

SHARED OWNERSHIP

The lone, male leader is no longer trusted as an authority figure in our turbulent world. What we need now is new ways for new, more flexible times. It's time for 'respons-able' group leadership, says **Hetty Einzig**

“ **W**hat breaks my heart is that our leaders are living and acting in wilful denial of how bad things are in the world today, and of their own power to do something about it, in the full knowledge that they are condemning our children and our children’s children to a nightmare future.”

So says a sober and successful businessman. From the nods around the packed room, many share his pain.

Are our leaders mad, bad and incompetent? There is, I sense, something else going on here.

I have worked for the past 10 years with individuals and groups developing leadership in global corporations in Europe, Asia and the US. In that time, I have come to see the failures, corruption and paralysis at the top of business and public life as symptoms of a moribund model: that of the lone, male leader.

The failure is systemic. If we can hospice it well, we may midwife a much-needed paradigm shift to more complex, suitable forms of leadership. Then, as new ways of being and new forms of leadership emerge, we may discover why it is so hard to exercise authority in our turbulent world.

Understanding may inspire us to divert our energies from lamentation to nurture, especially in our professional lives. This is part of the work of active hope – of what has been called the Great Turning.

Authority issues

Issues of leadership, authority and power speak to our primal relationships with our parents,

our original authority figures. It is within the family that our unconscious map of relationships is formed. Authority, the sanction to make ultimate decisions binding on others, and power, a personal attribute, are fundamental to our sense of identity and agency. Some believe it is impossible to exercise real authority now – witness the blocking of US President Obama in so many policies he tries to introduce. Others are more optimistic, seeing today’s workplace as fertile ground for new forms of power sharing.

Yet the mythological power of the lone, male leader endures. Just as our parents contained the

anxieties of our childhood, so the lone leader has been a container for the anxieties of the workplace.

The deal was that individuals gave up personal freedom for protection. But now the world is beyond the capacity of a single container. Thus, we see the news unfold on our screens in real time – raw images telling of Syrian conflict, Polar ice melt, rapes in Tahrir square, tsunamis in Japan – in our face, into our homes.

Previously the lone leader was backed by the great institutions of state, church, law and education. We now sense these as corrupted and degraded – trust in them seems naive. This cocktail of complexity, transparency and

Case study: Journey into leadership

A large UK mutual building society with more than 5,000 staff was the major employer in a small town. Everyone knew everyone, so risk-taking and accountability were non-existent. Communication between the group executive board (GEB) and the other leaders was dead, and blocking innovation.

The new CEO, a modest, reflective man, supported my proposal for a ‘Journey into Leadership’ weaved into the company’s bi-monthly off-site events, in which the GEB and other leaders came together for an evening social plus one day to tackle strategic issues.

The evening dinner included spouses: everyone felt valued and the camaraderie carried over into work. Buddy coaching sessions enabled sharing of real issues, contained vulnerability, and promoted reflection, confidence and care. Team activities, deliberately fun and complex, encouraged open, respectful peer collaboration. Authenticity and accountability grew. The off-site event introduced new ways of working and

tackled business issues in this new language. Increasingly, business leaders volunteered to help co-design the day, and found creative ways to address strategic and operational issues. The CEO always participated, and followed this up by establishing processes that supported new behaviours and, crucially, accountability.

Three months afterwards, this new culture was put to the test. The company acquired another building society and an ambitious seven-month integration target was set. All involved owned this purpose, enacting the flexible cooperation they had experimented with – leading, supporting, collaborating as needed. Change workshops and clear communication promoted enthusiasm and trust and the seven-month target was met with pride.

A model of shared power points to a way of sustaining leadership in our perverse world. We need to recognise the redundancy of old ‘heroic’ styles of leadership and replace them.

Crisis contains opportunity. The way forward is responsible.

Roots and influences

My experiences over the past 20-plus years in coaching and leadership development globally, have been informed by my training in transpersonal psychology, and rooted in beliefs in service and human potential. My association with the US non-profit The Pachamama Alliance led to recognition of the interdependence of environment, social justice and the spiritual, as has my work with the social change organisation, Be the Change, including experiments with Circle Leadership.

Recently, I completed a master's at the Tavistock Centre, London, looking at organisational dynamics through psychoanalytic and systemic lenses. Joanna Macy's *The Work That Reconnects*, and its Buddhist principles, continues to inform my work: the Active Hope she speaks for, is as needed and inspirational in business as elsewhere.

collapse heightens anxiety.

Two developments are helping us move on from our love affair with the lone, male leader.

