Keep On Learning

Learning is an essential part of the leadership process for everyone involved. What carries us through life is our ability to grow, to discover new possibilities in ourselves, in others, and in our worlds. Successful artists, inventors, scientists, executives, and leaders in any field never lose that spirit. When they don't know what they're doing, they embrace the experience, realizing with every fiber of their being that they're learning and that learning is what life is all about. Just like fruit on the tree, when we stop growing, we start to rot.

That's precisely why leadership has to be everyone's business. Why leadership will always be a relationship. How action brings forth the leader within. And, in the end, how leadership is about developing oneself to be an instrument for making a difference. And these principles ring true—whatever the future has in store for all of us.

Chapter Eight

Leadership as the Legitimation of Doubt

Karl E. Weick

The purpose of this chapter is to develop an allegory for leadership in the twenty-first century, an allegory built around a moment in Warren Bennis's life. As he describes in his commentary at the end of this book, Bennis gave an evening lecture at the Harvard School of Education while he was president of the University of Cincinnati. Everything came together in a superb performance. During the upbeat Q and A session after the speech, Bennis was startled when the dean, Paul Ylvisaker, asked quietly, "Warren, do you really love being president of Cincinnati?" Bennis did not have a snappy answer. In fact, he didn't have any answer. After an interminable silence, in a room that quieted dramatically, Bennis finally said, "I don't know." Shortly thereafter, he came to the realization that he loved being a college president but hated doing a college presidency, and left Cincinnati.

Why do I flag this as a moment that can carry the message of leadership for an entire century? Notice what Bennis did not say. He did not say, I can't choose between yes and no. The question of whether he loves being president is not a problem in decision making. It is deeper than that. It is an issue of meaning, direction, and sensemaking. Standing in front of that Harvard audience, Bennis was facing a job, a university, a calling, and his own leadership theories with a mixture of puzzlement, ambivalence, and honesty. Leaders who stand in front of the new millennium and resist the temptation to treat it glibly or breathlessly are in the same position.
I want to argue that, given what Bennis faced, he called this one right. When he said, "I don’t know," that was a strong act of leadership, not a weak one. It was strong because it positioned him for the sensemaking that he needed to do, not for the decision making that would come later as a minor by-product of sensemaking. To lead in the future is to be less in thrall of decision making—and more in thrall of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). That is the theme I want to develop.

Think first of the world Bennis faces at the moment of Ylvisaker’s question. It is a world that is partly unknowable and unpredictable. It is a world into which people have been thrown. By thrown, I mean that people can’t avoid acting, can’t step back and reflect on their actions, can’t predict the effects of their actions, have no choice but to deal with interpretations whose correctness cannot be settled once and for all, and they can’t remain silent. Anything they say shapes both events and themselves. These are the givens that shape sensemaking.

This feeling of thrown-ness, and the need to make sense of it, are just what we would expect if we took seriously the psychological implications of quantum theory and chaos theory. Both of these theories suggest that the world is less like a machine and more like shifting patterns of relationships. These patterns are unknowable because any effort to measure them changes them. These patterns are also unpredictable because very small differences in initial conditions can lead very quickly to very large differences in the future state of a system (McDaniel, 1997). In an unknowable, unpredictable world, sensemaking is all we have. Rueben McDaniel put the point this way:

> Because the nature of the world is unknowable (chaos theory and quantum theory) we are left with only sensemaking. Even if we had the capacity to do more, doing more would not help. Quantum theory helps us to understand that the present state of the world is, at best, a probability distribution. As we learn from chaos theory, the next state of the world is unknowable. And so we must pay attention to the world as it unfolds. Therefore, it is a good thing that we can’t do more than sensemaking... because then we would only be frustrated by our inability to know. But believing enables action, which leads to more sense (sometimes), and sensemaking connects actions to beliefs (sometimes) [private communication].

It is the combination of thrown-ness, unknowability, and unpredictability that makes having some direction, any direction, the central issue for human beings, and by implication, the central issue for leaders. Sensemaking is about navigating by means of a compass rather than a map. “Maps, by definition, can help only in known worlds—worlds that have been charted before. Compasses are helpful when you are not sure where you are and can get only a general sense of direction” (Hurst, 1995, p. 168). Maps may be the mainstay of performance, but the compass and the compass needle, which function much like human values, are the mainstays of learning and renewal. If people find themselves in a world that is only partially charted, and if leaders also admit that they too don’t know, then both are more likely to mobilize resources for direction making rather than for performance.

