment. As it unfolded, the experiment stimulated unexpected actions that enlivened discussion about leadership and generated hard-won personal insights.

The Leadership Experiment

The leadership experiment is based on a successful assignment[1] I have used for many years in my philosophy classes. Since the group had read Covey's Eight Principles, I used it as a starting point. Other books with how-to suggestions on the art of leadership are readily adaptable to my experiment format. The only requirement is that one is willing to test ideas and oneself through experimental experience. The experiment has five phases:

1. Think about an experiment:

   a. Review Covey's 8 Principles of Principle-Centered Leadership:

   - Learn continually through experience
   - See life as a mission
   - Radiate positive energy
   - Believe in other people
   - Lead a balanced life
   - See life as an adventure
   - Be synergistic
   - Exercise for self-renewal in 4 dimensions

   b. Choose to implement one of the principles

2. Plan your experiment:

   a. Design an experiment that you would be willing to do to implement your chosen principle. Be specific: Answer what you will do, with whom, when, where, and for how long.

b. State what obstacles or excuses you anticipate in carrying out your experiment.

c. Estimate how committed you will be in completing it.

d. Identify what risks are involved in doing and in not doing the experiment.

e. Predict the results of your experiment, both positive and negative.

f. Indicate what difference it will make if you are successful in your experiment.

g. Identify one "big" (more essential, universal, or philosophical) question that is present in your experiment.

3. Describe-evaluate your experiment:

a. Keep a journal in which you describe what you did and how you assessed it.

b. At the end of your experiment evaluate your overall results. Check how accurate you predicted the results. Try to make explicit the values you use to evaluate results.

c. Based on your experiment, describe what you have learned or concluded about your "big" question.

d. Summarize your understanding of Covey's principle and yourself as a principle-centered leader.

e. Discuss your experiment with a philosophical friend.

4. Reflect on process:

Identify what questions and insights you have about leadership and about learning through self-reflective experimentation.

5. Share your experience:

a. Send a copy of your experiment-experience anonymously to GTH for a summary report that will be shared with the group for discussion.

b. Present your experiment to the group for discussion.

In effect, the experiment provides a mirror in which a person can see more clearly what beliefs and assumptions shape her/his actions. This experiment-experience format provides a framework for understanding a leadership idea in the context of one's life, broadly viewing and assessing both the principle and oneself.

Early Reactions to the Experiment

Not surprising, some group members responded to the experiment with trepidation and skepticism. It seemed like a good idea, but messy. Convenient "reasons" appeared, to allow one to avoid the experiment, such as:

"I feel forced to do something."

"I feel on view to everyone."

"There is too much else I have to do."

Two extreme, latent experiment-defeating assumptions need to be challenged:

- Everything is ok and there is no need to experiment.
- Everything is a mess and there is no hope of a satisfactory experiment.

Troublesome points arise in doing an experiment. Examining them, listening to one's critical inner-dialogue as challenging realities present themselves, will provide a source for deeper Socratic understanding of one's beliefs about leadership ideals. Some common trouble spots in doing the experiment include:

- Choosing a specific action-plan
- Realizing that an action-plan appears quite different when implementing it
- (Under or over) estimating the difficulties
- Predicting the results seems like guess-work
- Making a realistic commitment, without over or under confidence
- Being surprised at the challenges to ways of thinking and acting that arise
- Uncovering moral or authenticity issues.

Avoidance "reasons" and trouble spots like these emerge for leaders in conducting plans of action. Any deliberate action involves ideas and judgments about results and intervening obstacles; and involves even deeper value-laden beliefs about oneself and the world—which reality can challenge. I assume that our ideas about ourselves as leaders are worthy of Socratic reflection.

Experiment Examples

Several members of the group experimented with the Covey principle to radiate positive energy. M.D. kept a journal for two weeks in which she learned:

I have difficulty neutralizing strong, negative energy sources emanating from

others. Retaliation is my natural response. I am likely to overreact to negative
behaviors, criticism, or human weaknesses. I can believe in the potential of people
but they have to show some evidence of that potential.

