

# Leadership – The Unseen Rudder

## Richard Hill

Like others writing in this *Quarterly* about leadership, I see an analogy to many of the questions concerning leadership in the humble sailing ship. Autocratic leaders may subjugate the crew with fear and punishment; inspirational leaders may stand at the bow and motivate others to seek the adventure; followers may choose to contribute smaller and less lofty activities in order to enable the ship to sail. When the wind blows, the sails become the generators of energy and motion, but it is the rudder, largely unseen but reflected on the deck in the motion of the ship's wheel, that lies beneath the surface and sets the course. The rudder maintains focus on that course, even when everyone and everything on deck is struggling or in disarray.

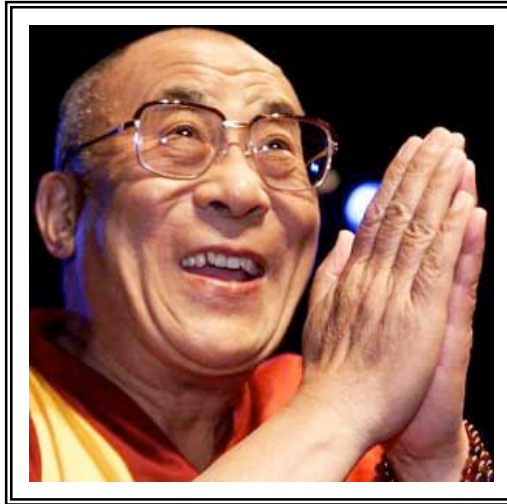
Leadership can be a man sitting in a jail cell for 27 years as the rudder of a nation, as we saw in Nelson Mandela. It can manifest itself as the patient maintenance of the ideal of human joy, exerting such power that a regime commanding over 1.3 billion people fears the Dalai Lama as a political threat. It can also be the resolute act of a single woman who stands firm when challenged by staff, resolutely defending her unshakable belief that benefit for her agency's counseling clients is the paramount value, as I have witnessed at a small family business in our town. It may also be the vision of a madman like Jim Jones, finding resonance with a group of lost sheep, and leading them inexorably toward their tragic common death.

For all these leaders, the rudder stayed firm, sometimes without deliberate action or determined steering, sometimes with a rough and rigid hand on the tiller. Leaders are sometimes judged as having “lost their way” or “lost their

direction.” Some might think this about Robert Mugabe, who may still be a leader, but whose followers are restless and losing contact with him. What is the nature of the resonance that holds leaders and their followers together? How do we understand the difference between healthy leadership and guidance that is steering the boat into dangerous waters? When the seas are rough, how can we tell if the rudder has enough flexibility to adapt to changing conditions? How does the state of neural integration in leaders and followers act with other factors, like the moment in history, as well as social and cultural influences?

If we approach this inquiry from an IPNB perspective, we immediately notice leadership only occurs in the environment of a group. It is a purely interpersonal concept and practice. Pulitzer prize winner, James Burns, says this about leadership: “Summoned forth by human wants, the task of leadership is to accomplish some change in the world that responds to those wants” (Burns, 2003, p. 2). Michael Mumford says that “... outstanding leadership is based on effective articulation of a future-oriented vision that motivates and directs others while providing a sense of meaning and affective engagement” (Mumford, 2008, p. 145). Interestingly, both of these definitions are wide enough to embrace Nelson Mandela and Jim Jones, along with their followers.

From a slightly different angle, the definition of mind put forward by Dan Siegel (2006) can be applied to the process of leadership: “The mind can be defined as a process that regulates the flow of energy and information” (p. 247). This definition can be applied to almost anything that has a set of processes (brain/body) that are organised and affected by ideas, thoughts, and



beliefs (contents of the mind) when the latter are intentionally introduced to the former. The mind of the leader affects the flow of energy and information throughout the group via processes discussed below. Over time, the group develops what we might call a mind as well, meaning the capacity to intentionally affect the flow of energy and information in others. We could say that leadership, the unseen rudder, shapes the emerging mind of the group as it is united by a future-oriented vision.

