FROM LEADERSHIP TO CITIZENSHIP

By Peter Block

A benefit of shifting from Leadership to Citizenship is to create the capacity for many more people to achieve what we have traditionally expected our leaders to accomplish. Servant-leadership may provide a gateway for this transition.

In a radio interview in 1991, the Nobel Prize-winning author Laurens Van der Post stated that the era of leaders is over. He said that what we had created in Nelson Mandela is an example of how we had gone too far in our search and glorification of leaders. We had made a god of Mandela, when in fact he was just a man. When we create a god, we at the same time create the possibility and conditions for the devil. He also believed that the way we glamorize leaders is a way of escaping from owning our own responsibility for the world we have created.

The people of South Africa, not Nelson Mandela, have brought some freedom to that country. Neighborhoods, cities, and civic and political associations are engaged in the process of deciding what that country will become. The leaders of that country are more products of the culture and its people than creators of it. Leadership in this era is more effect than it is cause. To keep focusing on the selection, training, and definition of leaders is to keep us frozen in the world of monarch, autocrat, and entitlement. It postpones the day when we will experience a world of community and accountability. The question of citizenship stays in the background, in the shadow of our attraction to leadership.

This is not an argument against leadership, rather a concern about the energy we have for the subject. Our attraction to leadership, our very interest in it, becomes the obstacle to authentic change or transformation. If we believe that leadership is the essential ingredient to high performance, then it has serious consequences about how we think about our institutions and what will improve or change them.

At a minimum we need to question the power of the leadership industry we have created. Once an idea becomes an industry, it loses its meaning. Everyone claims it has their own and it becomes commercialized. The

question of leadership that began as a search for spirit and vision has now been commodified. We operate as if leadership can be packaged, and thereby be sold and then purchased.

What is stunning in this industry is not the suppliers, it is the willingness of customers to pay for the solutions. And to do it over and over again. The most frequently asked question at conferences on leadership is "What is the next fad?" Our expectations of real results are so low that:

1. We accept that what we are now doing is a fad or fashion
2. We are still willing to show interest and purchase the next solution.

Suppose Van der Post was right about the end of the era of leaders. What would it mean to stop our pursuit of leaders and leadership and, in effect, to lose interest in them?

Our loss of interest would not eliminate leaders. We would still have teachers, managers, doctors, mayors, senators, and presidents. Sergeants, coaches, professors, conference speakers, authors, and senior engineers. So what would change?

First, we would ask all of them to sit down. There is no need for them to stand up since we will not be watching them so closely. We might ask them to sit with us, to join us. We need their experience, their wisdom, even their direction. It is just not necessary to look up at them.

Second, we could have a garage sale for lavaliere microphones, laser pointers, overhead projectors, and podiums. Perhaps we could export them to cultures at an earlier stage in the industrial food chain. Call it economic development or foreign aid. We will not need loud speaker technology for a few. We will need new

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amplification methods so that everyone's voice can be heard. Learning replaces instruction, participation replaces presentation, questions become more important than answers.

Third, we can wind down the managed efforts to change organizational culture. We can stop acting as if management needs to articulate and drive a culture they have defined. We have been acting as if culture is created by the words and model of the leaders. Vision statements advocating customer service, economic success, employee trust, and teamwork continue to be sold and distributed. This is patriarchy at its most concealed. The mindset that there is a population waiting to be told what norms and values they are to live by expresses a loss of faith in human capacity.

Culture is the emergence of shared meanings, not as a product of top-level intentions. Culture is created by the stories, tradition, and behavioral consent of the community. The attempt to sell culture to your own people makes a commodity out of the search for community and meaning.

The Fiction of Change

Part of the reason for seeking leaders is the belief that we are living in an era of great social change. If we can be realistic about change, we might relax a little about leaders. There is a tendency to confuse speed with transformation. Just because I can exchange more information faster and faster does not mean that the content of our dialogue or the nature of the way we organize human effort has shifted. If we can take our eyes off of technology for a moment and see the tenacity of the beliefs that guide our culture, including our workplaces, we are most likely entrenched in a period of surprising stability. We do not need great leaders if tomorrow will be much like today.

