

The Art of Moral Leadership

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At ASPA's fiftieth anniversary celebration I was honored to share the stage with two legends in public administration, Luther Gulick and Don Stone. I was reminded that day of Don Stone's many contributions to our field and I am reminded again today. I can feel the presence of Don Stone here today and it's an honor for me to be in his presence.

I want to talk this afternoon about the art of leadership, especially the art of moral leadership. But I want to begin with what seems to me to be the most obvious question facing anyone interested in improving their leadership capacity at whatever level. What is it that leaders do that causes others to follow?

In some cases, a potential leader will present others with a rational explanation as to why moving in a new direction might be a good idea. But

providing an explanation is rarely enough for real leadership to occur. People can get interested in “explanations,” but they are rarely “energized” in the absence of an emotional commitment. For this to happen, the leader must touch not only the “head” but also the “heart.”

Connecting with the emotions is the work of art, and, for this reason, we think leadership, whether in small groups, organizations, or even entire societies, is an art rather than a science.

You’ll be interested in the following definition of leadership from one of the most significant public leaders of our time, former Secretary of State Colin Powell: *“Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible.”*

Thinking of leadership as an art directs our attention to new ideas about leadership, most quite different from those found in the standard textbooks, which tend to emphasize the “science” of leadership. Thinking of leadership as an art enables us to see things we have vaguely felt about ourselves and others who lead, but have not been able to articulate “scientifically.” It allows

us to develop a new language or vocabulary to employ in talking about leadership.

If leadership is an art, then one way to learn about leadership is to study other arts, to see how people in those disciplines approach their work, and then to apply those lessons to the art of leadership. That was the approach that Janet and I took in the project that led to our book *The Dance of Leadership*. We began by conducting a series of in-depth interviews with some of this country's premier artists, especially dancers and choreographers - people such as David Parsons, whose David Parsons Dance Company is one of the leading exponents of modern dance, Liz Lerman, whose Liz Lerman Dance Exchange has brought dance together with civic dialogue for Americans of all ages, and Septime Webre, artistic director of the Washington Ballet and one of the "cutting edge" choreographers of our time.

From these artists, and many others, we learned about some of the elements that artists, musicians, and dancers consider as they create their art. We learned about the many rhythms of human interaction, we learned about the importance of images and symbols in communicating human emotions, we learned about improvising with creativity and spontaneity, and we learned

about the importance of focus, concentration, passion, and discipline. While leaders might say that “timing is everything” or realize that much of their work is actually “improvised,” we found that artists not only understand these ideas, but have developed specific approaches for improving one’s performance in these areas.

Having learned some of the lessons the more traditional arts hold for the art of leadership, we turned back to the world of actual leaders and asked how these ideas might apply. Certainly some parallels were obvious, as in the examples of “timing” and “improvisation.” But beyond that, we discovered that understanding how artists approach their work gave us new insight into what leaders do.

But we wanted to test these ideas. So we conducted in-depth interviews with a number of important and thoughtful leaders. These interviews included people such as George Fisher, who was Chairman and CEO at Kodak and previously CEO at Motorola; Jane Hull, the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives in Arizona and later Secretary of State, then Governor; and Phil Fulmer, who guided the Tennessee Volunteer

football team to a national championship in 1998 and was recognized by the Football Writers Association as the national “Coach of the Year.”

From these leaders we learned a variety of lessons, but there are two aspects of the leadership experience that we found to be central. *1) Leaders connect with others emotionally in a way that energizes them and causes them to act, 2) Leaders provide the assurance that we need to pursue important values.* Our book *The Dance of Leadership* is mostly about the first of these, but what I’d like to do today is to expand our treatment of that first area by exploring the role of personal and social energy in leadership, then to examine the second area in terms of moral energy.

What I want to suggest is that understanding leadership as an art is essential to both the study and practice of leadership and that artistic leadership can best be understood and best be practiced by thinking in terms of the shaping of human energy.

But I also want to argue that artistic leadership has a shadow side, carrying the potential for deceit and manipulation. And, to give away the ending in advance, I will argue that only when artistic leadership is

accompanied by a sense of moral imagination can it be both effective and responsible.