Energy and information flow through and affect the tangible world: leaders, followers, material possessions, geographic constraints, and social/cultural/historical circumstances. We might think of the group mind as the vision, dreams, wants, and passions that combine to set the course for everyone concerned. The desired outcome is to facilitate beneficial change. Sometimes the definition of beneficial change may be determined by the implicit world of a very injured person, who then finds followers who resonate with that injury, bringing tragic results. This reality suggests that part of the definition we are developing may involve distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy leadership. IPNB can certainly provide a touchstone for such a definition. Leadership that conduces toward a FACES state - flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable - sharply contrasts with leadership that pushes toward rigidity or chaos (Siegel, 2006).

In addition, there are a number of neurobiological processes that influence the attraction of followers to leaders and vice versa. Leaving aside rational thought and critical analysis, there are at least three more subterranean processes that are important. Followers need to have a *feeling* about their leader (implicit resonance), a sense of what is going on in *their thoughts* (a narrative that makes visceral sense given the followers' implicit resonance), and a feeling that, by associating with the leader's vision, they are engaging in *something larger than themselves* (a

sense of meaning that has components of implicit and explicit values). This involves, respectively, mirror neurons (Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs, Gallese, Buccino, & Mazziotta, 2005), theory of mind – the ability to understand our own and others' mental states while appreciating that they are not identical (Whiten, 1991), and numinosum – a positive emotion of wonderment and sense of adventure (Rossi, 2002).

Mirror neurons, and the resonance circuits with which they are associated (Siegel, 2007), enable us to have an internal experience of the intentions and feelings of the leader, modified, of course, by our own implicit mental models. One intriguing aspect of the mirror system in humans is that even though it is triggered by physical events, the intention or goal of the performer has a direct influence on the mirror response. Grasping a cup to drink produces a slightly different set of neuronal firings than grasping a cup to be cleared away (Iacoboni & Dapretto, 2006). Another set of neurons, called canonical neurons, also respond to physical action and are more related to the shape of the object and how it needs to be grasped. Both mirror and canonical neurons fire when an object is observed in a context, but only mirror neurons fire when the object is acted on by another person (Boller & Grafman, 2003). This might imply that the object is

subsumed by the intention of the action. This is important in that a leader's actions may possibly be perceived as part of a single intention, such as the handshakes, slaps on the back, embraces, and smiles given while working the crowd, which might all be absorbed into the single intention of successfully achieving the visionary goal. When a leader is putting out his hands to meet those in the crowd, the feeling of a group engaged in a common vision dominates the inner experience of the audience, rather than them just attuning with the physical process of imitating an outstretched hand.

Theory of Mind (ToM) is necessary in order to appreciate the mental processes of the leader,

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especially during a speech or in the physical activity of leading. One aspect of ToM is the ability to be aware that the mental processes of the leader is separate from that of the follower. The experience of being able to choose to become engaged in the new adventure gives the follower a feeling of autonomy and control. When this capacity is weakened, followers may be drawn into such a strong resonance that they don't feel that separation - or that freedom. ToM is linked with the mirror neuron system, but also involves other regions, and so can be seen as an outcome of increasing neural integration. Another aspect of ToM is that others are perceived as intentional agents whose vision impacts their behaviors. Thus, it can become the foundation for a more integrated interpersonal system when there is resonance between two minds or a group of minds. If both parties of this system have well-developed neural integration, particularly those circuits that modulate the limbic regions and connect right to left hemisphere, then there is a much higher likelihood that the resonance will lead to actions that promote a FACES system.

The third process fostered by leadership is a sense of transcending oneself and becoming part of something greater or larger than the self.