In regard to Covey's recommendations to sidestep negative energy with a sense of humor, she demurred and appealed to a more foundational belief for herself: "These changes in behavior appear to be not only overwhelming but when so much change is required, one would wonder if authenticity is sacrificed." Authenticity emerged as basic value and concern in discussions of several members' experiments.

One member's experiment astounded us in the degree of his idealism and personal risk to implement the Golden Rule where he saw a need. L.G. knew a neighbor family was about to lose their house because of an inability to meet mortgage payments, after the husband-father's surgeries for a life-threatening condition. In the course of "doing unto others" L.G. personally assumed the mortgage and helped the family apply for public assistance—neither of which were easy to do. He appreciated a "hard lessons of life:" "When you are down and out there are very few persons who will come to your assistance. And, when you are down you are treated with less respect." This illustrates a significant difference bearing on any kind of learning: second-hand quotable learning is not as dramatically challenging, valuable and earned as that from intimate first-hand experience where one's core values are at stake. L.G. stood out as decidedly authentic—though equivocally for us. While we admired his nobility, many of us admitted that we would not have followed him as a leader, if we had to act with such a high degree of sacrifice in applying the Golden Rule. Because, for one reason, we knew that his experiment was ongoing; there was no apparent, near-term, natural exit point from this support for this reality-stricken family. To abandon them for his own comfort, even when they were improving, he decided, would violate his Golden Rule principle.

W.G. designed an experiment to examine his leadership behaviors as he participated in various roles as project director, president of his synagogue, and vice president of two service organizations and board member of a charter school. He tested whether his actions were principled and his motives were altruistic. Using a grid, he placed each action, after review, into one of four quadrants with the four labels:

1. Doing the right thing for the right reasons
2. Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons

3.   Doing the wrong thing for the right reasons

4.   Doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons

Clearly he put his self image at risk: "I may find I am not as principled or altruistic a person as I believe I am." Just engaging the experiment, he realized, reinforced his "sense of personal integrity and courage to do the right things as a leader." For him, the alternative not taken was unacceptable: "Not doing the experiment leaves me feeling like a coward."

One experiment focused on Covey's principle of mission. S.B. continued "with renewed determination" to formulate his most fundamental beliefs and to devise a strategy for correcting what he had diagnosed as an ego problem. One item of his personal mission-statement read:

Before I do or say anything, I wait for an instant while my ego rushes by, and then

I ask the universe what is best for all.

He learned,

I am never disappointed when I do it, and I am frequently disappointed when I

don't.

Another group member, R.J. chose the principle of seeing life as an adventure and undertook a project to produce a training video for future social services training initiatives. He foresaw a conflict and focused on resolving it.

Overall, members of the group who conducted an experiment experienced the following:

- Freshness of experience
- Dramatic engagement of self in (or against) the world
- Discoveries about self (image) and latent powers
- Reinterpretations of meaning about leadership ideas, specifically Covey's terminology
- Unexpected results
- Questions about the meaning of leadership
- An existential-moral question about their own authenticity.

The worth of doing the experiment was most evident in discussions of each of the experiments. Leading a discussion of one's experiment resembled a leadership situation. Personal authenticity, we came to understand, was evident in varying degrees as experimenters talked about their challenges and self-discoveries. We all had moments of seeing someone in the group in new light. We had moments of understanding, times during which a piece of narrative, a paradigmatic

experience, a "self-evident" truth, or a metaphor crystallized into an insight. For these moments of understanding A.C. used the phrase "teachable points of view[2]" and asserted their importance:

> Leadership is about ideas and the way we live our lives; it is about recounting stories that demonstrate a set of values that we (should) live by. Every leader has to cultivate his ideas and values into a teachable point of view that he uses to teach and coach others to be leaders.