As we've already mentioned, there are two ways of relating to others, through the head or through the heart. We can appeal to logic and reason, explaining our ideas in the most precise and objective terms, hoping that the other will understand our argument and find it persuasive. Or we can try to connect through the emotions, by sharing a part of ourselves in a way that may touch the feelings of the other and trigger some hidden interest, perhaps even excitement. Both are valuable.

Unfortunately, in my view, the modern world has steered a little too far in the direction of the intellect and, especially in the world of organizations, has sought to rationalize and to quantify what may be neither rational nor quantifiable. In turn, we have come to accept a rather narrow view of leadership, a "managerial" view of leadership, one that focuses our attention on "plans," "resources," and "objectives," as opposed to questions of human emotions and human values.

In that view, the old language of “command and control” doesn’t seem completely out of place, even when it is expressed in more contemporary and more subtle terms such “productivity” and “performance management.” As a result, we live in organizations that are typically over-managed and under-led.

In contrast, real and enduring leadership is an emotional, intellectual, physical and even an aesthetic experience that involves our heads, our hearts, and our fundamental selves. It centers on developing our fullest human potential. It has to do with finding meaning.

Writing about art, aesthetic philosopher Ellen Dissanayake put it this way, the social purpose of art is “the creation of mutuality, the passage from feeling into shared meaning” And, we would argue, that’s the purpose of leadership as well, the passage from feeling to shared meaning.

There’s a lot of confusion about the terms “leaders” and “leadership” these days, so let me be clear about what I’m talking about. First, while leadership has historically been associated with power or influence, I don’t think those are helpful terms today – as I’ll explain in a minute. Second, leadership is not a position, something that is only associated with people who

hold certain offices. As we know, sometimes those in formal positions lead but often they don't. Also, formal leaders aren't the only ones who lead. People throughout organizations lead – and, as John Gardner has pointed out, they must. When we talk about leadership, we are not talking about a position in a hierarchy; we are talking about an action we all engage in from time to time.

Let me illustrate in this way. How many dancers are there in the room? How many of you have ever danced?

Looking back historically, we can outline the traditional tasks of leadership. *The leader is supposed 1) to come up with good ideas about the direction the group or organization or society should take, 2) to decide on a course of action or a goal to be accomplished, and 3) to exert his or her influence or control in moving the group in that direction.* This is what we might call “the great leader” view – a view of the great leader doing great things. And, again, it is not surprising that this view of leadership is hardly distinguishable from management.

But the traditional “job description” of the leader no longer works. While perhaps suited to the formal leader of decades past, this view simply

doesn't fit circumstances today. No one individual can be expected to come up with all the best ideas about where the group or organization should be going. Moreover, having one individual decide on a course of action not only limits the options available, but also limits the commitment of the others to the direction that is chosen. And, if anything, asserting excessive power or control in trying to move a group is likely to backfire over the long term. Most people don't want to be told what to do; they want to be a part of what is being decided.

In contrast to this traditional view of the leader's role, consider this more contemporary description of leadership. *Leadership today is exercised by one who: 1) helps the group or organization or society understand its needs and its potential, 2) integrates and articulates the group's vision, and 3) acts as a "trigger" or stimulus for group action.* This view recognizes that all members of the group have aspirations not only for themselves but for the groups and organizations and societies of which they are a part. Involving many people in assessing the potential of the group, then constructing an image of the future is both more effective in the long run and, as we will see, is morally the right thing to do.

This is not at all to say that the leader must just sit back and wait for the group to act. In fact, the process of bringing forward ideas, combining and restating them in terms that are meaningful, and communicating them in a way that resonates throughout a group or organization is extremely hard work. Indeed, it is much harder work than simply trying to control people. But it's also much more likely to result in a clear direction and sustained energy on the part of the group.

All of this suggests a way of thinking about leadership that can be captured in a new definition of leadership, one that we will present in two versions. The first is my twenty-nine word “academic” definition; the second is the one word “practical” definition. The academic version is that *leadership occurs where one member of a group or organization stimulates others to more clearly recognize their previously latent needs, desires, and potentialities and to work together toward their fulfillment.* The one word, practical version is this: *leadership “energizes.”* The essence of leadership, wherever it occurs, is its capacity to “energize.”

