Thinking Like a Round Table Leader: How Mental Complexity Enables Leaders to Succeed in a Complex Environment

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When we consider what it means to be a great military leader, we often conjure up iconic Hollywood imagery, such as William Wallace charging across the battlefield toward the enemy, George S. Patton addressing the Third Army in front of a giant American flag, or Leonidas leading the last stand at Thermopylae. These brave and inspiring leaders were dauntless, willing to sacrifice for their nations, and possessed many of the qualities to which we aspire. To many, they pose as the embodiment of the warrior ethos.

This vision of the warrior ethos also promotes the idea that leaders stand aloft, separate from those they lead, and with the sole responsibility for action. We understand these leaders to possess what the great military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called *coup d'oeil*, the ability to evaluate and comprehend the environment "at a glance" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 578). This idea, which authors David Bradford and Allan Cohen call *heroic leadership*, implies that leaders have the sole responsibility for assessing the situation, setting objectives, and executing plans (Bradford & Cohen, 1998). This is understandable, as leaders normally come to their position because of their previous success and

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proven performance; they are generally adept in their field and have a history of making good decisions. However, if leaders feel like they alone have the best solutions to every problem, they are likely placing their own pride ahead of the good of the unit. The warrior ethos places service before self, and that may require abandoning the idea of the leader as the sole-source of knowledge and ideas.

The changing dynamics of current military operations demand more from leaders than to be brave and take charge. To succeed in an increasingly complex world, leaders must think differently; they must think more complexly and see beyond their own perspective. This paper examines how leaders can achieve this through increased levels of mental complexity, calling upon Harvard professor and author Robert Kegan's human developmental theory. The paper further explores how these levels translate into three distinct leadership styles: the desk leader, the conference table leader, and the round table leader; ultimately promoting a "round table" approach, in which leaders utilize mental complexity to form organizations that can adapt to the rapid changes inherent in the modern complex environment.

Environmental Complexity

The environment in which organizations operate is growing increasingly complex. Globalization, technology, and mass and social media have opened systems to interact with one another in novel and unpredictable ways. This rapidly growing complexity is often illustrated by referencing Moore's Law, which predicts that the processing power for computers will double every two years (Moore, 1965). While the law is specific to computer processing, it is often used as a partial analogy to the exponential growth in the complexity we experience. It is only a partial analogy because the computer's processing power and speed

greatly add to this boom in chaos. Thomas Freidman wrote about a similar concept, identifying that society does indeed adapt to changes, and does so at an increasingly faster rate as well; however, the rate simply cannot keep pace with innovations or novel ideas that affect public order. He illustrated this by stating that society was able to adapt to the oncoming pace of the internal combustion engine by instituting new laws, conventions, and infrastructure, but today's firehose of technology does not allow civilization to adapt before it changes again (Freidman, 2016).

Historian John Lewis Gaddis provides valuable insight into the realities of complexity. He claims that most people desire a *reductionist* view of reality, the idea that "you can best understand reality by breaking it up into its various parts" (2002, p. 54). This perception holds that factors in the environment can be isolated in such a way as to reduce them into independent variables, allowing control. However, such reductionism only works in a closed system, or in a vacuum, where each factor can be isolated from the rest of the world around it. In such a system a person could alter a variable or two and produce the desired outcome. This tidy view of reality leads people to believe that if they control enough variables, they can control the events of the future.

Gaddis contrasts the perception with that of the ecological view of reality, which goes beyond taking specific values into account and focuses on "how components interact to become systems whose nature can't be defined merely by calculating the sum of their parts" (2002, p. 55). In explaining his *ecological view*, Gaddis was describing 'open systems.' Such systems are not comprised of variables that can be controlled, and they are open to input from sources external to the system. As such, systems interact with other systems, eliminating the boundaries for predictable

input or output and creating the possibility for countless 'unintended' consequences. Economist and author Emile Grunberg equates "open systems" with complexity, stating that in open systems, variables "are themselves dependent variables in other theories, ad infinitum" and therefore open systems "lack constants" (1978, p. 546). The result is unpredictability, a fundamental characteristic of complexity.

