Diverse Thinking ~ Collective Action:
The Leader's Role in Evoking Excellence

"Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from outside, is available .
. . a new idea as powerful as any other in history will be let loose. "
British Astronomer, Sir Fred Hoyle, 1948

When the first photos of the earth from space were transmitted from the U.S. Apollo space program in 1969, humanity was profoundly moved. The photo symbolizes a graduation for humans on the planet. No longer are we able to think of ourselves only as citizens of a particular country, state, or region; we are citizens of this global planet. We can literally see the interconnection – the water that surrounds and connects all the landmasses, the atmosphere that surrounds the entire planet. The photo symbolizes other interdependencies as well – economic, political, environmental, social, spiritual. These forces interact to create a dynamic global system, creating contact among people of different cultures, different political ideologies and different worldviews. Our cultures and our communities throughout the world are exposed to one another and interact in ways never before experienced.

This dynamic global system, in turn, requires a fundamental shift in our understanding of the role, the actions and the characteristics of leaders. We need a new vision of leaders and of leadership.

This paper is an invitation to explore this fundamental shift in thinking and acting that is required of global leaders. It will investigate
- the critical importance of eliciting diverse perspectives and the leader's role in creating a space/environment for that to happen, and,
- ways leaders can enable new ideas, shared vision, group intention and motivation for collective action to emerge

The reality, and the adaptive challenge, of a leader's world lies in relating to a variety of specific individuals, and being able to draw out their views and their values – in order to evoke the talents of those individuals, as well as to forge common vision, goals and action. Living in an interdependent world of great diversity calls for actively eliciting diverse ways of thinking, and creating new ways of working together. Systems thinking, principles from chaos and complexity theory and perspectives from the field of ecology provide powerful insight into leadership roles, behavior and characteristics needed in an interdependent global society.

From Mechanism to Interdependence - our Worldview is Changing

Diversity, from a mechanistic viewpoint, is not a desirable quality. For centuries western science has conceived of the world as a giant machine. In machines we expect that parts are finely calibrated, that they fit together perfectly, that when one part wears out it can be replaced. We expect to be able to predict the outcome of the interaction of those parts, to be able to design a machine, in fact, that will predictably produce the desired product with standard measurements and consistent quality.

While these are viable expectations for machines, the challenge we face today is that this mechanistic perspective is deeply embedded in our social systems, in the way we structure our organizations, the way we design our jobs, the way we work together. The machine metaphor is pervasive, and it is not useful as a lens for leadership in organizations. The mechanistic view of the world is based on dualistic metaphysics, separation of mind and matter, time and space. This leads to focusing on the parts rather than the whole. It implies direct cause and effect, linear, sequential thinking. It suggests that truth is only what can be objectively demonstrated and that change is caused by one force acting on another, as in the common billiard ball analogy.

 Diversity, from this perspective, complicates matters. Differences mean less certainty, less ability to standardize - jobs, roles, norms - and less ability to predict outcomes. Today there is increasing awareness that ideas and trends, like epidemics, spread in nonlinear fashion, with the makeup of human contact being the most important factor. Leadership, conceived as a heroic or charismatic or visionary individual, convincing, cajoling, commanding or otherwise engaging others to "buy into" a particular goal is ineffective.

A particularly troublesome result of mechanistic thinking is that it fosters monocultures, that is, systems with very low diversity. And monocultures, whether in agriculture or human groups, are unsustainable. One- dimensional individuals, groups or organizations are vulnerable.

In agriculture, monoculture, or cultivation of low diversity of crops, can lead to large-scale crop failure as a single genetic variety becomes susceptible to a disease. The Irish potato famine was caused by susceptibility to a particular kind of mold. The wine industry in Europe was devastated by susceptibility to a particular tiny insect. In the case of the wine industry, each crop had to be replaced by a new variety imported from another country that had used a different genetic variable that was not susceptible to the pathogen. There is concern in the computer industry that Microsoft has nurtured a software "monoculture" that threatens global computer security. That is, that Microsoft's software is so dangerously pervasive that a virus capable of exploiting even a single flaw in its operating systems could wreak havoc.