First, more women are now in leadership positions. Female ways of working more often create flexible, collaborative, people-centred and values-driven cultures. Women tend to prefer to nurture seeds of creativity than the grand gesture, emphasising laterality and downplaying vertical authority.

Second, the dispersed, cross-functional project teams of global corporations and the diversity of countries they operate in, are driving models of devolved leadership and decision-making. Hence, the felt need for coaching and leadership, which, in turn, highlight and encourage new types of relationship.

There are costs in moving away from the security of a single authority figure, such as increased exposure and thus vulnerability, and the rise of 'sibling' rivalries. But new behaviours generated by new consciousness are needed.

Development of inner authority is essential in these new relationships. Holding authority and exercising it effectively depends on three interrelated domains: our inner world (our

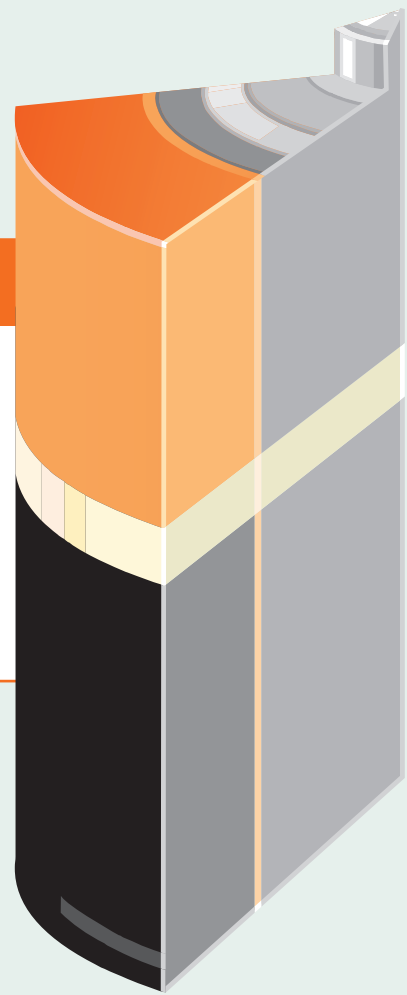
sense of personal authority); the structure and culture of the organisation, and the society we live in (how power is enacted by public institutions). But these are fluid, not fixed, just as our need for dependence, independence and interdependence are constantly re-negotiated dynamics.

Shared leadership, authority, power

The Great Turning involves re-fashioning the stories we live and work by. We need to recognise and nurture the emerging paradigm of new leadership, as vested in the group, team or organisation, not in an individual. Just as the child defines the parent, so the follower makes the leader; as in a family system, followers can learn to lead and leaders can be followers.

The workplace today is fluid and increasingly flat, but even in the midst of change some workplace structures and language remain stiff with hierarchies. Language shapes meaning and how we see ourselves, and our organisations.

Thus, our new story replaces 'leadership' with leading emphasising the dynamic nature of the activity, as do following and collaborating. Seeing these three states of being as part of an



