

Making Leadership Happen

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The ideas expressed in this paper represent the collective work of many colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership.





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A Whole System Approach to Leadership

More than ever, in a fast-changing and interconnected world, organizations feel the need for leadership. As a result, managers get a lot of advice on how to be more effective leaders. Articulate a clear vision, engage your employees, develop talent, have a global mindset, think strategically, create win-win solutions, leverage diversity, communicate effectively, hold people accountable, be an agile learner. On one level, all of this advice makes great sense. Who could argue with it? At another level, it can be overwhelming. First, the lists of leader characteristics and behaviors seem endless. It's as if we've taken every positive human quality and made it into a requirement for effective leaders. Second, some of the advice can seem contradictory at times. Managers are told to take charge and to empower others, to be politically savvy and authentic, to be flexible and steadfast.

At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®), we think it's time to step back and take a different approach. Instead of putting the entire weight of leadership on individual managers and their capabilities, we think it's important to examine how the whole system is involved in making leadership happen. For example, the exchanges between employees and their managers, the interactions among peer managers or team members, the quality of relationships throughout the organization, the actions of teams and committees, and the use of existing organizational structures and processes—all of these aspects of an organization can impact whether leadership happens or not. Don't get us wrong. We aren't abandoning the importance of individual managers examining and further developing their talents and capabilities. Rather, we're suggesting that such an exercise is necessary but not sufficient for improving leadership in groups, organizations, and society.

What do we mean when we say making leadership happen? First, in our “whole system” perspective, **leadership**

happens in the interactions and exchanges among people with shared work. Leadership can be happening within teams, workgroups, task forces, divisions, communities, and whole organizations. Leadership can be happening across teams, levels, and functions. (You'll find me using the word “collective” as a generic term for all the different forms that groups of people might take.) Regardless of the collective, for leadership to happen, the interactions and exchanges among people have to yield:

- Agreement on what the collective is trying to achieve together (Direction)
- Effective coordination and integration of the different aspects of the work so that it fits together in service of the shared direction (Alignment)
- People who are making the success of the collective (not just their individual success) a personal priority (Commitment)

These three outcomes—direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC for short)—make it possible for individuals to work together willingly and effectively to realize collective achievements. So when we say making leadership happen, we mean making direction, alignment, and commitment happen. In fact, we think the only way to know if leadership has happened is to look for the presence of these three outcomes.

There are many different ways that leadership happens. Sometimes a single individual plays a major role in making it happen. Sometimes it simply emerges in the conversations and interactions among people working together. Sometimes different people play different roles to bring it about. Both formal and informal processes can make it happen. What brings about DAC in one situation may not bring it about in another situation. There are no easy formulas.

Before looking at some examples of how leadership happens, it is important to note that realizing collective achievements requires more than individuals working together willingly and effectively. Think of R&D teams creating a new product, sales groups reaching revenue targets, organizations producing goods and services, a school increasing its graduation rates, a community creating a more sustainable environment. Although leadership is essential for such accomplishments, achieving these results is also dependent on other factors such as financial resources, people with the right technical knowledge and skills, appropriate technology, and effective business practices. Sometimes we can put too much emphasis on leadership, forgetting that it is only one ingredient in the recipe for organizational success.

When Leadership Is Happening: Multiple People, Multiple Processes

As already noted, leadership happens in different ways. Consider the following scenario:

The senior management team of a hospital (one that is part of a large healthcare organization) talked in meetings over several weeks about the hospital's recent results on a standard set of "quality of care" metrics (hospital performance measures that are made available to the public by the U.S. government). Their performance was a bit above average—enough to keep them in the good graces of headquarter executives—but what should their goals be going forward? After much discussion, they unanimously agreed that they should set their goals higher than the goals given to them by headquarters. Two factors seemed to figure into their decision. First, in recent years they had been working to re-establish their reputation in the local community. They felt that overachieving was a way to get the attention of people in the community. Second, they had a bit of a chip on their shoulder when it came to the healthcare organization. Being one of the organization's smaller hospitals, they sometimes felt overlooked. This was an opportunity to show what they could do.