In human systems, a monoculture is any sort of system wherein everyone has similar perceptions, ways of thinking and frameworks for making meaning of their experience. There is an appeal to it. It seems easier to manage, allows for economies of scale, and minimizes surprises. But just as eating only one type of food, no matter how nutritious it might be, would eventually lead to poor health, in an interdependent world, organizations characterized by internal monoculture do not have internal fortitude, or the flexibility to respond to their changing environment. No matter how beautifully the violins might be played, without all the other instruments, there is no orchestra.

Organizations seek to create strong cultures to promote cohesiveness within, to develop consistency in decision-making, to encourage employee pride and commitment. Yet, this creates its own problems. Strong cultures tend to become homogeneous cultures. And homogeneous cultures do not have diversity of interest, perspective, or relationships within and without to enable the innovation and adaptability necessary for sustainable performance.

Leadership in an Interdependent World

As we are becoming increasingly aware of the negative consequences of considering, consciously or not, organizations as machines, the good news is that new metaphors for organizations are appearing. Because these metaphors provide a different way of understanding organizations, they also suggest a very different conceptualization of leadership. Scientific understanding of the natural world is leading to a conceptualization of nature as a complex of self-organizing systems, a web of life as described by Fritjof Capra (1996), where all phenomena are interwoven and interdependent. This conceptualization of nature as a complex system of living organisms has emerged independently among many disciplines: scientists, philosophers and sociologists. It is becoming a universal framework for understanding not only the natural world, but the social world as well. This systemic, holistic view of the world is based on a metaphysics that assumes non-duality. It assumes that everything is interconnected. This leads to a focus on wholes, rather than parts, to relationships rather than separate

entities, to networks and feedback loops rather than linear, deterministic cause and effect influence. It implies that subjective truth is valid as well as objective truth, that non-quantifiable qualities are nevertheless real and significant, that change is continual.

In a diverse, dynamic, interdependent world, where meaning and action emerge moment by moment through the interaction of the various elements, the terms leader, and leadership, take on quite different connotations. In this context the incongruence and inadequacy of equating "leader" to position, to level, or to title become obvious. These are all static designations. They cannot reflect the on-going flow of reality.

A leader, in this context, is the one who can listen deeply – to others, to self and to the situation - to discern "what is wanting to happen" and who can facilitate that emergence, at that moment. A leader is one who is able to evoke diverse voices by creating a safe environment, by facilitating trust, by appreciating the uniqueness of each person. This individual could well be the supervisor of the work team, the manager of a department, the administrator of a hospital, or the designated leader of a project team. It could as well be any one of the members of these organizations.

And what about "leadership?" Clearly, it is a shared responsibility of the group or the community, not the designated task of a few. In a dynamic, interconnected world, there is no one right way. Every individual, every system has a valuable perspective of the whole. Every person and every team has important information that can affect other parts and the whole as well. Every person has unique gifts and has the responsibility to contribute those unique gifts and to invite the contribution of others. Every person has the ability to influence the environment of the organization so that all voices feel welcomed, to demonstrate personal integrity that creates trust, to contribute to the continual self-organizing of the organizational system.

Diversity, from this perspective is essential. The role of the leader in evoking excellence requires a deep appreciation of the necessity for diverse thinking, and competence in co-creating an environment that is safe and accepting on the one hand and honest and challenging on the other. The term leader in this paper may be interpreted to be a person so designated by title or position, however, the deeper meaning of the paper will be enhanced by recognizing that leadership is a widely shared perspective and activity which shifts moment by moment, from one person to another, with the flow of group interaction.

Though a topic for much deeper consideration than is possible here, it is essential to acknowledge that each individual is also a dynamic living system. Thus, the importance of self-awareness and self-development cannot be overstated. Personal assumptions and bias not only influence perception but

also are projected onto other people and onto situations. Social transformation does indeed require personal transformation.

