

1-1-2010

Tao and the Lost Art of Leadership

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Recommended Citation

Paynton, Scott (2010) "Tao and the Lost Art of Leadership," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 60.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/60>

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Academic Leadership Journal

[Tao and the Lost Art of Leadership](#)

Issues: [Fall 2010 - Volume 8 Issue 4](#)

Posted On 2010-09-29 08:14:00

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I often tell people that I am literally a lifetime student of academic leadership. I grew up watching my father navigate his career in the academy as a professor of Sociology, including serving as Department Chair. Much to his pleasure I followed suit, pursuing a fun and challenging career as a professor of Communication in the same state university system. Over the course of my journey in academe, I've observed, and participated in, almost every level of academic leadership. From serving as chair of too many committees to remember, Department Chair, Vice-President of the Academic Senate, University Ombudsperson, and now Associate Dean, I've encountered both the good and bad in leadership at the university level.

Anyone who has served in positions of academic leadership can testify to the often difficult nature of this work. Because universities routinely hire academics to lead, often without any actual training in leadership, many are unprepared to lead effectively. I've witnessed a great number of academic leaders grasping to figure out how to lead, with no clue where to begin developing effective approaches. One of the primary lessons I've learned is that, as a starting point for effective leadership, it is important that leaders define leadership for themselves in order to effectively enact their particular approaches to leadership.

If we apply the basic ideas of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theories on social constructionism to leadership, we can conclude that the very ways we discuss, and therefore enact, leadership are bound by our social interactions. Our social interactions occur within larger cultural assumptions and practices that ultimately influence how we come to understand concepts like leadership. Using this logic, if we trace chronological developments of leadership theory in western societies (particularly the U.S.) over the last 100 years, we see that they are framed from cultural perspectives that value the individual as the primary focus of leadership. From trait theories to transformational leadership theories, the individual leader is most often the primary focus of conversation and inquiry into what leadership ultimately means, and how we come to define and do it. Extending the tenets of social constructionism to leadership, it is evident that each previous theoretical development in leadership has shaped the development of subsequent leadership theories. As a result, western definitions of leadership have continually developed the idea of the leader as someone who is in charge, or "in front," of those whom he/she leads-someone set apart and distinct by some special characteristics or abilities. In some cases, the term *leadership* is used synonymously with the term *leader*, explicitly valuing the individual over the act and the collective.

To lead effectively in today's colleges and universities, academic leaders must be able to define what leadership means to them. Why is this important? Applying social constructionist logic to leadership, our definitions of reality ARE our reality. Put another way, it is highly unlikely that we can behave

outside the boundaries that we have constructed through our social definitions of reality. The logical outcome of this when applied to leadership is that leaders are essentially unable to lead in ways that do not conform to the definitional boundaries they have placed on leadership. I believe that many academic leaders are unsuccessful because they have not taken the time to assess and develop effective definitions of leadership, an exercise that has the potential to both expand and limit their ability to lead effectively.

Let's take a few moments to examine two definitions of leadership in order to further understand how defining leadership influences our approach to leading. Northouse (2010) provides a traditional western definition of leadership when he states that leadership is, "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3). Note that the emphasis is clearly on the individual as the individual is mentioned twice. Not only is the leader distinguished from those she/he is leading, followers are not referred to as a group, but a group of *individuals*. A strict interpretation of this definition reveals that the person ultimately responsible for influencing is the individual leader. Influence moves in one direction and from one person – the leader. If it is the leader who is solely responsible for doing the influencing, then we might also conclude that the "common goal" referenced in this definition is really the goal of the leader. Northouse demonstrates a clear lack of emphasis on the participation and importance of the group other than being responsible for responding to the influence of the individual leader in order to achieve his/her goal. Apply this definition to academic leadership and it doesn't take long to realize why someone who defines and exercises leadership in this way will be challenged by faculty and staff.

This is a particularly strict interpretation of this definition, and one might argue that the actual act of leadership is not likely to play out this severely in academic contexts. But, can we be sure? Haven't we all confronted leaders who take this approach to leading? This is why I advocate that defining leadership is so important for leaders. Let's look at a slightly different definition of leadership before moving on to lost approaches to leadership in western thought.

Throughout his years of leadership study Joseph Rost realized the importance of effectively defining leadership, and argued that too many leadership definitions are problematic and deficient in one way or another. In his quest to form a more singular definition of leadership, Rost (1993) offered a slightly more transactional definition of leadership when he wrote that, "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 97). Notice the distinctions between this definition and the one offered by Northouse. Rost acknowledges in his definition that the leadership role involves an "influence relationship" where both leaders and followers participate in influencing the direction of the group. This is in contrast to Northouse's idea that it is the leader who is responsible for doing the influencing. Rost also recognizes mutual purposes at play in any leadership situation, not a common goal. This distinction is important because it identifies that not everyone in a leadership relationship seeks the same goals. For example, an academic dean may want faculty to publish in order to increase the profile of the university. Faculty may publish to promote their individual careers, and to be considered for tenure and promotion. Both purposes are valid and can be accomplished simultaneously in the right leadership context. Applied to the actual behaviors of leaders, these definitions would yield very different results. According to the second definition, the leadership process is more relational among participants and carries with it multiple relational dynamics and goals.

