Agile Leadership
Leadership as a Stage Play

By Peter Stonefield PhD

Andy Turner was Marketing Director at a major software company. He was persuasive, heroic and passionate. At times, however he was very impatient and demanding. When any of his staff reported they weren't going to meet schedule he became visibly upset and would publicly admonish them and command them to get things back on track.

Andy's "Commanding "style began a few years earlier when he was frustrated with, as he put it, almost everything. He discovered that demanding got short term results. Over the next few years he replicated the behavior and was promoted twice. Fueled by the promotions, the commanding behavior grew rapidly and so did the unintended consequences. Many in his group became fearful and resentful. No one wanted to be in his cross hairs. As a result, they began acting more out of self preservation than a desire to make big things happen. The resentments were also blurring their perceptions of Andy's strengths. Many could no longer see his other leadership competencies like persuasiveness, drive, enthusiasm, encouragement and camaraderie.

Andy's issue is a common one shared by many leaders regardless of their style. At some time in their career, they become over-identified with a particular role, mind-set or 'success strategy' and as a result over use it. His "Commander" 'success strategy' made him a bigger and better leader for awhile but it's over use and excesses paradoxically made it now too small for him. Andy needed to dis-identify from and get bigger than his "Commander". He needed to discover a deeper sense of "I-ness"-an inner Director that could manage his "Commander".

Leadership as a Stage Play

To facilitate the discovery of a deeper sense of "I-ness", I had him to consider leadership as a stage play. I asked him to imagine he had a cast of leadership characters or roles he could deploy for different situations. Suppose you had a "Commander", "Visionary", "Coach", "Politician", "Collaborator" and "Talent Scout". He looked at me skeptically. I went on to describe how we all already have an inner cast of semi-autonomous roles, characters or selves that we play as we move throughout the day. "Right now, I am in the role of "Coach". Later today I will be giving a presentation to a group of Six Sigma black belts and will become my "Passionate Presenter". Tonight I will be an "Abstract Thinker" and an "Emotionally Caring Friend".

Andy readily recognized that he is different with his boss than with his subordinates; different with his kids than with his peers; different when presenting in front of people. I asked him to make a list of the different roles he plays. With some coaching, Andy was able to identify several. He was a "Presenter", "Salesman", "Techy", "Commander", "Marketer", "Subordinate", "Husband", "Father" and "Poker Player". Each of these roles are adaptive "success strategies" organized to satisfy needs and get results in a particular situation, context or environment.

When he identifies with one of these roles his sense of I-ness becomes embedded in the role virtually unnoticed. The role becomes the central aspect of who he is in the moment, determining how he perceives reality. For example, when he is identified with the role of "Techy" and says "**I** believe…" he is reasoning from his mental models and beliefs in the role of

"Techy" and not as "Commander", "Salesman", "Father", "Poker Player" or any other role he plays. And when identified as "Techy" the knowledge, beliefs and values that shape perception and behavior are often different from the other roles. From this perspective, Andy was able to step back from and view his "Commander" almost as if it were another person. He recognized the heavy handedness and wanted to learn how to mange it. Andy was discovering his inner Director and was now ready to organize a cast of roles for leadership.

I asked him about the secret to his success as a "Poker Player". He told me, "I am very cool, calm and detached. I don't get upset or rattled." Bingo, I thought. Then, I asked him, "What if you could bring the calm, cool and somewhat detached mind set of your "Poker Player" to your leadership? What if, when your upset "Commander" begins to take over you could take on the mindset of your "Poker Player" and quickly let go of the upset." Over the next month Andy learned how to do just that. When he recognized he was getting frustrated about something not done, he would become his "Poker Player". He became more conscious of the feeling, thinking and behavior of his "Commander", "Poker Player" and other roles. He was learning how to step back to his inner Director. From this perspective he could consider what leadership role including his "Commander", less the upset, would best fit the situation.

Over the next several months he went on to develop or refine other leadership roles like "Talent Scout", "Collaborator", "Visionary," "Coach" and "Thought Leader". One year later Andy was promoted to VP of Marketing in another division of the company.