If I had to convert this broad portrait of leadership challenges into a set of contrasts, they would include the following. As unknowability and unpredictability become more prominent hallmarks of the twenty-first century, we can expect to find conditions such as these:

- Uncertainty will be based less on insufficient facts and more on insufficient questions.
- There will be fewer experts and more novices.
- There will be more of a premium on staying in motion than on detaching and reflecting.
- There will be more migration of decisions to those with the expertise to handle them, and less convergence of decisions on people entitled by rank to make them.
- There will be fewer attempts to capture the big picture and more attempts to capture the big story, with its ongoing dynamic, plot.
- There will be more focus on updating and plausibility and less on forecasting and accuracy.
- There will be more improvisation and fewer routines.
- There will be more humility and less hubris.
The Value of Uncertainty

If we compress this set of predictions into a singular speculative picture of the effective leader, we can see why that person begins with the assertion, “I don’t know.” The effective leader is someone who searches for the better question, accepts inexperience, stays in motion, channels decisions to those with the best knowledge of the matter at hand, crafts good stories, is obsessed with updating, encourages improvisation, and is deeply aware of personal ignorance. People who act this way help others make sense of what they are facing. Sensemaking is not about rules and options and decisions. Sensemaking does not presume that there are generic right answers about things like taking risks or following rules. Instead, sensemaking is about how to stay in touch with context.

In the face of all the recent rhetoric about “new rules,” we are better off playing up the fact of “newness” and playing down the possibility that this newness will necessarily take the form of rules. What’s new is the context. What’s new is the need for direction. What’s new is a premium on updating. And what’s new is the need to fall back on the compass rather than the map. We often run into the image of maps when people reaffirm Count Korzybski’s famous caution, the map is not the territory. Even though the map never was the territory, and even though people still get confused when they forget this, it is conceivable that the image of maps and territories itself is dated, and the lowly compass may be the better image. Even though the compass is not any closer to the territory than is the map, it is much harder to mistake the compass for the territory. A compass makes it clearer that we are looking for a direction rather than a location. And a compass is a more reliable instrument of navigation if locations on the map are changing. Regardless of whether one has a map or a compass, it is less crucial that people have a specific destination, and more crucial for purposes of sensemaking that they have the capability to act their way into an understanding of where they are, who they are, and what they are doing. While the effective leader may sometimes be able to point to a specific destination that people find compelling, it is more likely that the effectiveness lies in the ability to set in motion a process for decision making.

When bewildered people ask, “What’s the story?” the crucial thing is to get them moving, observing, updating, and arguing about feasibility and plausibility. A powerful means to do this is for the leader to answer the question by saying, “I don’t know what the story is, but let’s find out.” That reply is more subtle than it sounds. A plausible story is actually not something that one “finds.” When the leader says, “let’s find out,” what the leader really means is, let’s create the story. The good story is not simply lying out there waiting to be detected. Instead, the good story comes from experience that is reworked, enacted into the world, and rediscovered as though it were something external. Bennis and the other leaders know that the discovered story is an implanted story, a story whose origins are more internal than they appear.

Let me give an example of what I’ve been talking about by describing a leader and a leadership style that embodies what I have said. This example comes from my research on the antecedents of wildland firefighting disasters. One of the five best wildland firefighters in the world is Paul Gleason. Much of his fame comes from his work in over five hundred serious fires, as crew chief in charge of nineteen other firefighters from the Interagency Hotshot Crew (the Zig Zag crew). Gleason said that when fighting fires, he prefers to view his leadership efforts as sensemaking rather than decision making. In his words, “If I make a decision it is a possession, I take pride in it, I tend to defend it and not listen to those who question it. If I make sense, then this is more dynamic and I listen and I can change it. A decision is something you polish. Sensemaking is a direction for the next period.”

When Gleason perceives his work as decision making, he feels that he postpones action so he can get the decision “right” and that after he makes the decision, he finds himself defending it rather than revising it to suit changing circumstances. Polishing and defending eat up valuable time and encourage blind spots. If, instead, Gleason treats an unfolding fire as a problem in sensemaking, then he gives his crew a direction for some indefinite period, a direction that by definition is dynamic, open to revision at any time, self-correcting, responsive, and with more of its rationale being transparent.