Think, for example, of the way things happen when a small group is brought together to address a problem or complete a task. Often the

conversation will swirl around inconclusively for a while until one person makes a suggestion that others “pick up” on and begin to act upon. People’s reactions may be based on the substance of what was said or on the way in which it was presented or, most likely, some combination of both. But, in any case, we would say that, at that point, where people react with energy and enthusiasm, leadership has been exercised, or, to say it in a different way, an act of leading has occurred. Note that the act of leading need not have been an act of the formal “leader” of the group, even if there is one, but leadership has still occurred. Again, leadership energizes.

From our work on *The Dance of Leadership* we have come think that the art of leading involves shaping and giving direction to the energy that is constantly exchanged among people. In our view, social energy is the “raw material” of artistic leadership, and understanding and working with the rhythms of social energy is an essential leadership skill.

There are three aspects of energy that are most important to leadership.

The first is *personal energy* – the character and commitment that the

individual who would lead brings to the leadership experience. This is the aspect of leadership that people refer to when they say, as did the ancient Greeks, “In order to lead others you must first know yourself.”

The second is *social energy* – the flow of energy between and among people that ultimately moves them to become activated in pursuit of mutual goals. We think that the flow of social energy is mostly stimulated by feelings and emotions. This is what causes the energizing effect of leadership.

The third is *moral energy* – including primarily the capacity for moral imagination, that is, the capacity to discern the various possibilities for acting in a given situation and to determine the moral consequences of those alternatives.

Let’s think first about personal energy, because much of what leaders do can be understood in terms of their transmitting energy to others. Again, we can learn from the world of dance. The dancer has a commitment to expressing his or her inner life and revealing that inner life in some external form. He or she draws on the outer world for both insight and inspiration, but ultimately it’s what’s inside that really counts.

Similarly, the leader draws from the outside world. Yet the leader also has to dig deep into his or her own consciousness and explore his or her values to draw forth a new interpretation, a new formulation, a new twist on the way people have been viewing the world.

Almost paradoxically, it's only through this personal immersion that the leader can articulate the vision of the group or organization. Leadership requires revealing the depths of your inner life in a very public way. With psychologist George Hagman, we would say that leadership, like art, does not merely capture how we feel: *“It articulates who we are, a living person with an inner life with its rhythms and connections, crises and breaks, complexity and richness.”*

Personal energy can be expressed in many ways. For example, energy is expressed in self-confidence and self-esteem, both of which are necessary to carry the leader through times of risk and vulnerability. The work of the leader is under constant scrutiny and examination, a subject of endless discussion in the group or organization (as well as outside). Consequently,

there is risk involved in every statement or proposal the leader makes. To live in such an environment requires considerable self-confidence.

Energy is also manifest in persistence and discipline, both of which are necessary to sustain a group or organization. Leadership can, of course, occur in a moment then drift away. But most leaders hope to sustain their contribution to the group or organization over a period of time. For this the leader needs persistence and discipline.

Energy also expresses engagement, the capacity to interact with many people in many different circumstances. The leader must be ready to listen to anyone at any time. The leader never knows when even a brief conversation might yield an insight that would help in important ways to shape the group's direction.

Energy is also manifest in resilience, a capacity to bounce back or even thrive in the face of adversity. Resilience is especially important as leaders need not only to tolerate change but to thrive under those circumstances. Today's leaders need to expect the unexpected and when it arrives be able to

adapt and to improvise. Where once stability was the norm and change was the exception, today change is the norm and stability is the exception.

Personal energy is manifest in patience and tolerance. Until the future arrives the leader must be able to deal with a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity. While the adept leader can position the group or organization to take advantage of opportunities that the environment may present, there's often no way of knowing when or how those opportunities will present themselves. In the meantime, the leader needs to remain calm but vigilant, ready to act when the time arrives.

Finally, with respect to personal energy, we might note that today sheer intellectual capacity may be less important for the leader than the capacity to absorb diversity and complexity, to synthesize different ideas, and to articulate the essence of the conversation in a clear and meaningful fashion. Leaders, more than others, excel in recognizing and recovering form, sorting out the relevant elements from those that distract, and identifying patterns that others fail to see. The leader takes complex material and goes its essence. As one corporate CEO told us, *“Managers make things more complex; leaders make things simple.”*

We've looked at personal energy. But leadership is also based on social energy. And again dance can be instructive. When the dancer looks at the "field" that is being presented, he or she thinks in terms of *energy*, that motive force that provides life and spirit to the dance.