The fundamental aspects of our organizations are remarkably resistant to a change in thinking and practice. The workplace may be flatter, leaner, focused more on customers and cycle time and mission. But when you get beneath the language, the way we distribute power, purpose, and resources and the way we view labor and the core worker has changed little in the last 20 years. We are still organized for consistency, control, and predictability. We still have financial and human resource practices that reek of a parent-child relationship. Too many of us are still seeking the approval of our bosses and fear anarchy from our subordinates.

The longing for change does not create it. The electronic revolution does not define our lives despite what the electronic industry and the media would have us believe. Think of a top spinning on a table; it rotates faster and faster, and still does not move from its spot. Speed, yes; change, no. For about 85 percent of the people at work, the core beliefs about organizing human effort remain untouched by the technological and marketplace changes that swirl around us.

Focusing on Citizenship

Draining the energy out of leadership takes us to an exploration of citizenship. Citizenship is our capacity to create for ourselves what we had sought from our leaders. Is it possible for each of us to:
* Create and articulate a vision?
* Be accountable for the well-being of the whole?
* Set and pursue goals that sustain the institution?
* Establish boundaries and set limits?
* Create structure and order that suits our purpose?
* Become a role model?

We have vested maturity and accountability for the whole in those with power. In doing this we have created the conditions where citizenship is not required and often discouraged. The fear we have of abandoning leadership is that lawlessness and chaos will result. We fear entitlement and individual self-interest will prevail. Through the way we have organized human effort, we have lost faith that people are capable of using freedom in a responsible way.

For some people and some groups, these pessimistic expectations often seem to be grounded in fact. We open the door and no one walks through. The paradox is that we have created a world so dependent on the centrality of leadership that citizens and employees have developed a learned dependency. If you ask citizens and employees what they want, they most often affirm the need for a kinder monarch. People seek the safety and comfort of someone at the top keeping the vision alive, promising a safe and prosperous tomorrow. They keep asking management to define their roles, develop a better pay system, judge their performance more objectively.

The trap we fall into in the face of passivity is to believe the solution is better leadership. Avoiding responsibility, compliance, and caution on the part of employees and citizens is a bigger problem than control and self-centeredness on the part of "leaders." The solution is not to keep trying to create better leaders, it is to explore how to become accountable citizens.

The reluctance for citizens and employees to become accountable for the well-being of the whole is exactly the reason for de-emphasizing leadership. If we keep focusing on the centrality of those in charge, we sentence ourselves to the continuing decay of citizenship and accountability.

Elements of Citizenship

Without getting lost in definition, citizenship is our agreement to receive rights and privileges from the community and, in so doing, to pay for them through our willingness to live within certain boundaries and act in the interest of the whole. At the core of citizenship is the desire to care for the well-being of the larger institution, be it an organization, a neighborhood, or a country. This requires accountability. This is the purchase price of our freedom.

One reason we seek leadership and lose faith in the principle of self-governing systems is that we live in a culture of entitlement. Entitlement is claiming rights without payment, the wish to be granted what is requested and to do our own thing. Entitlement destroys institutions and community. It is the wish to go to heaven and not have to die.

Citizenship is accountability that is chosen. This is most likely to happen when we have been able to overcome

our isolation. High-control systems thrive on our isolation; they breed it, reward it. One hundred years ago self-management was called mutiny. One of the first things totalitarian states do is establish a curfew and deny the right of assembly. Rediscovering citizenship depends on overcoming our isolation and paying attention to the way we come together.

The Power of Assembly

A very direct way of experiencing the presence of community and the existence of a larger whole is when we assemble in one place at one time. Community is felt in concert. In convention. We feel this when we go to concerts, to conventions. It is limited, though, by the way we design our communal events. We turn conventions into passive listening experiences. We have stages, all eyes aimed at the front, at the leader/speaker.

The microphone, the screen, the show is in the front. The community sits in judgment and reception. Applause, sleep, and questions are the options for citizens.