Raising a hospital's scores on quality metrics takes the concerted effort of the entire staff. So the management team took their vision out into the organization. They held formal meetings to share the goals and to explain why they thought it was important to set the bar high and why they thought the hospital was up to the challenge. In the meetings, they first gauged the level of enthusiasm for taking on these lofty goals and found that the hospital staff was enthusiastic. The staff clearly took pride in their work and wanted to be part of an organization known for its high-quality care of patients. During the meetings, staff members were also asked to generate strategies for reaching the goals. These ideas were brought back to senior team meetings and assigned to the appropriate individual or department to explore further. Special efforts were made to engage the medical staff—a group essential to the hospital's success but not employed by the hospital. Believing that doctors are most influenced by other doctors, the hospital CEO first enlisted the help of a small group of physicians whom he knew would be eager to support

the initiative, and this group became ambassadors to the medical community. The eventual result of all the meetings, conversations, suggestions, and explorations was a detailed two-year plan for increasing quality of patient care at the hospital. The plan involved every department and unit in the hospital.

Two practices were put into place to keep the initiative moving in the right direction. First, all managers were expected to schedule time each week to get out among staff and keep the initiative visible: they looked for evidence of plan execution, asked about successes and problems encountered, and reinforced the importance of the initiative. The VP of Nursing was particularly vigilant with her “qual-

ity rounds” and served as a role model for others. Second, an oversight committee was established. A group of 25 managers and physicians met regularly to track progress, make adjustments, and vet new ideas. A strong sense of accountability developed within the group as they saw how strongly each member believed in the importance of what they were trying to achieve as an organization.

THE RESULT: Two years later, an independent organization listed the hospital’s quality of patient care as tenth best in the nation. Employee satisfaction was in the 95th percentile and physician satisfaction was in the 94th percentile nationally.

Clearly leadership is happening in this scenario. There was a shared direction. People were coordinating their efforts in service of that direction. Commitment to the initiative was high. How was all this DAC created? Through many different interactions and exchanges. Some of the key ones are highlighted in the chart below.

IMPROVING PATIENT CARE

HOW WAS DIRECTION CREATED?

- By joining in a movement that was already afoot in the healthcare field—a movement to enhance the quality of patient care in hospitals.
- By customizing organizational goals in ways that met local needs and desires.
- By having organizational goals crafted through discussion and joint agreement at the top of the organization and then tested for acceptance through meetings with staff throughout the organization.
- By having those who already shared in the direction influence others.

HOW WAS ALIGNMENT CREATED?

- By involving many throughout the organization in crafting an implementation plan that specified department and unit responsibilities.
- By managers staying abreast of how implementation was going on the front lines and by employees keeping them abreast.
- Through a coordinating committee that monitored progress and made adjustments.

HOW WAS COMMITMENT CREATED?

- By connecting the improvement initiative to the existing motivations of individuals (e.g., to achieve beyond what others expected, to deliver high-quality patient care).
- By drawing attention to and reinforcing goal-directed effort.
- Through a “contagious” effect: seeing others’ commitment increases one’s own commitment.

Let's take a look at a second scenario:

The CEO of a midsize European company called three of her direct reports to a meeting: the VP of Human Resources, the VP of Organization Learning and Development, and the VP of Strategy. What she shared came as a surprise to each of them. She had been thinking about how to create efficiencies in the organization's management hierarchy and at the same time create more synergies between groups whose responsibilities overlapped. Bottom line: She wanted one unit that integrated HR, learning and development, and strategy. The three direct reports spent the next hour in charge of the conversation—probing more on the CEO's rationale, challenging some of her assumptions, and getting clearer on what she was really wanting to accomplish. It became clear to them that the CEO was fairly committed to this idea of hers and was looking to the three of them to come back to her with a more detailed picture of how the idea could play out in reality.

After the CEO left the meeting, the three VPs looked at each other. After a long silence, one of them said, "I'm not excited about this idea yet, but she made some really good points. There for a minute I was thinking that if the three of us could just do a better job of getting our groups to collaborate, then we wouldn't need this major change. But the longer we talked, the clearer it became that we are really going to go down this road." His two colleagues shared their own personal reactions, and the three of them spent the next hour strategizing and deciding on next steps. What was left unsaid was that one of them could likely end up being the boss of the other two.