Principles of Systemic, Holistic, Thinking

Basic principles of systemic, holistic thinking bring a useful perspective to understanding the work of leaders:

> *Interdependence* – The leader's world is not just interconnected, it is interdependent, comprised of overlapping systems that profoundly influence one another. Whether one leads a team or a city, a corporate division or a university department, these all include multiple systems and every system includes multiple elements and relationships. Leaders work within a dynamic field of relationships in which the effect of any single action is not entirely controllable because in a systemic, interdependent reality, every action affects the whole.

> *Dynamic* – The essence of a system - a team, a work group, or a nation – is created through the interaction of the components. In the West, our mechanistic worldview causes us to focus on the parts, so much so, that we often overlooked the impact of relationships. We forgot that for every change, ripples flow out to impact other parts of the system. It is the dance that is important. Joanna Macy (1991) expresses it eloquently.
>> A system is less a thing than a pattern. It is a pattern of events, its existence and character deriving less from the nature of its components than from their organization.

> *Emergence* – Because of the dynamic nature of systems, nothing is static. Reality emerges through our interaction, our communication. Meaning is created moment by moment through conversation and through relationships. Even strategic planning is becoming a more emergent process. (Smith, 1997) Rather than predicting the future, establishing goals based on those predictions, and mobilizing resources to achieve those goals, the development of strategy is being reversed today. Facing high uncertainty and complexity, leaders seek greater flexibility and agility. Now they often start with identifying key core competencies, examining internal and external relationships that can leverage those competencies and establishing feedback systems that allow for adapting plans.

> *Diversity* - In his theory of living systems, Fritjof Capra (1996) provides a conceptual framework for the link between ecological communities and human communities. A diverse ecosystem will be resilient, because it contains many species with overlapping ecological functions that can partially replace one another. The more complex the network is, the more complex its pattern of interconnection, the more resilient it will be. In human

communities ethnic and cultural diversity may play the same role. Diversity means many different relationships, many different approaches to the same problem. A diverse community is a resilient community, capable of adapting to changing situations.

So, if leaders live in an interdependent, ever-changing, continually emergent world, their focus shifts, from inspiring or controlling toward the achievement of goals, to listening to what is wanting to emerge. Their work is to create space for diverse voices to be heard, both within their team or organization, and in the larger context within which they exist.

Within a mechanistic world, not only are diverse voices an irritating distraction, but it seems an immense task to somehow coordinate all of those diverse voices into some kind of collective action. A brief example may illuminate a more systemic, holistic perspective.

 A small team of graduate students developing a paper to describe the kind of organizations they wanted to help create, suddenly realized that the way they were approaching this assignment was the antithesis of the kind of organization they were hoping to create. They suspended the tasks they had allocated to one another and spent several hours talking together, both in person and on-line. As they explored their ideas together, the conversations became rich, and "we hated for our meetings to end." When the time came to actually write the paper, "It practically wrote itself," they reported. Their reflections are insightful: it seemed weird to give up our lists and our individual tasks; not everyone was present every time, and yet it didn't matter, the continuity continued; questions seemed key, we used questions to help us think together.

A larger, long term corporate example provides a similar illustration. A multi-state telecommunications company, facing dramatic changes following deregulation, developed a company-wide initiative to engage all employees in articulating a set of values that would support their work together. As work groups across the company had conversations about the values that were important to them, and as company directors synthesized the reports from these groups, an important statement of values emerged. The most significant aspect of this activity, however, was not the statement of values, but the conversations that were held. People were personally engaged. Diverse voices were heard. For the five years following deregulation, when almost every telecommunications company in the industry experienced lower revenue and profits, this organization realized a 13% increase in revenue and a 7% increase in profits.

In each case, the focus shifted from achieving specific tasks, to the relationships that comprised and created the whole. This shift released creativity, wove together disparate voices and led to achieving desired and significant results.

Evoking Diverse Thinking and Collective Action

Hofstede's seminal work on personality and culture (1993, 1997), and the GLOBE research by House and Javidan (2001) on culture and leadership, provide very useful grounding in understanding cultural differences. Likewise research such as the Tubbs and Schulz (2006) work on global leadership competencies provides a useful basis for leadership development, including developing "Global Leadership Competencies". And, as Richard Nisbett's (2003) research reveals, children of Confucius and children of Aristotle do indeed view the world in different ways. For Westerners, especially Americans and those of north European culture, "a company is an atomistic, modular place where people perform their distinctive functions. For the Easterners, . . .a company is an organism where the social relations are an integral part of what holds things together" (Nisbett, 2003, p. 84).