Gleason’s commitment to sensemaking is striking. When crews fight fires, they post a lookout whose job is to monitor the relationship between the oncoming fire and the crew and to warn if the distance between the two gets too small. On some of Gleason’s
especially hazardous fires, where there is danger of rolling rocks or windblown spot fires, he has assigned as many as sixteen people to be lookouts, leaving only four people to actually fight the fire. In the Dude fire near Payson, Arizona, which was an active, dangerous fire, Gleason worked part of the time without gloves so he could get a fuller sense of the weather conditions. He clothed himself as if he didn’t know for sure what his surroundings were. It paid off. The first day of fighting this fire, around 1:45 in the afternoon, he felt a few drops of rain on the back of his hands. He knew there were no thunderstorms in the area, inferred that he must be feeling virga—condensation from a huge column of smoke that had iced over on top and was about to collapse—and he now knew that it was time to act. He moved firefighters into a safety zone just before the column collapsed. When it did so, it pushed fire in all directions and six people who were some distance from his safety zone were killed.

**Leading by the Compass**

Gleason’s example nudges us to think more carefully about what it means to lead when one is thrown into an unknowable, unpredictable context in which the most one can hope for is a plausible direction and plausible updating. Just such a situation is what may have confronted Bennis at Harvard and leaders at the millennium. The nature of leadership when sense is up for grabs has some distinctive properties. I want to suggest that, in the face of doubt, leaders are best served if they focus on animation, improvisation, lightness, authentication, and learning.

**Animation**

Successful sensemaking is more likely when people stay in motion, have a direction, look closely, update often, and converse candidly. This logic derives from the basic process that is involved. That process is embodied in the rhetorical question, How can we know what we think until we see what we say? People need to act in order to discover what they face, they need to talk in order to discover what they think, and they need to feel in order to discover what it means. The “saying” involves action and animation, the “seeing” involves directed observation, the “thinking” involves the updating of previous thinking, and the “we” that makes all of this happen takes the form of candid dialogue that mixes together trust, trustworthiness, and self-respect.

What is subtle about all of this is that it is surprisingly indifferent to content. In a way, any old prescription, any old change program, any old mantra or guru or text will do, as long as that program animates people and gets them moving and generating experiments that uncover opportunities; provides a direction; encourages updating through improved situational awareness and closer attention to what is actually happening; and facilitates respectful interaction in which trust, trustworthiness, and self-respect (Campbell, 1990) develop equally and allow people to build a stable rendition of what they face. Whether people become animated because of “new economic rules,” or total quality, or learning organization, or transformation, or teachable points of view, or action learning, or culture change, or whatever, they are more or less likely to survive depending on whether their program engages or blocks these components of sensemaking. It is the thrust of this argument that there is nothing special about the content of change programs per se that explains their success or failure. What matters is the extent to which the program triggers sustained animation, direction, attention, and respectful interaction. It is these four activities that make it easier or harder for people to collectively make sense of what they are facing and to deal with it.

**Improvisation**

When people are thrown into an unknowable, unpredictable environment, there is also a premium on improvisation. Improvisation can be defined as reworking previously experienced material in relation to unanticipated ideas that are conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of a current performance (adapted from Berliner, 1994, p. 241). Improvisation involves the flexible treatment of preplanned material. It is not about “making something out of nothing.” Instead, it is about making something out of previous experience, practice, and knowledge during those
moments when people uncover and test intuitive understandings while their ongoing action can still make a difference (Schön, 1987, pp. 26–27). What is noteworthy in improvised action is a certain ad hoc adroitness (Ryle, 1979, p. 129). Improvisation materializes around a simple melody, formula, or theme that provides the pretext for real-time composing and embellishment. Outside the field of music, these melodies are the directions that are so important for sensemaking.

The role of the leader during improvisation is suggested by Dan Isenberg’s (1985) description of battlefield commanders. On battlefields, commanders often “fight empirically” in order to discover what kind of enemy they are up against. “Tactical maneuvers will be undertaken with the primary purpose of learning more about the enemy’s position, weaponry, and strength, as well as one’s own strength, mobility, and understanding of the battlefield situation. . . . Sometimes the officer will need to implement his or her solution with little or no problem definition and problem solving. Only after taking action and seeing the results will the officer be able to better define the problem that he or she may have already solved!” (pp. 178–179). Commanders essentially hold a diagnosis lightly and tie their understanding to activity. This is akin to a simple melody that is embellished until a more appropriate melody emerges from the embellishments. A hunch held lightly is a direction to be followed, not a decision to be defended. It is easier to change directions than to reverse decisions, simply because less is at stake. This is what both Gleason and Bennis have taught us.