The same is true of the leader, for whom coming up with good ideas is rarely enough. As we said earlier, people can get interested in "explanations," but they are rarely "energized" without some kind of an emotional commitment. The leader must trigger, stimulate, or evoke an emotional response on the part of potential followers so that those people will become active and engaged. Only when people are "moved" emotionally will they begin to "move," psychologically and physically. Leadership energizes.

Let's go back to dance. Dancers and choreographers are concerned with conveying emotional content that resonates with their audiences. They go about that task by creating symbols and metaphors. But at the center is

the perspective that dancers and choreographers bring to their work. They simply see the world differently from other people.

Through their special lens, dancers and choreographers see the world in terms of human activity that has to be organized so that energy flows through time and through space with a certain level of intensity, but also with a certain degree of freedom and release. With the right combination of these elements, people move through time and space at an appropriate rhythm, expressing the energy they feel and transferring that energy to others. We think that leaders or potential leaders would also benefit from approaching their work in terms of the flow of human energy and, indeed, based on our interviews, we would say that the best leaders already do – even if they don't use that word.

Think of a basketball team going through the course of a game. The players' actions are bounded by a specific space and a specific time, the court and the time-clock. But these are merely backdrops against which the players structure bursts of energy that flow through time and space. One of the important roles of the leader is to organize the flow of energy so as to best achieve valued results.

Consider the United States' 1960s ambition to put a man on the moon. President John Kennedy's expression of that goal had the effect of restructuring the way we thought about space and time, both in the sense of how we understood distances and travel times between the earth and the moon and how we might organize our political and organizational time and space over the next several years. Moreover, because people responded to the emotional challenge that the president presented, much greater social and political "energy" was focused on the space program. We would say that the primary effect of the president's leadership was to "trigger" certain activities undertaken through newly energized groups and organizations.

Dancers and choreographers are, of course, very much focused on energy and especially the movement of shapes in time and space. The way that an individual occupies a space is important, but what becomes even more important are the *relationships* among the various dancers, the pattern that they form and how they move vis-à-vis one another. It's not the individual bodies that the choreographer is working with but the relationships – the exchange of human energy among people – that counts most.

For many leaders, and certainly for almost all managers, there is a tendency to think of time and space in fairly rigid terms, epitomized in the organization chart, the ultimate spatial representation of how the organization is supposed to operate. But, of course, what is completely missing from the chart is any sense of movement, any variation in focus or balance or flow, any dynamism, any energy.

For the leader, having a capacity for designing and shaping relationships as they move through space and time is absolutely essential. To work with these patterns the leader must have a special sense of human relationships; he or she must be able to see not just the “dots,” but ways of “connecting the dots.” *Leaders are in the business of shaping and giving direction to human energy as it flows through space and time.*

A part of this is being able to see the whole “field,” something that is a very special capability of the most effective leaders. Think of the way some athletes seem to see the field of play in a more complete way than others. They have a “sense” of the game that derives, at least in part, from knowing where everything is and where everything is going. Hockey great Wayne

Gretsky, for example, is supposed to have said, “Others skate to where the puck is; I skate to where the puck is going to be.”

Most leadership occurs in settings other than athletic fields, but we may certainly speak of leaders generally as needing to recognize all the components of a situation that are in play at any particular moment and to have a sense of the energy in relationships so as to know what to expect next.

For the choreographer, who works at shaping human energy, things are always changing and consequently the solutions change from moment to moment. Choreographer Mila Parrish reflected, “In the process of making a work, new possibilities arise, new potential solutions. The playing field is open, is active, is alive, and is responsive.” The choreographic design is never a progression from box to box; rather it’s a swirling mix of bodies in motion, of symbols and meanings that float in and out, of music, of colors, and of time mixing with space in the most unpredictable ways.

Similarly, leaders can’t just move from box to box. Rather, in the process of leading, new possibilities arise, new potential solutions. The leader’s field, like that of the choreographer, is open, active, and responsive.