As valuable as such research is, however, evoking excellence does not rest solely on understanding cultural characteristics. Evoking excellence depends on tapping into the unique characteristics, passion and talent of individuals, inviting full expression of those talents in an environment of cooperative creativity.

Emergent Theory and Practice

Research from a variety of additional sources provides a theoretical foundation for new ways of understanding both our organizations and leadership.

Complex Adaptive Systems

As scientists grappled with the realization that not everything could be predicted or controlled, the theory of complexity emerged. This theory, based on relationships, emergence, patterns and iterations, maintains that the universe is full of systems, weather systems, immune systems, social systems, etc. These systems are complex and constantly adapting to their environment and thus are referred to as complex adaptive systems (Stacy, 1992).

A few of the features of complex adaptive systems include the fact that:
- usually they are open systems, taking in information and energy from their environment and releasing information and energy into their environment
- relationships are non-linear, that is a small disturbance may cause a large effect, or no effect; cause and effect relationships are not proportional
- negative and positive feedback loops are often found; the effects of an element's behavior are fed back to it in such a way that the element itself is altered
- they have a history; they are dynamic and prior states may influence present states

- they may be nested; for example, an economy is made up of organizations, which are made up of people, which are made up of cells, all of which are complex systems
- boundaries are difficult to determine; the decision is ultimately made by the observer.

Complex adaptive systems behave and evolve according to three principles: order is emergent as opposed to predetermined, the system's history is irreversible, and the system's future is unpredictable.

Patricia Shaw (2002), co-founder of the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshsire, translates these features of complex adaptive systems into the ongoing work of organizational life. She understands the "organization," not as something that has an existence separate from our own activity, but rather as a continual organizing process. She describes this organizing as essentially a conversational, self-organizing process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of reality. It is the process of collectively making sense of our experience.

Shaw describes leading, in this understanding of reality, as "going on together." She considers it a craft and believes that ". . . just as we can learn to conceptualize, to design, to communicate and persuade, we can also learn to participate with imaginative concreteness." (Shaw, 2002, p. 173)

Chaos Theory - Fractals

Fractals, a central concept of chaos theory, are said to display a pattern that repeats itself at every level of magnification from the microscopic to the macroscopic. This physical concept, like many others, can be regarded as having a social analog. Myron J. Frankman, a Canadian economist and professor at McGill University, considers social fractals as a basis for extending economic international cooperation. In a paper for the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development, he argues that open participatory structures of governance which are appropriate locally and nationally, are no less appropriate at the supranational and even global levels.

Drawing on the research of Riane Eisler (1987), he highlights what he calls the fractal quality of the old paradigm and the fractal quality of the new paradigm.

In her Cultural Transformation Theory, (1995) Eisler distinguishes between what she calls the dominator model of society, either patriarchy or matriarchy, in which one half of humanity is ranked over the other, and the partnership model, in which social relations are based on the principle of linking, rather than ranking. "Diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority." (1995, xvii)

We do have notions of self-organizing and self-governing societies – in native and indigenous cultures. In particular, Eisler describes the Neolithic cultures in area of modern Turkey. Interestingly, a book published by the China Social Sciences Publishing House, *The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Society: Gender Relations and Social Models*. describes a culture of the same time period, with similar characteristics, Ban Po, located near Xian (1995).

Frankman calls attention to the fact that in the last two decades or so, have seen the blossoming of a new vocabulary. We hear about empowerment, participation, non-governmental organizations, local control, democratization, grassroots initiatives, human rights, and freedom. While the old paradigms are still around, animated discussion and action have been set in motion by this succession of phrases which reflects a new viewpoint. He sees the characteristics of the dominator model, with emphasis on obedience, deference to authority and a rigid hierarchical ordering of society – as the fractal quality of the old paradigm – found in the family the workplace, the school, the community, the congregation and governance. Likewise, he suggests that the new partnership model can be fractal. He argues that the partnership image or vision as a new way of being together can find expression in individuals, families, schools, organizations, communities and the world. He further suggests that to the extent that society shifts from the dominator to the partnership model, the prospect for global social justice are enhanced.