Over the next several weeks, the three VPs had more meetings. They had different ideas about the priorities of the proposed combined group, key roles, and overall structure. Mostly they laid out their arguments, listened to each other, and negotiated. Occasionally, their conversation led to a breakthrough idea. In the end, they had a proposal for the CEO. There was a lot in the proposal that they agreed on. On issues where they hadn't agreed, they provided options. They each had a good relationship with the CEO, respected her dedication to the organization, and trusted her judgment. They were comfortable with her making the call on the few items they couldn't agree on.

The CEO liked what she saw in the proposal. She still had some decisions to make, and after talking in depth to each of the VPs, felt comfortable making those decisions. The departmental "merger" took place over the next six months. One of the VPs was made Executive VP of the new unit and he oversaw the process, regularly meeting with key staff members as they worked out the details of role responsibilities, work flow, and interfaces with the rest of the organization. He was energized to work with his staff as they began to realize some of the expected efficiencies and synergies. One of the VPs left the organization for another job; his altered role in the new unit just wasn't as satisfying to him, and he had found himself just going through the motions, not really engaging in the work as he had in the past. His departure left the final VP with an expanded role—an unexpected new opportunity that she welcomed.



This scenario focuses on a much smaller group: the CEO and three of her direct reports. Shared direction took longer to arrive at. Commitment happened later in the process. Note that the story says nothing about DAC in the new unit itself—a useful reminder that having direction, alignment, and commitment about an organizational change in a top-level group doesn't tell us whether there's DAC for the change more broadly in the organization.

But one suspects that having it at the top is an important first step. The chart below highlights some of the key actions and processes that produced DAC in this scenario.

INTEGRATING THREE UNITS

HOW WAS SHARED DIRECTION CREATED?

- By the CEO using her authority (and her direct reports accepting her authority) to design the overall structure of the organization.
- By three peers arguing, negotiating, and finding where they could agree.
- By these peers agreeing to support the decision of a trusted boss.

HOW WAS ALIGNMENT CREATED?

- By redesigning roles, workflows, and interfaces in the new unit.
- Through oversight of alignment issues by one person (the Executive VP).

HOW WAS COMMITMENT CREATED?

- By laying out a logical argument of how the change would bring benefits to the organization.
- By having an opportunity to influence the outcome.
- By staying with a group when one feels committed and leaving when one doesn't.

In both of these scenarios, DAC is being generated. However, different leadership processes are being utilized in an effort to produce these outcomes. Clearly, the size of the collective impacts leadership processes. **Making leadership happen in a team is different than making it happen in a department or in a whole organization.** The organizing structure of the collective can also lead to the need for different leadership processes, for example:

Matrix structures need leadership processes for creating shared direction across the two dimensions of the matrix (e.g., geography and product, business unit and function) and for encouraging employee commitment to multiple groups.

Organizations that rely heavily on temporary project teams to accomplish work need leadership processes that allow team members to quickly develop a shared understanding of their project goals and trust with their new co-workers.

Collectives with little formal structure (e.g., informal networks in organizations, neighborhoods, social movements) need leadership processes that encourage individuals to connect with others who have a shared agenda.

A particularly important driver of the way people go about making leadership happen is the collective's shared beliefs about what will produce direction, alignment, and commitment.

This might seem obvious, but it's important to point out because different groups of people have different sets of shared beliefs. Some of these shared beliefs come from everyone being part of the same national culture. For example, in some cultures more than in others, people more naturally look to those in higher positions of authority to provide direction. People in the same profession can also come to have shared beliefs about DAC. For example, lawyers may see negotiation as a natural strategy for reaching agreement on a direc-

tion, whereas scientists may think that decisions about shared direction need to be based on careful research. And many organizations have developed strong preferences for the way leadership should happen. All these types of difference in approaches to leadership become particularly salient to the manager who moves from one organization to another or who is working to make leadership happen across functional areas or around the globe.

A final thing to note about these scenarios: There isn't "a" leader making leadership happen. The actions, interactions, reactions, and exchanges of multiple people are producing the DAC. Certainly in the second scenario, the CEO is playing a major role, but even in this instance one can see that the actions of her direct reports are making leadership happen, too.