It involves a sometimes maddening mix of bodies and personalities, of ideas and images, or projects and proposals, all coming together in the most unpredictable ways. When these forces crystallize in perfect action, in harmony with one another, there is a sense of “flow.” Things feel right and people feel good. When they don’t, groups and organizations and societies can simply collapse.

So energy then is not just that which moves the body and leads to sweat and sore muscles. Rather energy is expression, the coming together of time and space, pattern and purpose, so that an inner intention is translated into external action. Chester Barnard, business executive and management theorist, put it well over fifty years ago when he wrote that, for executives, the essential skill is:

“the sensing of the organization as a whole and the total situation relevant to it. It transcends the capacity of merely intellectual methods The terms pertinent to it are ‘feeling,’ ‘judgment,’ ‘sense,’ ‘proportion,’ ‘balance,’ ‘appropriateness.’ It is a matter of art rather than science, and it is aesthetic rather than logical”

We've talked about personal energy and social energy. But what about moral energy? It turns out that the energy of the leader comes from a number of somewhat surprising sources, each resting on a foundation of values.

And again dance can again be instructive. At its best, dance touches us in deeply human ways, leaving us with new ways of seeing the world. Surely the same is true of leaders, whose primary field of interest is the transition between the present and the future. Real leaders have the capacity to reveal our yearnings and our passions (even when we are unaware of them), then to articulate those as aspirations for the future. The world of those who lead at whatever level is inherently one in which they are living "on the edge," the edge of the present as it falls into the future. And, as we will see, that's where values abound.

Similarly, when we think of art, we think of objects of beauty or at least those that we find attractive, because they somehow speak to us. We would say that leadership relies on a similar frame of mind, not necessarily one

oriented toward beauty per se, but one aimed at exploring new configurations of human values. In the world of leadership, the art is not increasing beauty, but increasing significant human values.

Leadership then touches the emotions, but it also activates the most basic human values. Leadership is about change and change involves the ideas and commitments that people cling to based on faith and conviction. For this reason, change is almost always accompanied by emotional turmoil. Change is simply hard for most people. People are emotionally attached to their values.

And here in the realm of values we encounter not only the best artistic leadership has to offer, but also its potential dark side, the possibility that artistic leadership may be used for deceit and manipulation. Parker Palmer has written, “*A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light upon some part of the world, and upon the lives of the people who dwell there.* A leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A *good* leader has high awareness of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good.”

Changing values is hard work, both for the leader and for the follower. Change involves moving away from the past and the present, both of which are at least comfortable in their familiarity. Consequently, when people consider possible changes in their work or their organizations they bring with them certain deep-seated, almost primal fears. There is the fear of the unknown, the fear of ambiguity and uncertainty; there is the fear of failure, that I won't be up to the challenges the future will bring; there is the fear of abandonment, of being stranded and alone; and there is the fear of losing control, wanting to stay in our comfort zone.

As we said earlier, the leader provides the assurance that we need to face the future. The leader is the one who says, "It's okay. We'll be fine. What we're doing is the right thing." The leader relieves the followers from the sense of loss, or the guilt they might otherwise feel in moving away from long-standing patterns and preferences.

But what's interesting is that doing so requires that the leader to assume a certain responsibility, the responsibility to make sure that the process of moving forward is undertaken with care and sensitivity.

Certainly James MacGregor Burns made just that point in his classic book *Leadership*. Burns argued that leadership involves a relationship between leaders and followers, who engage with one another in a process of determining what is to be sought. Leaders act on their own motives and interests, but these must be connected to the motives and interests of followers. In order for moral leadership to occur, the values of both the leader and the followers must be represented.

As Burns has said, “Leaders and followers are engaged in a common enterprise; they are dependent on each other, their fortunes rise and fall together.” (426)

In that relationship the views of the followers should be freely expressed and fully entertained. Leaders and followers should engage in a dialogue, not a monologue, and that dialogue should be free of domination and coercion. It should be structured so that fundamentally new ideas and relationships might emerge. This suggests that the leader should above all aid in creating an open and visible process through which members of the group can express their needs and interests. That is what we mean by maintaining the integrity of the group process – and that is the leader’s primary task.