Quantum Physics and Dialogue

David Bohm was a quantum physicist and also passionately interested in the dynamics of society. He was particularly concerned with how people of diverse opinion and diverse culture could get beyond conflict and confrontation to unleash the creative potential latent in their differences.   "A free form of dialogue," he said, . . . "may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today" (Bohm & Peat, 1987, p. 240). For Bohm, a common meaning is created and is constantly transforming in the process of dialogue. He explains that people engaged in dialogue are not primarily in opposition to one another and yet, neither are they actually interacting. Rather, they are participating in this pool of common meaning that is continually emerging (Bohm, 1985).

Writing about Bohm's understanding of dialogue, Danah Zohar (1994) describes it as similar to the process the brain goes through every time it takes in new information, first deconstructing and then resynthesizes new data to arrive at a new meaningful whole. In dialogue, the deconstructive stage is described as a "letting go" or a "suspension" of one's own point of view as the only point of view. There must be a willingness to put one's own alongside others' points of view as one of many to be compared, contrasted, and considered.

During this stage of the dialogue, one's own point of view becomes available for analysis along with those of others. The meanings and underlying assumptions of all the points of view can be surfaced, their cultural presuppositions and assumptions thus exposed, and their grip on the consciousness loosened.

Rather than trying to understand a situation by analyzing it, examining the parts, in dialogue the focus is on the whole. As each person shares his or her unique perspective or understanding, it is not with the intent to persuade others to a particular point of view, but rather to explore together, to weave together many perspectives to deepen understanding of the whole. The insight that emerges is always dependent upon "reciprocal connectivity that can never be predicted and controlled.

Bohm believed that as people go through this process, much of the emotional charge surrounding a rigidly held point of view would be diffused, making it easier for participants genuinely to listen to one another. In the brain a sense of frustration is released – the mind stops trying to make sense of the data in the old terms. It frees itself to begin the process of reconstructing the data through the creation of new concepts and categories.

Once the participants in a dialogue have let go of clinging to their own points of view and the process of deconstruction is complete, the second stage begins the resynthesis. People discover they can listen to each other in a new way, that there is some common ground to be discovered. This new order is a whole new, emergent level of consciousness in which the participants get beyond the fragmented state of individual consciousness to a shared pool of meaning and value, to a common purpose or understanding. They see that their original points of view in their original form clash, but if looked at in a new way "give rise to a unity in plurality." (Zohar, 1994, p. 242)

But as Bohm and those who have developed the art of practicing dialogue within groups can tell us, it is more than simply ensuring that every person has an opportunity to speak. There is a different quality of listening. There is a process of "hanging up our assumptions" for a bit that opens us to really hearing the meaning of what others express, AND to tuning in to a deeper level internally, to becoming more aware of our own thinking and feeling. It involves a willingness to be touched by the words and ideas of another.

Two individuals stand out for their leadership in the practical application of the theory underlying dialogue: William Isaacs and Juanita Brown.

William Isaacs, as Director of The Dialogue Project at the Organizational Learning Center at MIT, describes dialogue as "the discipline of collective learning and inquiry . . . for transforming the quality of conversation and the thinking that lies beneath it" (Isaacs, 1993). Isaacs has facilitated dialogue processes in situations of extremely strong differences in perspective such as

hostile labor/management representatives from a steel mill and with opposing factions during the reconciliation following apartheid. He is emphatic that dialogue is not a problem-solving technique, but a means to surface the subtle influences on our thinking that keep us locked in to automatic habits of perception and thought.

Juanita Brown and colleagues developed The World Café as a widely practiced and useful way for groups of people to tap into the wisdom within the group. In an article authored with Sherrin Bennett (Brown, Bennett, 1995), she reminds us of the vulnerability of these new ways of being and working together. Listening deeply and taking in the other's meaning, we choose the risk of being changed by what we hear. In this sense, listening is a radical act. It is the willingness to allow this process to unfold that gives dialogue its transformative power, concludes Brown.