Most organizations, by their design, are not equipped to deal with this level of complexity. Instead, they are designed to be as economical as possible and often trade

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in flexibility to achieve efficiency. Standard operating procedures and specialized roles are implemented to maximize all resources. Once an organization achieves an equilibrium in which it has become optimized to reach its potential, leaders tend to focus on maintaining the status quo. The achieved equilibrium often corresponds with a cognitive consensus that Thomas Kuhn describes as a "paradigm," or a "constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (1996, p. 175). In other words, when an organization accepts certain assumptions as truth and relies on those assumptions to do its business effectively and efficiently, it begins to take on a stasis in which change, if it is to be considered at all, is only tolerated in small and almost insignificant

ways for fear of disrupting the efficiency the organization has gained within the existing paradigm.

Additionally, as organizations become more specialized, they can generate groupthink and isolationism. Economist and system theorist, Kenneth E. Boulding, in writing about what he referred to as "isolated subcultures" wrote that "total growth of knowledge is being slowed down by the loss of relevant communications. The spread of specialized deafness means that someone who ought to know something that someone else knows isn't able to find it out for lack of generalized ears" (1956, p. 198-199). This is a fitting metaphor for what happens in leadership. Ideas become so engrained in cultures that they develop a similar specialized deafness to outside thought; people are closed (deaf) to concepts that come from outside their own circle of like-minded people. Because organizations are normally filled with the expertise specific to that organization, people tend to think only in the terms of their own expertise, remaining ignorant of 'outside' information that may in some way be applied to their own field.

The concept that organizations, and more specifically the leaders of organizations, rely on paradigms and develop specialized deafness to other fields and areas of thought is comparable to a closed system; in fact, it could be considered a closed mental system. People have their own meaning-making system, formed by a composite of study, experience, and even genetics. If a person's mental model remains closed, just as with closed systems used in scientific experiments, the outcomes are restricted and predictable. Here we find a problem with the idea of heroic leadership. If leaders feel they must generate all the answers themselves, they create a closed mental system. Such a closed model is perfectly adequate to deal with a simple problem or

closed system. However, if a person is dealing with open systems that interact with one another, like those found in the modern military environment, the closed mental system is limited in the ways which it can perceive the uncertain possibilities. Often in these cases, people tend to 'bend' reality to fit their own mental constructs. Leaders and organizations must instead try to match the openness of the environment with an openness of mind, or put another way, they must match environmental complexity with mental complexity.
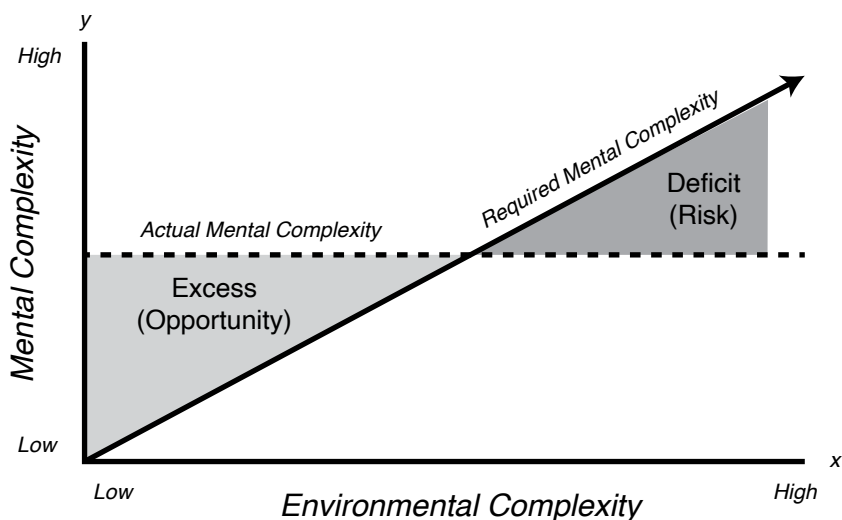
Matching Environmental and Mental Complexity

Robert Kegan's developmental theory supports the need for an environmental and mental complexity match. He and his fellow author of *Immunity to Change*, Lisa Lahey, explain that "when we experience the world as "too complex" we are not just experiencing the complexity of the world. We are experiencing a mismatch between the world's complexity and our own" (2009, p. 12). Figure 1 is a conceptual graph that illustrates this idea; the up-sloped line represents the mental complexity (along the y axis) required to match the environmental complexity (along the x axis). The line is a non-quantitative representation of the relationship that should exist if mental complexity is to match the environment. The dashed horizontal line represents a person's actual mental complexity, or the openness of his or her mental model or sense-making mechanism. The point on the graph where the two lines cross represents the point at which the person's mental complexity is sufficient to engage with the complexity found in the environment.