Lacking that orientation, the leader may be tempted not only to rule with excessive power, but to make decisions based on his or her personal interests rather than those of the group. And the leader may be tempted to lie to followers to protect the organization, or at least “spin” the truth to conceal what is actually happening.

There’s one particular danger that is connected to artistic leadership. We are familiar with charisma, which we might say represents the extreme of artistic leadership, the ultimate evocation of the emotions of followers. Some might say that charisma can be used for good or evil. However, I would say that charismatic leadership in whatever its form constitutes a moral “slippery slope.” On the one hand, the leader may be tempted to use his or her allure for personal gain or to make decisions based on conceit rather than reason. On the other, the followers may be put in the position of unwittingly and uncritically accepting the values of the leader; they may be too easily subject to manipulation.

In any case, there are no easy guides for the leader. Moral leadership is not based on a set of moral principles or rules that a leader can choose to

follow or ignore. Human interactions are far too complex for that to work. As much as we have tried over the past several hundred years to construct rules or codes of conduct, the ethical choices we face are always too difficult for those to readily fit all situations and all circumstances. And that situation is getting more difficult all the time.

And, besides, most moral lapses are not based on a conscious choice to “break a rule” or, more generally, to promote evil rather than good. As Aristotle said, often the doer of evil does not know at the time that he is doing evil. Most leaders don’t make ethical mistakes based solely on greed or callousness – though some do. Rather most fail to see moral issues that are inherent in a situation but lie just beneath the surface.

They uncritically accept an organization’s culture and fail to recognize the ethical traps it holds for them. They neglect low-probability events, they miscalculate risks, they fail to consider all the parties that might be involved, and they downplay long-term consequences. They allow themselves to be blinded by opportunity and don’t see the negatives. They arrive at a point where they say, we’ve gotten ourselves in a situation that we can’t get out. We have to do whatever we can to save the organization – and save ourselves.

Identifying and resolving moral issues requires moral imagination - a good sense of ethical awareness but also the imagination to promote a moral process and result. Moral imagination involves not just a heightened attention to moral concerns, but rather carefully and thoughtfully understanding and evaluating various options from a moral point of view. Acting with moral imagination requires expanding our capacity for moral reasoning and charting new directions for moral action. Having that kind of vision today is a moral imperative.

As a leader, how can you break out of your standard ways of thinking to be sure to consider the ethical implications of your actions? How can you bring the same creativity to addressing moral questions that you bring to addressing questions of cost, performance, or results? How can you expose your own faulty assumptions about yourself, about other people, and about the world in general, assumptions that may lead you to minimize the moral consequences of your actions? How can you be creative in your leadership, yet at the same time be sure that your creativity is not used to develop faulty justifications for your actions?

Let me conclude by saying once again that leadership requires a combination of personal energy, social energy, and moral energy. In large part leadership rests on building an emotional connection with others. But that emotional connection, when it is extended too far, can veil important ethical considerations or can even be used for the personal benefit of the leader. To avoid that happening, we must demand that the leader and the followers constantly negotiate shared meanings and purposes and do so with transparency, and to do so critically and reflectively. That requires the leader to exercise moral imagination. And moral imagination itself involves a certain amount of art. So while the ethics of leadership may sometimes be threatened by art, as in the case of charisma, only art can resuscitate moral leadership.

Artistic leadership connects with us emotionally in a way that energizes us and causes us to act. But we must also be attentive to the moral purpose of leadership, to lift up both the leader and the led, to move them both toward the greater good. Earlier, we spoke of “the passage from feeling into shared

meaning.” Artful leadership expresses and is based on “feelings” and “emotions” but moral leadership rests on and creates “shared meaning.”

I want to end with a quotation, one that I think captures the essence of artistic leadership as it is joined with moral leadership:

“We must be willing to take risks, committed to the experience, and ready to be vulnerable and open to the self-discovery that is a natural product of the process. We must be willing to listen to others and to be generous with them. An active balance of self-fulfillment and response to others’ needs has to be maintained. Basically we need the courage of our own impulses and responses qualified only by a healthy concern for the people we are working with.”

We might easily assume that this quotation came from an important leader or a bestselling book on leadership. But in fact the quotation comes from an introductory text in dance. But for me it expresses well the art of moral leadership.

Thank you very much!