Leadership in the Chaordic Age

Len Hjalmarson

Today’s church is in serious trouble. The crisis we see is a crisis in leadership, because leaders are often the first to resist change, fearing loss of position or influence. Where internal resistance is not an issue, time often is. Leaders cease being learners not only because they fear change, but because the pressure of leadership tends to create reaction more than reflection. Perhaps Canadian leadership guru Michael Fullan is right when he observes that, “the two greatest failures of leaders are indecisiveness in times of urgent need for action and dead certainty that they are right in times of complexity.”

Thankfully, our dualistic and hierarchical models of leadership are falling in favour of holistic and egalitarian models. The crisis is thus an opportunity to rediscover the vocation of the church as an authentic community, a living priesthood, a missional people in a foreign land. We have the opportunity to move from leadership cults, to leadership cultures; instead of lone rangers, we need meaning makers; instead of the Wiz we need Dorothy. Back in 2003 Reggie McNeal wrote,

The current church culture in NA is on life support. It is living off the work, money and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty five and older) or when the remaining three fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both...

In spite of emptying pews and the rapidly growing de-churched population, the old models are not falling without resistance. We don’t easily leave behind what we know, any more than we easily give up power. The problem of leadership “baggage” is acute because what was functional in one setting is dysfunctional in a new context. Complexity and net-worked reality conspire against hierarchical models where decisions flow down and information flows up. Bottlenecks spell a broken system, and organizations which don’t know how to learn cannot adapt, and become monuments to past glory.

A Leadership Crisis?

Ron Martoia was asked in an interview in 2003, “What do you see as the two biggest problems facing leaders in the emerging church?”

The first thing is lack of maps and few cartographers. Our modernist moorings, where being seminar junkies and bookaholics was rewarded with the right answers for our analytical questions, makes ministry in this emerging era very problematic. The fact is indigenous ministry will not tolerate book answers to our questions. And the maps may look very different from what we are used to.

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1 Michael Fullan, *The Six Secrets of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 16. Fullan observes that management theory, “... has four defects: it is constitutionally incapable of self-criticism; its terminology usually confuses rather than educates; it rarely rises above common sense; and it is faddish and bedeviled by contradictions.”


4 Kilpatrick, Falk and Johns. *Leadership for Dynamic Learning Communities* (University of Tasmania, 2002).
The second big issue is how to create more workable models of life change and transformation. We find the information revolution so sexy. But the reality is for all the information floating around in the church there seems to be a nearly inverse proportion of life change.5

We need maps to help us set direction; but who makes the maps? In our confusing time, the demand for answers is more intense than ever. As systems break down the anxiety rises dramatically. What once worked no longer works. The pressure is on for leaders to provide solutions.

Inevitably, the first response is to try harder, and search for a bigger hammer. Our models, rooted in the scientific revolution, are built around the application of power. But the Titanic would still have hit the iceberg at 30 knots instead of the 24 she was making. Once her hull was ripped open, more pumps would not have helped; her design allowed water over the bulkheads to move along compartment by compartment. All our thinking about the problem is within a single paradigm: knowledge is power. But what do we do when the linear cause and effect model becomes part of the problem? We need to work WITH the context rather than impose a solution. Margaret Wheatley writes, “Western practices attempt to dominate life; we want life to comply with human needs rather than working as partners. This disregard for life's dynamics is alarmingly evident in today's organizations. Leaders use control and imposition rather than self-organizing processes. They react to uncertainty and chaos by tightening already feeble controls, rather than engaging our best capacities in the dance.”6

The analogy of dance reminds us that the Trinity is also a model for leadership: mutuality, and participation.7 The “best capacities” of people are engaged when they participate: when they have a voice, when they are valued as partners, and when they see that their work has meaning. These qualities of participation can help us to a new practice of leadership based on the nature of the Body of Christ.

The Whole or the Parts?

In a paper in 2002, Richard Ascough notes that Paul avoided hierarchical, externally imposed models of leadership in favor of promoting self-organizing, self-governing, adaptive groups. He comments that, “Paul's leadership style could thus be characterized as involving what modern scientists call 'chaos theory.'” Chaos theory is a biological model that sees an organization as a living, self-organizing web of relationships.8

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5 Ron Martoiia. Interview at Ginkworld.net, 2003. Notice that this begs an epistemology, which is the single largest shift in the move from modernity to postmodernity. We are still discovering just how powerful the imagination is in the process of knowing and learning.