To the left of this point, where mental complexity is greater than required, leaders utilize excess mental complexity to build efficiency, create opportunities, and increase mental complexity within themselves and the organization. To the right of this point, the leader's lack of mental complexity can lead to limited options and put the mission at risk. This graph serves to illustrate the concept that in a complex environment, a lot may be riding on one's ability to match, or ideally

Figure 1
Mental and Environmental Complexity Match

surpass, the required level of mental complexity. In much of society, this dynamic is in proportion and people are able to adequately cope with the complexity they face on a daily basis. However, for leaders who face a complex environment, there is a high demand (and need) for mental complexity.

What is Mental Complexity?

Mental Complexity, in the context of this paper, is based on Dr. Kegan's theory of human development. Increasing mental complexity involves not merely increasing knowledge of facts, but being able "to think abstractly about the facts" (2003, p. 23). Kegan explains the brain's growth in capacity during adulthood in the same way he explains a child's mental capacity growth, through a mechanism described as a "subject-to-object shift." In short, this theory poses that as humans develop, they are able to differentiate between what is self, or subject, and that which is other, or object. As the mind is able to do this at increasingly significant levels, it is growing in complexity. According to Kegan, "*Object* refers to those aspects of our meaning-making that we can look at, take a perspective on, reflect on, integrate, and exercise control over because we can "see it." It is visible for us in some way" (2003, p. 25). In short, it is something that we can look at objectively. Kegan contrasts this with what we are unable to look at objectively, explaining that "*Subject* refers to those aspects of our meaning-making that we are identified with, that we are run by, are controlled by, and are fused with. So is for us invisible." He then plainly states that "...we *have* that which is object, we are that which is subject" (2003, p. 25). Growing in mental complexity involves being able to clearly, or objectively, look at assumptions that were previously hidden from us, or subjective to us. Kegan theorized that the mind transitions entire categories from subject to object; once the mind transitions one category of

experience from subject to object, all experiences, thought, and perceptions within that category move as well. Additionally, these transitions occur in stages, so that once a category has transitioned, the perceiving individual has, in essence, become a different perceiver.

Kegan identifies five major subject-to-object transitions that occur somewhat naturally in life; although, not all adults transition through all five stages. At some point in the process, people may unconsciously decide if they are willing to undergo the discomfort that comes with the next level of subject to object transference, or growth in mental complexity. Kegan's model recognizes that the process is not easy; he describes our subject assumptions as being part of us, conflated with our own identity. So, in the transition process, we lose subject and create object (Kegan, 1982). This process can be very uncomfortable because it creates a sort of "separation anxiety." For this reason, most people find it difficult to break free from their hidden and comfortable assumptions and achieve higher levels of mental complexity.

In order to provide the context for the mental complexity required in leaders to optimize organizations to match the complex environment, this paper examines the three stages found in adulthood (Stages 3-5). These final stages (the Socialized mind, the Self-authoring mind, and the Self-transforming mind) are displayed in graphic format in Figure 2 below. This graphic, which appears in Kegan and Lahey's *Immunity to Change*, displays the stages as plateaus, indicating that there are distinct times of stability and times of change (2009). As stated previously, the changes occur when categories change from subject to object. In a sense, it occurs when an individual can examine the world through a wider lens, one that is able to view and assess their previous lens. This graphic also

provides a brief description of each of these final stages, explaining what these categorical subject-object shifts imply for leaders.

Socialized Mind

The socialized mind is normally achieved in older adolescents, and it is at this stage that most adults tend to settle, finding comfort in their socialized beliefs and without a desire to "rise" any further (Helsing & Lahey, 2010). This is understandable because it is in this stage that people find their identity, or self, in others. Breaking out of this stage is perhaps the most difficult because it can sever familial and friendly bonds. Therefore, the afore-mentioned "separation anxiety" locks most into this stage of sense-making. In the socialized mind, as Kegan stated, "there is no self to share with another; instead the other is required to bring the self into being." An individual becomes somewhat "fused" with the group (1982, p. 97). People at this developmental level may be able to see or even understand another individual's or group's perspective, but they cannot make any objective assessment of it because, as authors Helsing and Lahey explain, "their own theories, values, and expectations about personal and professional relationships and responsibilities are essentially made up by the theories, values and expectation of these others [in their group]" (2010, p. 74). Because this is true, people often become emotional when someone presents an alternate view. The socialized mind simply does not have the lens through which to evaluate these different views.