Lightness

A leader who says “I don’t know” is a lot like a foreman who yells “drop your tools” to wildland firefighters who are trying to outrun an exploding fire. Firefighters who ignore this order and continue to carry heavy tools like chainsaws retreat more slowly. All too often, they are overtaken by the fire and perish. There have been at least twenty-three fatalities just since 1990 where this happened. I think analogous crises occur when a leader says “I don’t know” and followers refuse to drop their heavy tools of logic and rationality. Those tools presume that the world is stable, knowable, and predictable, something the leader has disavowed. The leader who says “I don’t know” essentially says that the group is facing a new ballgame where the old tools of logic may be its undoing rather than its salvation. To drop these tools is not to give up on finding a workable answer. It is only to give up on one means of answering that is ill-suited to the unstable, the unknowable, the unpredictable. To drop the heavy tools of rationality is to gain access to lightness in the form of intuitions, feelings, stories, experience, active listening, shared humanity, awareness in the moment, capability for fascination, awe, novel words, and empathy. All these nonlogical activities trigger interpretations that have some plausibility and feasibility. And all these activities are made more legitimate when a leader says “I don’t know.” That admission forces the leader to drop pretense, drop omniscience, drop expert authority, drop a macho posture, and drop monologues. The lightness of listening and exploring is the consequence.

Dropping one’s tools to regain lightness and agility is old news. Nowhere is this better stated than in the ancient epigram (Lao Tzu, cited in Muller, 1999, p. 134) that reads,

In pursuit of knowledge, every day something is acquired;  
In pursuit of wisdom, every day something is dropped.

But old as the ties among dropping and lightness and wisdom may be, they tend to be forgotten in an era where leaders and followers alike are preoccupied with knowledge management, acquisitions, and acquisitiveness. When Bennis says to Ylvisaker, “I don’t know,” this comment suggests that something more than a pursuit of knowledge is involved, and something more than acquiring the title of president is at stake. When Bennis says he doesn’t know, that is a polite way of saying, this isn’t about knowledge and acquisitions at all. It is about something different, something more elusive, something more like a quest where the directions are less clear. When any leader suggests that the issue ahead is more about wisdom than knowledge and more about dropping than acquiring, this has an important effect on followers. It makes it legitimate for them to contribute in kind. A leader who drops heavy tools candidly and publicly is more likely to encourage similar acts in others. Having dropped their heavy tools, people are in a better position to watch closely and interact respectfully to begin to form
some idea of what they do face. The likelihood that this will happen at all depends on their capability for lightness.

Authentication

One of the early pioneers in the study of organizational behavior, Harvard's Fritz Roethlisberger (1977), adds yet another twist to the Bennis prototype for leadership in the future. Roethlisberger was struck by the fact that the vast majority of problems that executives complained about had the same form. He repeatedly heard that many people in organizations were not doing what they should be doing, in spite of numerous policies and standards designed to make sure that workers would do what they should. Accounting people weren't providing the information they were supposed to, supervisors weren't supervising, marketing people weren't working with production people, and so on. In a fascinating conjecture, Roethlisberger said it was as if the organization were undoing all the things the manager did when that person planned, directed, and coordinated. He went on to speculate that the undoing seemed to exhibit the mathematical property of reciprocalness. Thus the relation between the manager and the organization was either like multiplication and division, leaving an identity number of one, or addition and subtraction leaving an identity number of zero. In either case, the executive's contribution was nil. What Roethlisberger wanted to find out was what was responsible for the apparent undoing.