Even in a town meeting, the structure illuminates the leaders - town council on a platform, soft chairs, one microphone per person. Citizens sit on ground level, folding chairs, one microphone per mob.

The architecture, the structure of assembly, the intent of convening are currently born of the leadership mind. This steals accountability from us all. It reinforces isolation and passivity. We need to redesign concert and convention to be as a communal undertaking.

We now possess the large-group methodology and the technology to assemble people as citizens and make their voice, ideas, and accountability the center of attention. We regularly take groups in the hundreds and engage them with each other. Mixed in diverse groups, strangers can get more connected to each other in two hours than they are connected to the people in their regular workplace. We can poll their ideas and summarize them instantaneously. We can have 20 subgroups meeting on common subjects and display their output on a video screen visible to all.

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These methods can be used to collectively define vision, assess current conditions, set strategy and goals, and make commitments. We do not have to live out our intentions through a leader, we can do it directly with each other. If citizenship and community were our prime intent, we would redesign the way people convene each and every time they come together.

Means of Engagement

Citizenship is a much broader question than simply the ways in which we meet. In an article entitled "Bowling Alone," Robert Putnam describes how people no longer bowl in leagues, they bowl as singles and pairs.[1] This symbolizes our isolation, the decline of social investment in each other, and the waning of civic engagement. The organizations that once brought us together - church, union hall, social club - are in decline. His research suggests that the economic and political viability of a community are highly dependent on our connection with each other.

This gives special importance to the institutions where people do congregate, the workplace. The workplace has the potential to be the place where community is revived and common purpose is reawakened. If we turn our attention from leadership to citizenship, we would begin to understand:

• The power of changing the conversation. The culture shifts when the conversation shifts. Focus on the questions more than the answers. Structure time so that dialogue becomes possible. Appreciate that the struggle

with difficult issues is what builds commitment and understanding. Minimize the manipulation and wordsmithing in our conversations and fill them with learning. Try to bring the way we talk to each other in line with our espoused beliefs. Have a conversation and then be willing to reflect on the quality and meaning of the conversation. And make this reflection the norm.

• Connection precedes content. Each shift in technology, work process, curriculum design, role, or responsibility needs the existence of trust, dialogue, and relationship if it is to be successful. This requires an investment in time and patience. Feelings need to be valued. Relationships need to be discussed. The struggle and the questions are often the solution. We need to structure our way of being together in a way that recognizes this - very different thinking from expecting the leader to define, answer questions, sell the changes.

• Confront people with their freedom. Each of us has to define meaning and purpose for ourselves. Take this off of the leader's back. Put it where it belongs. Each person has a vision, has a worldview. Our task is to help each person uncover and express their vision for the organization they are a part of. Common vision will emerge from this dialogue. Leaders do not need to be the ones to express the vision and enroll each other. Enrollment is a choice to sign up, not a strategy of persuasion. Each person needs to confront whether they are living their values. Each of us needs to be a role model, walk our talk, articulate longings, offer hope and inspiration. This is the nature of citizenship. When we leave these tasks to leaders, we let people off of the hook and conspire to create a culture of entitlement instead of a culture of accountability.

Conditions for Self-Governance

We have the ideology and experience for self-managing institutions, we only need to broaden the practice. Self-governance hinges on employees' willingness to provide each other what the leader previously provided. Peer accountability is the glue that preserves chaos from anarchy and lawlessness. Employees and citizens making promises to each other and holding each other to account is what sustains community. This is what civic engagement entails. Neighbors deciding to come together, making demands on each other to create a safe place to work and live.

In practical terms, we will always need bosses, some hierarchy, clear structure, measures, and rules to live by. The workplace stops spinning to fast and really begins to change when we redefine the role of the boss and reassign who is responsible for creating the structure, measures, and rules. Clinging to our attraction to leadership keeps change in the hands of the few. We want to transfer it to the many. This is the power of citizenship.