Self-Authoring Mind

When a person is able to access the self-authoring mind, they broaden their lens to see the views of their previous group and objectively compare them with the views of other individuals or groups. The mind opens, takes on a broader perspective, and sees more of the environment objectively. In Kegan's words, people "can reflect on, handle, look at" the reactions and beliefs they previously held as truths. Kegan describes the self-authoring mind this way: "instead of being, so to speak, made up by or

Figure 2

Stages 3-5 of Kegan's Developmental Theory (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 16)
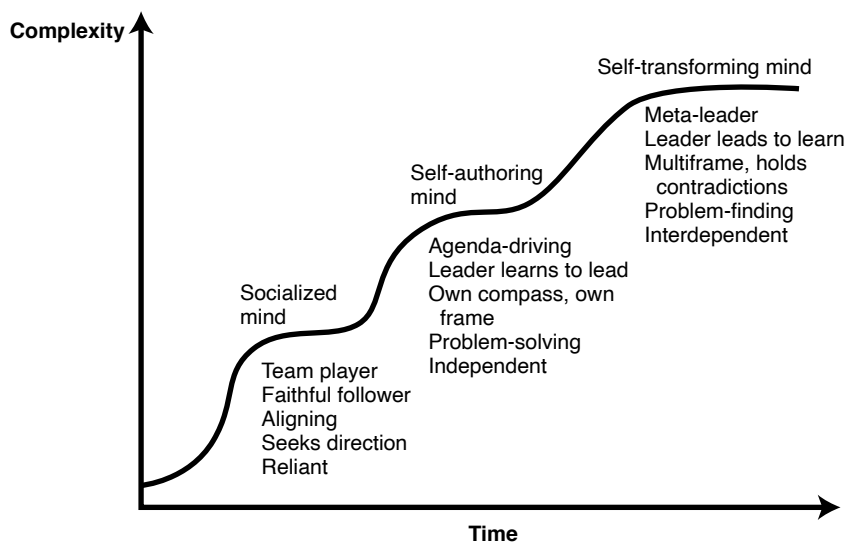
written by our surround, our culture, our family, the institutions that we value, we are capable of orienting ourselves more autonomously in these contexts" (2003, p. 35). We become the authority on our own beliefs; we choose what we ascribe to, rather than unconsciously surrendering that choice to our social groups. When we self-author, we, in a sense, break away from the herd. Then, when outside the herd, we can look back and more clearly see the herd, where it is heading, what it believes, and why. With this perspective, people make their assessment of what is best, what is right, and what should be.

> *...the greater diversity of thought that is considered, the more individuals minds are stretched and are able to make sense of the environment.*

Self-Transforming Mind

The final transition in Dr. Kegan's model occurs when an individual with a self-authoring mind is able to once again step out of their own belief system and look at their lens rather than merely looking through it (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This transformation, if it occurs, only does so later in life (Kegan, 2003). This is where a leader truly begins to appreciate the ideas of others. Kegan and Lahey state that a person possessing, or at least accessing, this level of mental complexity "both values and is wary about any one stance, analysis, or agenda" (2009, p. 19). These individuals "make space" for others views rather than beholding to their own agenda. Such a leader is interested in, and even seeks information that will disrupt their own system and their former lens. Kegan noted that this level "involves this capacity to hold on

to opposites; to reclaim the projections that we would tend otherwise to put somewhere else" (2003, p. 42). Whereas in the self-authoring mind, people are able to appreciate the views of several groups in order to decide between them, in the self-transforming mind, they are able to see the different ways in which one might be inclined to decide between the groups. In this way, this stage of mental development is a system of systems, or as Kegan labeled it, "trans-system" (1994, p. 315). It is at this level of openness that we find a comparable match for the open systems that characterize the complexity of the environment.

As described above, a closed mind is comparable to a closed system in which a scientist may isolate factors in order to control outcomes. Whether with experiments or with mental processing, this closure makes the product restricted and predictable. However, when individuals reach a new stage in mental complexity, their minds open. Each time it does so, it is, in some ways, no longer limited to its own understanding but can facilitate and even harvest the understanding of others and hold a collective understanding. Additionally, the greater diversity of thought that is considered, the more individuals minds are stretched and are able to make sense of the environment.