At this point in his discussion, Roethlisberger describes two extended cases where people don't do what they are supposed to be doing. One is the famous Harvard case called the Dashman Company and the other is a real-life experience of one of his students, a stubborn engineer named "Hal" who was appointed superintendent of maintenance shortly after being exposed to Roethlisberger's teaching. In the Dashman case, a newly appointed VP of purchasing, Mr. Post, sends out a directive to twenty decentralized purchasing agents saying that from now on, any purchasing contracts over $10,000 should be cleared with the top office. All twenty agents say they will be pleased to cooperate. But nothing happens. Not a single contract crosses Mr. Post's desk. The case stops with the new VP asking his assistant, Mr. Larson, a veteran of the firm, what he should do. Roethlisberger's students fumble with diagnoses for most of the classroom hour. With thirty seconds left before the bell, Roethlisberger says the following:

If you stop to think for a moment, none of us knows what the situations in the plants really are, because none of us has gone to the plants to find out. We have just been speculating about what the situations there might be. This applies to Mr. Larson in the case as well as to us in the class. Until these speculations are checked, we may be mistaken. Hence, whatever Mr. Larson can say that might help to move matters in this direction may be the first simple step needed. Perhaps Mr. Larson with one sentence can preview a simple logic for Mr. Post to take the first step. So, dear students, please reflect and ponder until we meet at the next hour about what such a simple one-sentence response to Mr. Post's query, "What should I do now?" should be [pp. 176-177].

The sentence Roethlisberger was reaching for was this one. Mr. Larson might say, in response to Mr. Post's question of what he should do now, "I don't know; but perhaps if you or I or both of us went to visit the plants, we might be able to find out" (p. 177; italics in original). Regrettably, even with days to think about it, few of the students came up with this answer. And those who did often deemed the visit a gimmick to get people to cooperate the way they were supposed to. One student, Hal, who thought it was a gimmick, went back to his plant, was promoted to supervisor of maintenance, and assumed his new position. No sooner had he begun the new assignment than the shop steward called and said, "What the hell is going on in your department?" Biting his tongue, and stifling his overwhelming desire to say, "Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" Hal said, "I don't know. Why don't you come to my office and tell me." The steward came, voiced the grievances, Hal listened, and they worked through their differences.

While these cases may have a quaint 1950s ring to them, set that feeling aside for the moment and look at what is happening. When leaders say "I don't know," this is a nonstereotypical response—they are supposed to know—and the response is truthful; it is factual in the sense that it states what the situation is; it establishes leader credibility in an unknowable world; it invites rather than precludes finding out more; it takes advantage of an immediate point of
entry into an ongoing, here-and-now situation; and it strengthens rather than weakens relationships. In terms of the seven conditions for sensemaking (social resources, clear identity, retrospect, cue utilization, update of ongoing impressions, plausibility, and enactment = SIR COPE) the statement "I don't know" is exemplary because it activates all seven. In turn, that means that the relationship has been fully tuned for sensemaking. When a leader says, "I don't know," that seldom stops the conversation. Instead, it invites such follow-on sentences as, "I don't know, but we might know," "but you might know and we need to listen," "but knowing is not the issue here," "but I know how to find out," "but let's talk to see what we do know for sure." Any of these follow-ons authenticate doubt, unknowability, and unpredictability as the point of departure.

Learning

The final and most obvious outcome of leadership acts that begin with not knowing is that they often end with something learned. A particularly vivid example of this point is Winston Churchill's reworking of one of the darkest moments in his life. During World War II Churchill made a colossal error when he failed to realize how vulnerable Singapore was to attack by a Japanese land invasion. This error led to Singapore's downfall. After the collapse Churchill asked four questions: Why didn't I know? Why wasn't I told? Why didn't I ask? Why didn't I tell what I knew? (See Allinson, 1993, pp. 11-12.) Those four questions are questions of interdependence. They are questions of sensemaking. And they are questions that are grounded in doubt. Those four questions take seriously the idea that knowledge is not something people possess in their heads but rather something people do together.

That seems to be the wisdom that lies behind Bennis's answer at Harvard. It is a wisdom that future leaders should take seriously if they want to deal candidly with what they face. It is a wisdom stripped of hubris. The leader willing to say "I don't know" is also a leader willing to admit, in Oscar Wilde's wonderful phrase, "I'm not young enough to know everything" (Kellman, 1999, p. 113).

Does this mean that leaders should undergo some sort of therapy or psychological diagnosis in order to be effective? Not at all. The most relevant aspects of personality can be examined by applying leadership theory to that "Great Group" we call the individual organism. We could simply ask that leaders apply to themselves the same principles that they use in leading others. How, in other words, do prospective leaders lead themselves? We like to think of ourselves as self-contained, even monolithic, units. But in real life there's no such thing, for our "individual" self actually consists of a host of disparate elements. An appreciable percentage of our own dry body weight, for example, consists of bacteria, some of which have simply taken up residence, but others of which are essential to our survival (Margulis and Sagan, 1990, p. 28).