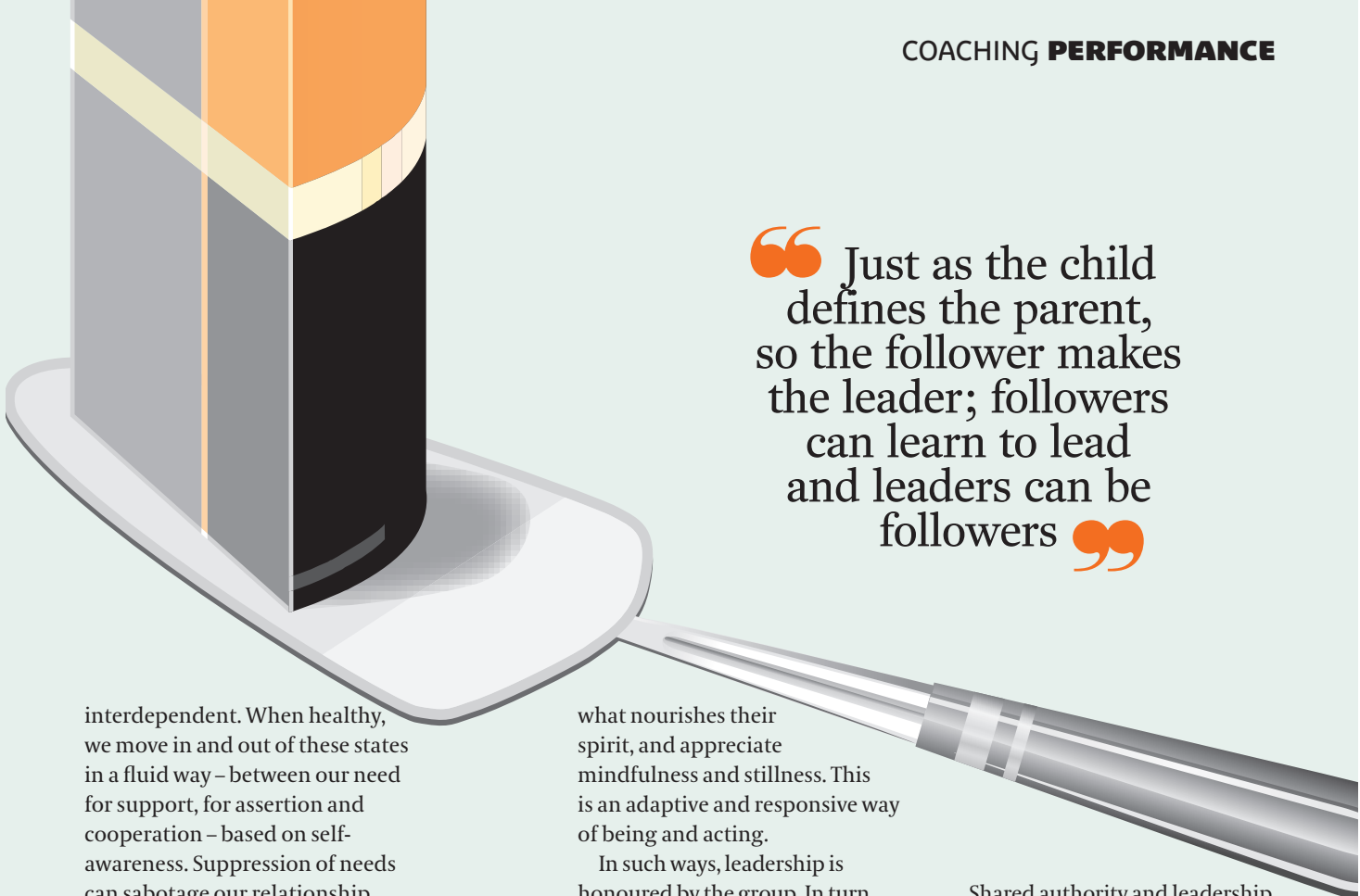
interactive whole, aspects of a shared endeavour, can resolve the isolation of the lone leader and enable the responsiveness needed.

Triangular model

The three dynamics parallel the stages of human development. These are dependence (following – child), independence (leading – youth) and interdependence (collaborating – adult). This triangular model is instinctively familiar.

By contrast, the traditional binary model of leader/follower creates splitting into good/bad, friend/foe, right/wrong, often crippling co-operation and creative work. The triangular model is more porous and adaptive. It is, I suggest, the container we need to be able to operate confidently without certainty of outcome.

Maturity does not erase our dependency needs – we are not always independent or even



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interdependent. When healthy, we move in and out of these states in a fluid way – between our need for support, for assertion and cooperation – based on self-awareness. Suppression of needs can sabotage our relationship with ourselves and with others.

Thus a model of shared and rotated roles of leading-following-collaborating, based around a central ‘space to think and space to act’ might better bring out the best in us, serving organisational over individual high performance.

Be respons-able

The other-as-supporter becomes as crucial as the one-who-acts in this circular model. Today, certainly tomorrow, there are few simple problems and solutions, rather tangled issues that need unravelling. Speed of ‘punch’, so long the prized attribute of leaders, doesn’t cut it with complexity.

Leaders who are able to take responsibility and who are also responsive – let’s call them ‘respons-able’ – are those who look inwards as well as out, and who seek insight through questioning and listening. They understand the alchemy of several brains working together, know

what nourishes their spirit, and appreciate mindfulness and stillness. This is an adaptive and responsive way of being and acting.

In such ways, leadership is honoured by the group. In turn, members lead, follow or collaborate, enacting different styles and types of authority, relating and action. This is a learning organisation with thinking kept fresh and creativity rife. Rotating responsibility develops and reinforces perspective and reflection. This is not all new: elders within many indigenous cultures have always exercised a collaborative, respected authority.

Shared authority and leadership can be fostered within organisations by experimentation and by types of play that encourage creative thinking and innovation. Coaching offers the ‘parental’ containment that makes it safe for boss and worker alike to drop roles and have fun. Just as in the group play of siblings and friends, these pleasures blossom, providing the rewards of self-discovery, curiosity, new ideas and collaboration. ■

References

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