Just as breaking free from the socialized mind can be uncomfortable, many find the idea of holding multiple realities as objective very disconcerting. It should be noted that accessing the self-transforming mind, like any other stage, does not preclude an individual from accessing any previous stage. The larger perspective still includes the previous perspectives; the self-authoring, and even socialized mind still exist within the larger view and people may choose to return to these levels as they are inclined. Accessing the self-transforming mind greatly enhances a leader's ability to fully understand

the essence of another's beliefs and ideas without requiring them to permanently forfeit their own chosen beliefs.

Applying Mental Complexity to Leadership

Kegan's theory, along with other similar stage models in the field of developmental psychology, are widely used in modern leadership literature and theory (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). Many, such as Kaz Gozdz and Joseph Jaworski in the four level leadership models and Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs in the five levels they propose in their book *Leadership Agility*, are building upon the idea that higher developmental stages aid leaders in addressing complexity (Gozdz, 2017, Jaworski, 2015, Joiner & Josephs, 2007). Having established the correlation between the mental complexity as an 'open mental system' and environmental complexity as described in general systems theory, this paper will use Kegan's stage-development framework while incorporating the principles of other works to describe three types of leaders, utilizing an illustrative-metaphorical structure of "tables." The three approaches to leadership described here are the desk leader, the conference table leader, and the round table leader; each relying on a higher level of mental complexity than the pervious and capable of addressing increasing levels of environmental complexity. The first two leadership styles - the desk and conference table leaders - carry with them the heroic leadership connotations that the leader alone has all the answers, while the third, the round table leader, introduces a post-heroic view of leadership that encourages participation and shared responsibility (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). The following will examine how each of these leadership approaches affects the leader's sense-making and how they address five critical leadership areas: communication, expectations, oversight, feedback, and organization.

It is also important to keep in mind that the use of categories is to illustrate the differences in leadership styles and their utility in dealing with complexity. In applying these models, leaders may choose to exercise characteristics from any category to fit the mission of the organization and their leadership position within it.

The Desk Leader

The desk leader represents a leader who operates in a socialized mind, which, as we have already addressed, means that they belong to a "herd." These leaders understand the world as it is translated through the views of the group to which they belong. This mindset assures the leader that the group is right, while anyone who disagrees with the group is wrong. Desk leaders ascribe to the paradigms held by the organization and believe that the organization's way is the best, and perhaps only, way of doing business; it is right, and therefore, they feel compelled to ensure it is enforced and propagated. Such leadership is typical in organizations because they are designed, in many ways, to keep everyone on the same page. With this view, the leader believes that others should understand what to do based on assumed shared beliefs (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Joiner and Josephs refer to this type of leader as an "expert" who believes that power comes from "authority and expertise" (2007, p. 8). This leadership style is illustrated in the picture-metaphor of a desk, (Figure 3) highlighting that the leader sits alone, as the sole authority. These basic beliefs, fomented in the socialized mind, keep the mental system closed and translate to some consistent and predictable leadership methods.

The first resulting trait is a communication style that is very directive. With the expectation that people within their span of control know how to do

their tasks, they simply need to be told what to do, not why. Secondly, the leader expects little more than compliance throughout the organization. Enjoyment, satisfaction, or even a desire to improve a process are somewhat irrelevant; personnel are simply expected to do their job in the prescribed fashion. The leader understands that the standard operating procedures within the organization are there because they are tried-and-true and have worked in the past. Paradigms, and all the assumptions that go with them, are held as gospel. Ensuring compliance brings out the desk leader's third defining characteristic, oversight via micro-management. They understand that part of their job is to ensure that the tasks are being carried

Figure 3
Desk Leader
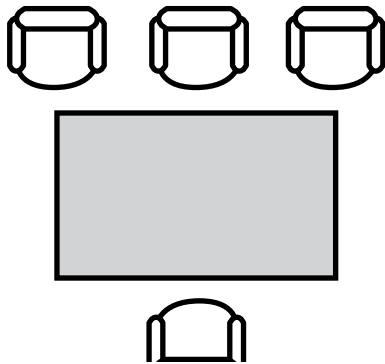
out correctly. Because these leaders direct and do not empower, they will micro-manage supervisors and workers alike. The fourth leadership trait these leaders exhibit is feedback through critique. Workers can expect that if they do things "right," they won't hear anything; however, if they make any mistakes, they can expect to be critiqued by the leader in an unhelpful manner, usually consisting of "this is where you went wrong," and nothing more. This is not intended to

help the employee get better, it is meant to reinforce the rules within the paradigm and mental model, to affirm the leader's expertise and position of authority, and to reiterate his expectation of compliance. This organization becomes strictly task-oriented. The *why* of the work is lost in the work itself and everyone is laboring simply to accomplish the next given task with no real concern for the organization or its mission. In a relatively simple and steady environment, this organization can be effective by maintaining the status quo