During discussions, we moved in two, sometimes conflicting, directions. We moved deeper into the details of individual experience and outward toward generalizations and abstractions. Leadership, as we realized more profoundly, is a rich and amorphous ideal thrives or withers depending how one negotiates stubborn realities.

Protest Against the Experiment

In addition to discussing what we learned about leadership as a result of the experiment, the group discussed whether and how the experiment would have worth to others in various contexts. A.C. from the start saw the experiment as embodying principle-centered leadership:

> Noel Tichy (in *The Leadership Engine*) talks about leadership being more about ideas than leadership styles, characteristics or traits. He speaks about leaders creating a "values based umbrella" large enough to encompass a set of morals and "the right things" to do that will work in all situations within the leader-follower context. Leaders, through the way they treat followers/employees/colleagues, develop this umbrella of transcendent ideas. At the basis of this is trust and fair treatment of individuals. I interpret this as integrity and an authentic style of relating to others who share a vision and a sense of who we are as an organization.

We discussed troubling examples of principle-based leadership, like Hitler's leadership of the Nazi Party and the German people. While we profoundly disagreed with his principles, nonetheless, Hitler can be said to have acted on principles shared by others (except those he exterminated). In effect, he provided a vision for a people humiliated by defeat after WWI. In spite of this difficult example, A.C. affirmed the value of the experiment as a discovery model for principle-centered leadership: "The faithful putting into action of the experiment helps us to understand the notion of principle-centered leadership. It goes back to our central issue: "How do

you (as a leader) make it (a values-based principle) work (in the real world)? A.C. consistently pointed out aspects of principle-centered leadership in the experiments. For example, in S.B.'s experiment to formulate his life-mission A.C. found this teachable point of view:

> Asking the Universe is like tying to find that higher order—that plateau of values—from which we may better understand how to make decisions and lead. Authentic leadership is being true to a set of moral principles that is above us as individuals.

Thus, A.C. saw our experiment as an important step: a process of individual change as a precursor of organizational change.

We had our disagreements, especially regarding the practicality of our whole enterprise for other's use. R.J. challenged the worth of the experiment and our insights for the social service organizations with which he is most familiar: He assessed that they are in a crisis mode. They need practical help quickly. Theory is bad medicine for organizations under siege. L.G. elaborated this protest. Managers in social-service organizations who suffer budget cuts, higher legislative mandates, and low staff morale are looking for directions. They have little time for leadership experiments or personal insights. They fear, in these times of uncertainty and risk, that their careers are on the line. For a solution, according to L.G., look to what people do in times of crisis; they go back to religion. So, he concluded, managers need the "tried and true;" so, give them the basics.

Sketch of a Theory

I proposed a point of view for contextualizing leadership based on Joseph Campell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*[3]. A hero journeys through four zones, each of which represents a different reality or different perspective on reality. "Ordinary reality," the usual starting point, is impoverished in some way. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack goes to market to sell his mother's cow. Buying a "magic" bean seems to further impoverish them. When the bean transforms into a beanstalk Jack enters a "dangerous and forbidden zone," the land of a giant. There, Jack eventually enters a potential "death zone," where life and death are the high stakes. Because he kills the giant Jack is able to "return to ordinary reality with a gift," gold, so that he and his mother live thereafter in a "transformed ordinary reality."