By looking at leadership from a whole-system perspective, you not only better see the multiple people involved, you also start to see how some actions that haven't typically been part of the concept of "leading" are indeed contributing to the production of leadership, for example, accepting a boss's authority, keeping those higher in the organization apprised of implementation progress, and leaving a group when one's commitment wanes. A whole-system lens provides you with more options when it comes to improving leadership.

The Manager's Role in Making Leadership Happen

It is taken for granted that managers in an organization have a major responsibility for making leadership happen in that organization (and even beyond the organization's boundaries with organizational partners). Here are three important strategies for taking hold of that responsibility:

1. Pay Attention to Whether Leadership is Happening

Start looking for evidence of direction, alignment, and commitment (see the table on page 9). Not just in the groups you are responsible for, but also when you are working with groups of peers, when the organization is introducing new initiatives, and when multiple groups or functions have to collaborate to get work accomplished. By paying attention to outcomes, you will not only begin to discern where more leadership is needed, but you will also start to see the kinds of processes and interactions that are producing the desired levels of direction, alignment, and commitment.

2. Make More Leadership Happen

First, when you notice that there aren't many leadership processes in place, create them. For example, do you need to meet more regularly with your peers to prioritize work in a matrix organization (to create more alignment)? Do you need a way to match members of your R&D staff with projects that they are most enthusiastic about while still assuring that all the projects are adequately resourced (to create more commitment)? Does the organization need a way to collect and share success stories about its new sustainability initiative (to create more direction and commitment)? Second, when there are useful leadership processes in place, make sure people have the skills to participate in them effectively. When a new strategic initiative is being launched, does your staff have the skills to analyze its implication for their own work (to create more alignment), to participate effectively in the town meetings the CEO is holding (to create more shared direction), and to constructively push back during implementation when something doesn't make sense to them (to create more alignment and commitment)? And finally, when existing leadership processes no longer seem to be producing the needed DAC, explore new ones. Does a more diverse group of people need to be involved in key business unit decisions (to create more direction)? Are more honest conversations about proposed changes needed (to create more commitment)? Are clearer accountabilities needed (to create more alignment)? When often-used (and comfortable) leadership processes no longer deliver the expected DAC, often the initial reaction is to try harder when trying a different approach is what is needed.



3. Improve Your Own Ability to Participate in the Making of Leadership

Back to those long lists of leader capabilities. It is useful to continue to deepen and broaden your individual skills and abilities. With a broader repertoire of capabilities you'll be able to participate more effectively in a wide range of leadership processes. Often the difficult question is "Where should I focus my development efforts?" One lens for examining this question is DAC. If there was one place in your organization where you would desperately like to see more DAC, where would that be (e.g., one of the groups you manage, the important task force you serve on, the direct report group you are part of)? Then what would you need to get better at so that more leadership happens in that setting?

And finally, don't undertake these three strategies alone! Talk to people about where DAC is happening and where it's not, enlist others in your experiments with new leadership processes, seek input on how to improve your own capabilities. Leadership is shared work—at the end of the day, you can only make it happen with others.

EVIDENCE OF DAC

	HAPPENING	NOT HAPPENING
DIRECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a vision, a desired future, or a set of goals that everyone buys into. • Members of the collective easily articulate how what they are trying to achieve together is worthwhile. • People agree on what collective success looks like. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is lack of agreement on priorities. • People feel as if they are being pulled in different directions. • There's inertia; people seem to be running in circles.
ALIGNMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is clear about each other's roles and responsibilities. • The work of each individual/group fits well with the work of other individuals/groups. • There's a sense of organization, coordination, and synchronization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Things are in disarray: deadlines are missed, rework is required, there's duplication of effort. • People feel isolated from one another. • Groups compete with one another.
COMMITMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People give the extra effort needed for the group to succeed. • There's a sense of trust and mutual responsibility for the work. • People express considerable passion and motivation for the work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only the easy things get done. • Everyone is just asking "what's in it for me?" • People are not "walking the talk."

About the Author

Cynthia McCauley has been involved in many aspects of our work in her 25 years at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®): research, product development, program evaluation, publication, management, and action learning coaching. She is coeditor of *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* and author of the popular guidebook *Developmental Assignments: Creating Learning Experiences without Changing Jobs*.



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