Despite their differences, these two definitions are still framed within cultural constructs that place value, emphasis, and distinction upon the leader as the focal point. When we think of leaders in western cultures, we often conceptualize positions like presidents, military generals, team captains, etc. Often, the conception of a leader is someone who leads from the position of being in front of followers. The very nature of the word follower assumes that to follow, followers do so from behind their leaders (think of ducklings waddling behind their mother). However, it is possible to construct leadership differently in order to produce different leadership behaviors that may be more effective than traditional western approaches. In fact, it is even possible to flip the position of the leader as someone who is behind, and even a part of, those whom he/she leads. This construction of leadership draws on largely eastern, and it could be argued, feminine ideas of what it means to influence and lead effectively.

In his work, *The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age* (2005), John Heider highlights leadership approaches shaped by eastern social constructs. The beginning of his text makes the case that to understand the notion of Tao, we should understand it as a *principle*, not a process. This approach to leadership moves us from focusing on leadership as an object, person, or action to leadership as a principle. The idea here is that principle and process cannot be separated. It is here that the leader who defines leadership as that of principle cannot separate his/her process from this definition. This substantiates my argument that the ways we define leadership are inseparable from our leadership processes. They are one — they are together. Principled leadership is fully connected to, and inseparable from, the processes of leadership.

With its emphasis on individuals, western approaches to leadership almost always suggest strength, action, and decisiveness as the foundation of leadership. The primary place of emphasis rests on individual action as the basis for measuring and understanding effective leadership. In contrast, the Tao takes us to a very different place for defining effective leadership. Notice how the following examples demonstrate a construction of leadership that is often in contrast to western ideals.

- “Group leadership consists of doing less and being more” (p. 113).
- “The wise leader is of service: receptive, yielding, following” (p. 121).
- “Once an event is fully energized and formed, stand back as much as possible....do not try to make an event conform to any predetermined plan or model” (p. 127).
- “The feminine outlasts the masculine. The feminine allows, but the masculine causes. The feminine surrenders, then encompasses and wins....Learn to see things backwards, inside out, and upside down” (p. 71).
- It puzzles people at first, to see how little the able leader actually does, and yet how much gets done” (p. 73).

These ideas are seldom associated with western ideas of effective leadership. As a result, too many leaders are quick to align themselves with behaviors that place special attention on the individual rather than understanding the interconnections of leadership principles and processes. Many western metaphors of leadership keep us entrenched in ineffective ways of leading. However, there is a metaphor I use to frame my approach to leadership that demonstrates how leaders can be effective by applying principles from the Tao. It is a metaphor in which effective leadership is accomplished by

leading from behind rather than in front of followers. Think about it. When someone is in front, it is impossible to see what is happening behind. How can someone lead effectively from this vantage point?

I recently took my family white-water rafting, an activity I've been fortunate to do a few times in my life. My friend, an experienced waterman, was our guide. What I have long-recognized as unique about the white-water rafting experience is that it serves as a wonderful example of effective leadership that is vastly different from other conceptualizations of leadership. Every time I've been rafting, the guide has explained to those of us in the boat our responsibilities as we raft. Ultimately, a good guide wants to yield as little influence as possible in the boat, allowing those in the boat to direct themselves according to the principles of the river. This approach creates an opportunity for followers to create their own processes and experiences. It is only during times of necessity that the good guide intervenes in order to actually influence the direction of the boat. Even in these instances, the participants are necessary and important in the process. The effective rafting guide is one who is able to observe, watch, and yield to the participants in ways that are non-invasive to the process of those in the boat. This is only possible by placing oneself *behind* participants in order to know how to respond appropriately. The rafting guide is a wonderful metaphor for eastern approaches to leadership in which a leader is effective in understanding and applying principles and processes.

In complex organizations like colleges and universities, which are collections of highly educated and intelligent people, it is a mistake to confine our approaches to leadership to those that focus on individual leaders whose charge it is to lead others by being in front of them. The wise academic leader is one who takes the approach of the rafting guide. He/she is able to understand and explain the principles and realities of academic life, provide the tools for others to navigate those realities, and observe from the back of the boat as the process unfolds. When something seems to be going off course, the effective academic leader works gently to bring people together to make the correction, then resumes his/her seat in the back, trusting the principles, the people, and the process. As The Tao of Leadership states, "Because the leader sees clearly, the leader can shed light on others. The group members need the leader for guidance and facilitation. The leader needs people to work with, people to serve" (p. 53).

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