The Conference Table Leader

Conference table leaders are likely to possess a self-authoring mind, understanding that people think differently than they do, but feeling the need to get everyone in alignment with their own beliefs, vision, and purpose (Hendel-Giller, 2018). Conference table leaders are critical and "outside-the-box" thinkers; they have undergone a difficult transition to rise above the felt need to go with the flow. In this way, they feel enlightened, able to look at matters objectively and choose between them. They examine why the organization does the things it does, question the status quo, and seek to find better ways of doing business. According to Kegan, these individuals have "a direction, an agenda... of what is needed," and about which "others need to hear to best further the agenda or mission" of their design (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 19). They also understand that it is the individuals in the organization that carry out the mission, and that they need to get them all on the same page and press forward together. Joiner describes a leader with this mindset as an achiever, who seeks to motivate others "by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to important outcomes" (Joiner & Josephs, 2007, p. 7). This leadership style is illustrated in the picture-metaphor of a conference table, (Figure 4) highlighting

that these leaders sit with those they lead, still maintaining authority at the head of the table, but at the same time fostering the team mentality.

Figure 4
Conference Table Leader
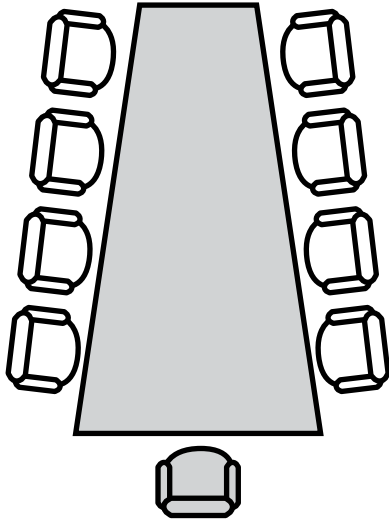
While the desk leader sits across the desk and directs people toward their tasks, the conference table leader communicates by attempting to inspire employees toward a shared vision. These leaders know it is their job to cast a vision for the future and to ensure everyone shares that vision; therefore, they invite everyone to join them on this new path. This leader expects buy-in to the vision and mission of the organization. Mere compliance is not enough, as these leaders understand that they can get more out of their people if they have a cause in which to believe. Their perspective allows them to understand that some folks may see things differently; these are the ones who need to be convinced and motivated to change. Once they achieve buy-in, conference table leaders are comfortable enough with their people to delegate responsibilities. In doing so,

they demonstrate a certain level of trust. This trust is also enforced by providing feedback in the form of constructive criticism, helping personnel accomplish their tasks without intervening directly. This leader creates a climate in which people are praised for good work or are provided with an improvement plan if needed. Conference table leaders lead vision-driven organizations that can be very successful, making them an attractive and aspirational leadership style.

The Round Table Leader

The two previous leadership styles carry with them the heroic leadership connotations that the leader alone has all the answers. However, these styles simply may not be enough to address the degree of complexity in the environment, and a different approach to leadership may be required. Round table leadership goes beyond the typical heroic leadership style of directing or inspiring; it surpasses efforts to maintain the status quo or to cast a new vision. This advanced leadership approach harnesses the intellectual and visionary firepower within the team to turn the organization into an adaptive organism. To create such a team, leaders must be able to accesses a self-transforming mind in which they can see that others have different views, AND appreciate those views as useful perspectives that should be examined and considered (Hendel-Giller, 2018).

While a conference table leader walks in with a vision or agenda, the round table leader does not. This runs counter to what so many see as the leader's role or responsibility; however, such a view may be conflating leadership with authority. Addressing this issue, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky contend that people grant authority "on the assumption that you will... promptly provide solutions to problems" (2009, p. 24). Round table leaders depart from this safe zone

of using authority and providing answers and instead lead their team to develop a vision and plan together. Kegan writes that a person with a self-transforming mind makes "space for the modification or expansion of their agenda or design" (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 20). Leaders with this kind of openness in their mental model are able to harness the ideas and perspectives of others, making the team full participants in the direction of the organization. Joiner and Josephs assert that such leaders "create a participative culture," possessing an "openness to change" and a "willingness to rethink basic assumptions and their visionary orientation" (2007, p. 10). This leadership style is illustrated in the picture-metaphor of a round table (Figure 5), highlighting that leaders sit as intellectual equals with those they lead, not possessing all the good ideas, but incorporating everyone on the team, facilitating active and open discussion, and taking the perspective of others.