Social Network Analysis

A small, but growing field, social network analysis, rests on the assumption that everyone is interdependent. It provides a kind of pattern recognition that makes sense of the complex relationships among people. Professor Karen Stephenson, who teaches at Harvard, the University of London, and the Stevens Institute of Technology, collects data through questionnaires, analyzes it through network modeling software and creates complex maps that reflect the flow of information. While it may be difficult to acknowledge the idea that there are people who play critical roles in organizations who do not even show up on the organization chart, that, in fact, is what her research shows, (and in fact what we have all experienced).

In an interview with Art Kleiner (2005), Stevenson describes the theory and applications of social network analysis. Originally derived from the complex math used to explain subatomic physics, social network analysis, is being used to understand and manage the "ineffable forces of human interaction within an organization's walls. . . ." She initially wrote a paper about algorithms for analyzing trade networks for field archeology research. Then, she began to see today's organizations as modern-day equivalents to the trade networks of ancient times.

The network itself has an intelligence, she asserts, more than the sum of its parts and beyond the knowledge of any one individual. "The form and substance of talk in an organization is as palpably influential on performance as a magnetic field is on a cluster of iron filings."

One of her clients, Steelcase, recently established a practice called community-based planning. When preparing on office design for a client, they conduct a Stevenson-like analysis of the communication flows within the organization. They then share this analysis with the employees who will be working in the new office environment and invite everyone to design the new setting together.

The Role of the Leader in Evoking Excellence

New metaphors of leadership are available to us. Consider the contrast between the charismatic visionary leading the troops and Greenleaf's Servant Leadership. Consider Heifitz' description of "going to the balcony," stepping back from the immediate situation to better "see" what is going on. Consider Parker Palmer's image of leadership as an "inside out" process. Consider Wheatley's belief that we can't predict what the future will be, rather we figure it out together as we go along.

We also have access to an increasing array of social technologies. From executive coaching, to group facilitation, to large group interventions, theory and research-based strategies and methodologies are available. Many of these are described above.

From the perspective of a dynamic, interdependent global world these images of leadership make sense and these methodologies are amazing in their ability to enable us to evoke diverse thinking and collective action.

At the same time, this perspective also evokes an uncomfortable dissonance. It is impossible to think of evoking excellence as simply an intellectual activity. There are no five steps to becoming a servant leader. When we step out of the mechanistic worldview, there are no cut and dried rules or guidelines. We step into a world of uncertainty – by definition. Systems are created moment by moment through the interaction of the forces that comprise them. And they are wholistic. They are all about relationships, relationships to people, to our work, to our own identity.

When we move out of the mechanistic worldview we move out of the world where the "top" influences the rest of the organization, into a world of mutual influence. We are no longer self-contained "billiard balls" bumping against one another, and remaining unchanged within. Being a leader in a dynamic, interdependent world requires as Bohm reminds us "a willingness to be touched by the words and ideas of another."

Evoking excellence depends on tapping into the unique characteristics, passion and talent of individuals, inviting full expression of those talents in an environment of cooperative creativity.

Leading from a systemic, holistic perspective, one can co-create an environment where this can happen. Appreciating that diversity is the source of creative and effective collective action, a leader can be encouraging and receptive to unique ideas. She or he can nurture multiple perspectives and approaches. Knowing that the essence of the team or the community is continually emerging she or he can create opportunities for multiple relationships and a variety of kinds of conversations where shared meaning can emerge. Knowing that diversity will enrich all the relationships and thus enrich the community as a whole, as well as each individual member, a leader can ensure that information and ideas flow freely through the

entire network and the diversity of interpretations and learning styles – even the diversity of mistakes – will enrich the entire community.

The effective leader in a dynamic interdependent world is willing to step out of the traditional expectations of command and control, but also to step out of the expectation for being the "vision setter." She or he sees self as co-creator, willing to trust the knowledge and wisdom of others, specifically charged with calling out the diverse talent of others and creating an environment of safety and expectation in which variety creates excellence.

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