The Banker and Musician
Other leaders have discovered their inner Director and became agile leaders in a similar way. Al Ross, VP of a major international bank, had a highly analytical and detached management style at work. On most weekends, however, he played piano in a band and would become a mildly extroverted and emotionally engaging "Musician". As the "Musician", Al was passionate and knew how important it was to connect with the audience and work as a team. Al transformed his leadership by bringing his "Musician" to work and adding it to his leadership cast. He became more passionate and emotionally connected with people, celebrated little successes, publicly recognized people and encouraged teamwork. Al got extraordinary results. In six months, Al's department reduced the average work time per service transaction by 40% while reducing staff 11% in the face of a 43% increase in volume. The department's customers were so impressed that they spontaneously started writing letters to senior management. Al's "Musician" perfectly complemented his highly analytical style and enabled Al to lead with chemistry, passion, detachment, analysis and bottom line reasoning. Not long afterward, Al was promoted and asked to perform his "leadership magic" in a large new acquisition.

Evolutionary Learning
Len Edgerly, Vice President and General Manager of Northern Gas of Wyoming, was faced with the daunting challenge of building organizational readiness for adapting to a more competitive and deregulated marketplace. He described his management style as non-irascible and somewhat detached, "I followed the numbers with the objective attitude that reflected my Harvard MBA-training." I guided Len through a deeply creative self-organizing process to discover what "new" role was already trying to emerge from his subconscious mind. Carl Rogers described the intimate relationship between adapting and creativity this way; "The mainspring of creativity

appears to be man's tendency to actualize potentialities as the organism forms new relationships to the environment. ….This tendency may become deeply buried and awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed." The outcome was an image of his next evolutionary step as a leader. He was so moved by his image, he wrote the following poem about it.

Natural Leadership
  for Peter Stonefield

dazzles of ideas folding
themselves together in mind tissue
I follow your voice into meditation

I see a woman's face shining
in sunlight through a crystal bowl
I follow her image through offices
of the gas company now filled with
music and colors her dark hair
her smooth walk draw me onward
she is my natural way of leadership
arranging my pieces to her field of energy

you are a man of rainbow energy who leads
seminars of possibilities
you teach business people to juggle yellow tennis balls
toss them up up up your mind opening always
for new ways to assist
the perfection of energy
our natural leaning toward wholeness
I remember your red tie and white shirt
the way you walk
effortlessly into tomorrow

                    - Len Edgerly

In the poem, he describes the visceral experience of how his image acted as an "attractor." He interpreted the image of the woman as representing his artistic and creative side.

Len grounded the insight by writing the poem and beginning a monthly news letter to all employees entitled Tidbits. In Tidbits, he creatively described visits to work sites. In each issue, he wrote about his experience of walking in the shoes of employees for a day. He portrayed a woman who monitored transmission lines through multiple computer terminals as a "ring master." His day in the trenches with a street crew became a celebration of the skill in backhoe operation and his joy of physical work. He expressed excitement about each person's work and contribution. The creativity, sensitivity and values expressed not only celebrated the employees involved, but vicariously honored all employee skills and contributions. The self-disclosure, humility, and humanity he expressed fostered a sense of "mutuality", interdependence and

appreciation of each individual's uniqueness in the organization. The feedback to Len's monthly letter was extraordinary. Over time this and other creative actions are building organizational cohesiveness, teamwork and creativity-essential characteristics for thriving in a deregulated market.

Andy, Al and Len transformed their leadership and became more agile and adaptive by viewing leadership as a stage play and discovering their inner Director. In the process, they evolved their consciousness and came to view their personalities as instruments-vehicles of expression that they could orchestrate for leadership effectiveness in different situations.

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He has successfully completed over 150 consulting engagements, created more than 20 different training and development programs and coached over 200 executives and engineers. Some of the training programs are Agile Communications, Agile Leadership, Managing Innovation, Knowledge Management, Managing Change, Creative Thinking, and Architecture for Teamwork He has facilitated the development of 10 knowledge leveraging "Communities of Practice" in engineering and marketing organizations. His client list includes Apple Computer, Baxter Laboratories, Dow Chemical, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Intel, US Government, PPG and Sun Microsystems. He was the principal consultant to the winner of the US President's Quality Award for Managing Change and the winner of the GSA Administrators Award for Managing Change in Government.

Peter's mission is to catalyze and accelerate the evolution of organizations and people.
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