The openness of the round table leaders' mental model allows members of the team to communicate through collaboration, expecting them to participate and become co-owners of the vision and direction of the organization rather than merely complying or even buying-in to the leader's vision. With co-ownership

comes a natural empowerment, understanding that not only is each voice heard, but every team member's position is relevant and valued; each member

Figure 5
Round Table Leader
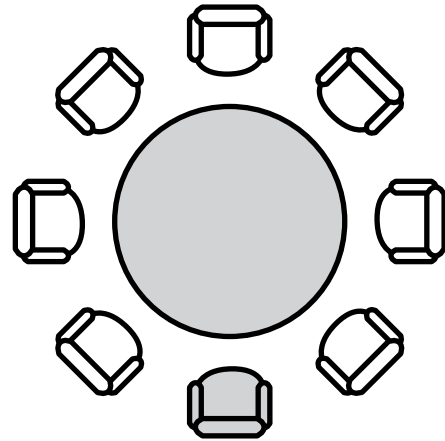
understands that the leader and other members of the team trust them and rely on them to perform their role in the organization. Evaluation and feedback are generated in the form of back-and-forth learning, in which teammates are encouraged to discuss what went wrong and seek solutions together with other members of the team. Ultimately, these leaders and their

Table 1
Summary of Leadership Approaches

	Communication	Expectation	Supervision	Evaluation	Organization
Desk Leader	Directs	Compliance	Micro-Manages	Critique	Task-driven
Conference Table Leader	Inspires	Buy-in	Delegates	Constructive Criticism	Vision-driven
Round Table Leader	Collaborates	Co-ownership	Empowers	Learning	Vision-creating

people become a vision-creating team, bringing together the best ideas from everyone in the continually evolving and adapting organization like a living, breathing organism.

Exercising and Applying Round Table Leadership

Round table leadership is not a style that should be applied without consideration of mission or position. Like the mental complexity model, leaders may choose and apply aspects of this leadership style where it is appropriate. It is also not something that comes naturally. Given that it corresponds with the highest level of mental complexity and that fewer than 8 percent of the researched population were able to access this self-transforming mind, this leadership style may be difficult to embrace and put into practice (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 28). In fact, mental complexity is not a skill that can be learned by mere study. Greater mental complexity is only achieved through practice, whether that comes through intentional efforts, life experience and circumstances, or both. Leaders must be willing to form the habit of suspending bias, going through the pain of losing one perspective in order to gain another, and continually working toward becoming open to new ideas. This requires leaders to think and communicate differently.

Thinking Differently

Adopting a leadership approach begins with how a leader thinks about their own position as a leader. Some may view the title of leader as the just reward for hard work. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky wrote that "one of the most seductive ways your organization rewards you… is to call you a "leader" (2009, p. 25). Round table leaders must reject this view of leadership and understand that their authority does not equate to omniscience. Sitting at a round table requires a different perspective on leadership, one that places a premium on inclusivity and downplays the assumed expertise of the leader. Former Pacific Fleet Commander, Admiral Scott Swift summed up this challenging leadership quality as vulnerability, not in a sense of being weak in the face of a threat, but in the sense of promoting inclusivity and engendering maximum participation for the group (Nelson, 2017). Inclusivity requires being open to new ideas and thoughts and to increase the leader's mental complexity to address the complexity faced in the environment.

Distributing Inclusivity

Over and above inclusivity, a leader of leaders has the additional and critical responsibility to develop lower-level leaders into inclusive leaders as well, that is, to grow their mental complexity. If only the head table is round, that enables the leader to harness the intellect of only those at that table and excludes all the intellect found elsewhere in the organization. However, if each individual at the head table takes the round table approach to their own section of the organization (Figure 6), then the best ideas from the level below begin to surface as well, eventually making their way to the head table. Distributing inclusivity throughout the organization could bring an exponential increase in the intellect from which the leader is able to draw.