7 See my other paper, “The Trinitarian Nature of Leadership.” The term “perichoresis” pictures a dance.

“...We are convinced that the new leadership we need to cultivate isn’t primarily about more knowledge and content; it’s about how you form learning communities that are apprenticed into new skills and habits...”

Alan Roxburgh

What if leadership has more to do with finding meaning than setting direction? In an increasingly complex world, setting a direction can get you killed. Where once we could forecast the future based on a series of measurements, and assumption of a constant rate of change, we live in a time when change has become non-linear, and we control only the smallest factors. The danger of imposing the old models on complex problems has been amply demonstrated in American foreign policy. Joshua Cooper Ramo writes,

Louis Halle, an American diplomat and strategist of the 1950’s, once observed that foreign policy is made not in reaction to the world but in reaction to an image of the world in the minds of the people making decisions. ‘In the degree that the image is false, actually and philosophically, no technician, however proficient, can make the policy that is based on it sound.’

The image of the world that western leaders work with may never have represented reality very well: yet the model “worked” in an industrial, linear, and pre-networked context. But that world only exists in isolated pockets today, and no longer represents the reality for most of us in the West. So what difference does it make?

In the latter half of The Age of the Unthinkable, the author points to the discoveries of social researcher Richard Nisbett. Nisbett discovered that the world views of east and west are distinctive: in the east change is seen as a constant. In the West we lean toward determinism, even where we interpret it through a religious lens (God upholds the Universe and creates laws which make interactions predictable). Moreover, and related, in the east the emphasis is on context, a relational and more-or-less gestalt approach to reality. In the West, we look at the whole through the parts. We are analytical in our approach to knowing. This is mostly a result of our interest in knowledge as power. We stress rational and propositional knowledge: knowledge independent of context. The difference this makes in a complex and inter-connected world was demonstrated by Nisbett in a simple test.

The problem was designed to measure the focal interest of eastern and western graduate students. A display was set up where thirty-six images flashed, changing every thirty seconds, with an eye-tracker recording where the subject looked. Western students immediately looked at the foreground object — the horse or tiger, for example. And once they spotted the central image they spent the bulk of the time looking right at...
it. Chinese students, by contrast, looked at the environment first, probing the complex background of forest or field. They did look at the focal object, but for far less time than the American students.\textsuperscript{13}

When the data was sorted, the researchers first thought there must be an error. From the point of view of westerners, it was as if the eastern students were more interested in the wallet than in the family photo. The Americans could easily recall specific objects they had seen: a car, a dolphin, a horse. The Chinese often forgot the object they had seen, but could describe the “backgrounds” in detail.

The conclusion: those immersed in the eastern world much more quickly perceive the meaning of relationships. They are far more sensitive to context, and they will thrive in this connected world in ways that Enlightenment westerners will not. The current shift to connected and networked reality, and the primacy of relationships and contexts, will remain a huge challenge for those of us raised in the analog world.

**Leadership and Strange Attractors**

To the western mind, “the details” smacks of chaos. We are less interested in the connections than in the function, so we ask pragmatic questions. Our goal is to solve the problem.\textsuperscript{14} But we can learn from the world of quantum physics. In QM, chaos is the norm, and instead of certainty there are probabilities. How do we lead in a world of uncertainty, and complex adaptive change? Enter the “strange attractors.”

Strange attractors, in the world of physics cause order to emerge from apparent chaos. “Strange attractors” are like guiding principles, or values, and have more impact on individual behavior than good management. Instead of setting direction, we could clarify purpose. When purpose is clear, focus becomes possible, and management can shift to collaboration and empowerment.

Purpose and principle, clearly understood and articulated, and commonly shared, are the genetic code of any healthy organization. To the degree that you hold purpose and principles in common among you, you can dispense with command and control. People will know how to behave in accordance with them, and they will do it in thousands of unimaginable, creative ways. The organization will become a vital, living set of beliefs.\textsuperscript{15}