So what do bosses do? The task of the boss is to convene people and engage them in the everyday challenges of how to plan, organize, lay out the work, discipline, and make sure the right people are on the team and doing the job right. Bosses become convenors and a focusing lens, not visionaries, role models, and motivators. Citizenship is the willingness to struggle with the pain of making a human living system move toward a common goal.

The Will of Citizenship

Something more is required of each of us if we want a culture of accountability. Each of us has to confront our own beliefs about what is possible. What we think is possible for others, of course, is really a projection of what we think is possible for ourselves. We have all experienced moments of accountability, we just think they were the exception. Organizations based on connection and common purpose will emerge when we begin to:

1. Believe that employees and ourselves are capable of using freedom in service of the well-being of the institution. What you see is what you get. If eight employees act responsibly and two abuse their freedom, why do we stay so focused on the irresponsible two? We have designed practices and policies for the two; it is time to create organizations that fit the eight employees who are committed and care.

2. Value the act of convening as a primary part of our job. Defining the critical questions and deciding who needs to be in the room are the tasks for every moment. Meetings are not a distraction from work. Thinking is not lost production. People contracting with each other and deciding together is the work.

3. Learn how to design a gathering. Robert's rules are for order, not building commitment or rethinking work. The ways we currently think about meetings are based on the industrial model of efficiency. Clear agenda,

minutes, votes, time-controlled per item, leader in charge, tension postponed. Methods for living systems that have been developed for training environments need to be brought into everyday working environments. Learn about the use of dialogue, open space methods, valuing tension and conflict, surfacing the diversity of purpose, encouraging face-to-face exchange of wants, fishbowls. Learn about conference models and how to use large-scale interactive designs. These are proven methods for both getting decisions made and evoking high levels of commitment. Sophisticated strategies for designing productive interaction currently reside in the hands of trainers and consultants. They belong in the hands of each of us.

4. Decentralize ourselves. Be a focusing lens, be willing to define the difficult issues, and then be a powerful equal. Create circles and become one voice among many. We don't need someone in the center. Get the boss out of the center, stop looking for a Sun King. Being boss is one role among many, and it is not the most critical role. Democracy is not defined by the actions of its elected officials, it is defined by the actions of citizens. Same with the workplace. Product is created and service is delivered by those who do the work. An organization is not the shadow of those who run them. Use the special powers of a boss no more than once a year and even then only when more collective efforts have been exhausted. Learn to listen, ask questions, express doubt, and live without answers. Be surprised. Learn to say no to those who want to be our leader.

5. Forge partnerships with others at your own level. Lateral relationships are the hardest to manage in the patriarchal world we live in. Stop expecting your own boss to build a team and bring distant territories together. Acknowledge the importance of your own acts of citizenship. If we are to truly be accountable for the well-

being of the whole organization, then we need to be willing to give up territory. Turn over control to other departments, to neighbors. Transfer a portion of your budget to another unit that may be doing work that is more vital to the institution than your own. Accept the fact that people in your unit may not be the brightest and the best and deserve the highest play. The consuming attention to leaders and followers distances you from the essential work of cocreating an organization with those at your level. Attending to your leadership turns your attention from your citizenship. If you insist on being a role model, set the example for how to cooperate with, yield, support, and affirm the actions of peers both within and outside your department.

Citizenship, self-management, and engagement come together when we collectively learn to rethink and redesign the places where we assemble. Authentic change needs to be self-inflicted. Our institutions need fixing, and we need bosses willing to shoulder the responsibility of their position. What turns the corner, though, is when people come together to collectively redesign the structure of their own experience. It may be redesigning the work itself, the pay system, the offer to a customer, the strategy or the physical layout of an office. Unfortunately, we have lost faith in people's capacity to come together on their own and be productive. We have become contemptuous of democracy. Camels being designed by committee and the like. This need not be so.

Our bias toward monarchy and our belief in the centrality of the leader has us ignore collective and communal successes and celebrate the heroism of the individual. If we can just let leadership be, and choose to focus on citizenship, we have the knowledge and experience to create accountable institutions, which is an important step toward an accountable culture, which is the essence of democracy.

[1] Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone," Journal of Democracy