Figure 6
Developing Round Table Leaders
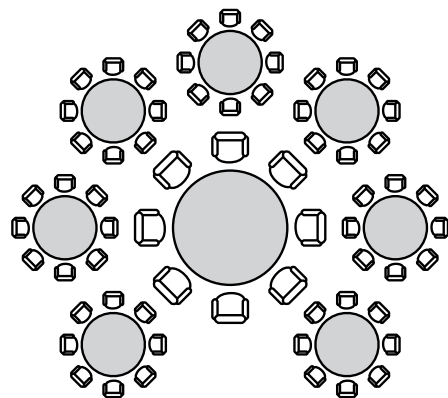
Communicating Differently

Building Trust and Accepting Risk

Communication must be built on a foundation of trust. If the people within the organization are going to contribute to the openness and complexity of the leader and the organization itself, they must understand that they are empowered to think and act, that they are allowed to take risks and make mistakes. If no one is willing to take risks, people will simply maintain the status quo, playing it safe and continuing to do the same thing they have always done. Diane Halpern of Claremont McKenna College wrote that "creative responses, especially when they are in response to novel situations, will be reduced if there is little or no tolerance for errors" (2004, p. 135). To establish this trust, a leader must be willing to let subordinates try, and let them fail.

> *The characteristics of round table leaders allow them to facilitate ideas that are inconsistent with their own subjective beliefs, broadening their perspective and increasing their ability to cope with a complex environment.*

Facilitating Open Discussion

Trust enables leaders to facilitate open discussions, and one of the best ways of doing this is to ask questions. Marquardt wrote that "Leaders, through questions, can build a culture in which questions are welcomed, assumptions are challenged, and new ways to solve problems are explored. Questions establish an inquiring culture in organizations, and such an inquiring culture builds a learning organization" (2005, p. 27). It is imperative that leaders foster this open flow of information because it could very well preclude disaster. Marquardt holds that the sinking of the Titanic, the Challenger explosion, and even the botched 1961 Bay of Pigs incident could all have been avoided if people surrounding the decision makers had felt free to speak up and question perceived expertise and authority (2005). Leaders must be willing to admit that there are considerations other than those they themselves have foreseen. An organization that engages in questioning can safeguard against blind spots and avoid catastrophe.

Two common objections to facilitating discussion are the lack of time and the fact that some matters simply do not call for deeper discussion. These are legitimate concerns; even Clausewitz warned that leaders must be careful not to be "dragged down to a state of dreary pedantry, and grub around in the underworld of ponderous concepts where no great commander... was ever seen" (Clausewitz, 1978). However, these concerns should not inhibit leaders from hearing disparate ideas when time is available and the complexity of the situation calls for it. Hearing new and disparate ideas can not only help prevent pitfalls, it can also illuminate new paths forward. Often one idea triggers another and acts as a springboard to generate new concepts. Author Edward de Bono calls this concept lateral thinking. He wrote that "vertical thinking selects a pathway by excluding other pathways. Lateral thinking does not select but seeks to open up other pathways" (1970, p. 39-40). The concept of lateral thinking provides an opportunity to generate new paths and provides additional and alternate options to explain the environment, to discover problems, and to generate approaches to overcome them. Lateral thinking also breaks paradigms and avoids specialized deafness by eliminating classifications and categories.

The characteristics of round table leaders allow them to facilitate ideas that are inconsistent with their own subjective beliefs, broadening their perspective and increasing their ability to cope with a complex environment.

Conclusion

Great military leaders must be more than brave and inspiring. The warrior ethos that elicits iconic views of heroic leadership must also include a post-heroic perspective that takes in the thoughts and ideas of others and expands the leader's ability to match the complexity in the environment. The interaction of open systems has always produced uncertainty, but globalization and advances in technology have significantly increased the pace and nature of change. Leaders facing these types of environments can easily find themselves outmatched. Traditional styles of leadership limit organizations to only what their leaders know and perceive. In complex environments, this can put their mission at risk, especially where these leaders and organizations fall victim to restricted thinking and strive to maintain the proven status quo. To address the openness and complexity in the environment, leaders must create openness and complexity in their own mental models as well. Round table leaders embrace the ideas, perspectives, and thoughts of those around them to increase the collective understanding of issues within the environment. Through the collaborative efforts of their team, leaders can create the mental complexity to adapt to complexity of their environment and remain relevant and successful.

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