While Campbell's four zones are more complex and part of a large thesis about all hero

stories, it provides a conceptual map for representing issues about leadership that, of necessity, include matters of perceptions of reality, risks and hoped-for rewards. Leadership involves at least three groups, the leader, followers and outside others. So, for example, I would locate R.J.'s protest in the name of the plight of social-services managers as follows: The managers perceive themselves in or dangerously close to being in the death zone. Their staffs are in the dangerous zone of low morale. We are seen as outside theoreticians of leadership, self-insulated from the dangers of "real" world managers. Thus we hold little promise of delivering them back to ordinary prosperous reality as a gift. Returning to the Hitler example, Hitler began from an impoverished reality, Germany's defeat and humiliation as well as his own personal impoverishment. He entered a forbidden zone of political violence and usurpation, called for followers who shared his impoverished reality and eventually lead Germany and others into a death zone. Only neo-Nazis can find the return to ordinary reality with a gift in this hero episode. Clearly, to us who are not followers of neo-Nazi "leaders," they are reality distorting, dangerous thugs masquerading in a forbidden zone. They appeal only to those as weak, gullible and as impoverished as themselves.

I would summarize our experiment in terms of the four zones. Our ideal of a leader is one who has the powers, integrity and vision to lead people and organizations when they find themselves in an impoverished reality but especially when they are in a dangerous and forbidden zone. (Managers in a non-impoverished zone have a less daunting task, to maintain prosperity). We expect leaders to improve reality in some fashion—that is their promise and their gift. Exemplary leaders like Christ, Buddha, and the nameless hero in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" leave their ordinary reality, enter a zone of temptation and danger, and face physical or symbolic death. As a result of their struggles and success in the "death zone," they leave their followers a legacy, redemption, noble truths, the form of the good, that promises to transform their ordinary if they act in the leader's proscribe ways.

Leaders will look differently depending on where one locates the leader and followers in Campbell's four zones. We discussed Rudolph Giuliani, Mayor of New York City. When times were prosperous, many liberal-minded people criticized him for his apparent strong-armed police tactics against the homeless and mocked him for alleged unconstitutional attack against free speech when he attempted to ban "obscene" paintings at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and even attempted to shut down the museum. But, when we all entered the dangerous and forbidden zone,

and the death zone, of September 11th, we changed our view of him a leader. We changed and, perhaps, he changed—certainly our reality zones changed. Changing zones changes perspectives. To generalize, since the realities are different in each zone, it seems reasonable to suppose that the nature of the experience, actions, and principles of a leader and followers are appropriately different. Analogously, the experiment invites a person interested in leadership to venture into a risky zone of action, to discover realities about leadership principles and personal authenticity. It is most likely, in this zone that one's leadership effectiveness and image of oneself comes acutely into view and are tested. The outcome is uncertain, but quite likely surprising and rich for insights about leadership and one's self.

Context Matters: The Box

Experiments are usually assessed in terms of their results. With such a small sample of participants it would be rash to draw conclusions. Yet, it is worth interpreting the experiment in terms of the overused injunction: Think outside the box. As a philosopher, I emphasize the Socratic imperative: think inside the box, the box being one's own beliefs and assumptions. The participants were comprised of academics and non-academics. What is the nature of the box for each group? I had the impression that the non-academics found the "outside" box, their workplace onerous if not oppressive. The social workers complained about failures of leadership and the rigidity in their profession. Additionally they felt pressures of their workloads. Personal experiments seemed at best a luxury or worse a waste of time, because it would not affect their immediate cultural box. The box for academics is quite different. We have significant degrees or freedom from "bosses" to pursue our interests, often general and conceptual in contrast immediate and practical. And we like and make time for discussions. Not surprising then, the academics were less focused on the shortcomings of their leadership. They did not feel the urgency of cultural change as the social workers did.

To speculate, any social-personal experimentation of the kind described here depends on how one sees their box. It can be rigid and demanding or flexible and enriching. That is the first look at the box. The reality of the nature of box will be better known if one explores it, so that thinking both outside and inside the box can be creative and productive.

References

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The contents of End Note 3, which identifies the article author: Hole, George T.: "An Experiment: To Make Your Life More Meaningful," <u>Teaching Philosophy</u>, 14:3, 295-303 (1991). See "Sex and Socratic Experimentation" for another example of an experiment with surprising results, in <u>College Sex</u>, eds. Bruce and Stewart, (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2010), pp. 17-27.