Theory of Mind helps to create a feeling of being an individual that is joining and deliberately engaging in an adventure, but the next step is to experience oneself as a member of a group or a team where individual actions combine for the greater good. What happens in the brain to create this sense of oneness? The posterior parietal lobe is involved in the orientation of the body in space. The left side creates a spatial sense of the self through the senses of touch, vision, and hearing, and the right side creates a sense of physical space in the environment in which that self can exist (Newberg et al., 2001). Mystical activities and actions like meditation are known to decrease activation in these areas, which

creates a feeling of being disconnected from the physical self and no longer confined to a particular location. Another trigger is strong repetitive movement and chanting. The repetitive calling of a name and repetitive waving or pumping the air with a fist will quiet these areas as well. Many orators will encourage the crowd to chant in order to shift the feeling from individual to group. As always, we can see that this human capacity for oneness can be used to generate a group with a powerful capacity to create a more awake and compassionate world, or the opposite. It is likely that the greater the neural integration of an individual, the more likely he or she is to resonate with a similar leader, to maintain sufficient autonomy to sense when the endeavor is going off the rails, and to allow enough interpersonal oneness that the group's goals supersede individual goals sufficiently to get something done. A mind drawn toward rigidity or chaos will have trouble maintaining this balance, while a mind gently swaying in coherence between structure and creativity has a much better chance.



This returns us to our original proposition. Leadership involves interpersonal activation of groups of people. Implicit resonance, coupled with more conscious processes, glue people together, for

good or ill. We have seen leaders emerge and gather an enormous following for visions that prove to be disastrous for all involved. Adolf Hitler is the prime example, but what of people like Robert Mugabe, Pol Pot, Mao Tse-tung, and others who seemed to be able to sway the hearts of millions, but leave them far worse than when the great adventure began? At those times, the tide of historical, social, cultural, and neurobiological factors combine with the unusual charisma of the leader to create a momentum that sweeps the group away. Particularly when people are in a state of fear about current conditions, they may lack the integrative capacity to see the long-term potential for harm lying

beyond the momentary relief of someone taking charge.

At the other end of the spectrum, a leader in isolation ceases to be leader. The rudder of the ship may be strong and true, but if there is no one willing to join the ranks on the upper decks, then the ship will be just a Mary Celeste, a mysterious ghost ship, where those who might have benefited are no longer engaged in the voyage.

Maintaining motivation can be difficult, but not impossible. Romantic couples are able to form lasting bonds on a number of levels that finally develop into an attachment that can last a lifetime (Fisher, 2004). Romantic love may correlate with the relationship that followers experience in the embrace of the emotional and ideological power of a leader. It is not uncommon to hear people speak of love for a leader to whom they have no personal engagement or connection. This is true of the charismatic spokesperson, but equally true of someone absent, such as Nelson Mandela, who remained alive in the minds of his people throughout his captivity.

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader" (Wisdom Quotes, 2008). It is the task of a healthy leader to give followers a belief that the vision, the "rudder," can have an expression in reality and a possibility of fulfillment. Great leaders have reached beyond the power of

expectations based on the past (the natural trajectory of the mind when left to itself) to inspire action toward creating a different future. Being a leader is about truly understanding the needs of others, the connection with others, the sharing of a vision and a powerful energy of forward motion and future possibility.

Benjamin Zander, the famous conductor, puts it elegantly as he describes what it is to lead an orchestra. He learnt to stop asking the question, "What is wrong with them?" and began asking himself, "Who am *I* being that my players' eyes are not shining?" (Zander, 2008).

The process of leadership rests on a vision, a dream, a need, a want, a desire, an intention, to become the nearly unseen rudder that lies beneath the surface, deep within the emotional psyche of our "water." On the surface, we gather around it, act because of it, and change the world in

response to its firmness and sureness. From this essential interpersonal process emerge the leaders, followers, and actions that have made our world what it is today. I believe that IPNB is potentially a vision in response to a need and a want, and as such, is much more than just a study of neural correlates. It can become a rudder that sets the sails of change toward an integrating community that actualizes harmony and well-being - a mind to regulate the flow of energy and information in the direction of a more awake and compassionate world.



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