Chaordic leaders resist taking control because they know that focus is more important than individual behaviors. Taking control would mean replacing individual initiative, and re-centralizing authority, thus impeding the development of a leadership culture. Control and certainty have both been greatly over-rated. In *The Spider and the Starfish*\textsuperscript{16} Brafman and Beckstrom explored the power of “leaderless” networks. And certainty is not a value advocated in Scripture, but rather faith, and dependence on the movement of the Spirit, a dynamic which is never in the control of the church.\textsuperscript{17}
If our goal is to be in control, we needn’t worry about the growth of community; a hierarchy will do. If our goal is to build a congregation, we only need a few leaders, who will soon burn out with the impossible task of holding it together. But if our goal is a leadership culture, something like a community on mission, we need a new vision of leadership. What is the leadership task in a de-centered network? Leaders need to know how to support, as leadership coach Margaret Wheatley put it,

“... self-organizing responses. People do not need the intricate directions, time lines, plans, and organization charts that we thought we had to give them. These are not how people accomplish good work; they are what impede contributions. But people do need a lot from their leaders. They need information, access, resources, trust, and follow-through. Leaders are necessary to foster experimentation, to help create connections across the organization, to feed the system with rich information from multiple sources—all while helping everyone stay clear on what we agreed we wanted to accomplish and who we wanted to be.”

If our goal is to grow communities and to empower ministry and life, we dare not build a corporate culture or settle for a congregation. We dare not be the savior or the one with all the answers, or the one who is indispensable, replacing the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, chaordic leaders don’t mind fluid structures and are comfortable with chaos because they are more interested in finding meaning than in building structures or establishing order. Margaret Wheatley comments that “We instinctively reach out to leaders who work with us in creating meaning.”

Wilfred Drath and Charles Paulus pursued this direction in a monograph titled “Making Common Sense.” They argue that the old understanding of leadership rested on a set of assumptions about human nature and motivation. The dominance-cum-social-influence view assumes that humans are naturally at rest and that they need a motivation force to get them going. The meaning-making view assumes that people are naturally in motion, always doing something, and that they need, rather than motivation to act, frameworks within which their actions make sense.

From this theory appears an important difference and a powerful advantage. When we no longer see dominance and social influence as the basic activities of leadership, we no longer think of people in terms of leaders and followers. Instead, we can think of leadership as a process in which an entire community is engaged. This enables us to disentangle power and authority from leadership. Authority is a tool for making sense of things, but so are other human tools such as values and work systems.

Drath and Paulus have helped me make sense of my own world; I am not a high “D.” I would rather collaborate and consult, a communal style that is typically assigned to females over males. Yet I find that people listen to me and come to me for advice. As a result I function as a mentor, and rather than offering answers I have found that my role is to engage in honest dialogue and reflection with them and help them see their commitments and tasks from a new perspective. This ability to name and interpret life is a poetic function: an essential quality of discovery and growth, which in turn is at the heart of making meaning.

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"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."

— John Quincey Adams

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Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power, but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those who are led.

Gary Hamel

Too often our leadership models, so heavily tied up with views of authority toward efficiency and productivity, have resulted in our missing the context and essence of leadership. We focused on what we could quantify and became like the captain of the ocean liner who carefully steered around the iceberg and hit it, forgetting that what we don't know and can't control makes up the greater part of the unseen reality. Working with the unseen elements of growth requires intimate connection (community) and comfort with process and paradox. Our hope to recover the dynamic of a missional movement requires us to move beyond hierarchies to something like distributed leadership: a functional flat priesthood in the world.21

**Dorothy vs The Wiz**

Brian McLaren in an article titled, “Dorothy on Leadership,” (Rev. Magazine, Nov/Dec 2000) challenges the modern assumptions of leadership and the successful pastor as CEO, alpha male, and corporate hero. McLaren describes his own attempt to emulate the Hybels, Warrens, and Maxwells of the world, and his discovery that in fact size XXL didn’t fit him, just as Saul’s armor wasn’t designed to fit David.

More to the point, McLaren saw a cultural clash; the models that worked in the modern church no longer function in the postmodern church. Perhaps they were never very good models anyway.

McLaren muses that as he considered the problem a scene in “The Wizard of Oz” came to mind. The scene is when little Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal that the great Wizard of Oz is a very average guy hiding behind an imposing image. The 1940’s world was a world immersed in modernity, a world that unleashed the A-bomb and defeated Nazi Germany: a world enamored with Superman and the Lone Ranger, confident in its own ability and in the promises of science to solve all our problems. Yet the film exposes the Wizard as a fraud, expressing a relentless doubt and displaying an early pang of discontent with its dominant model of larger-than-life leadership. Brian wondered what image of leadership would replace the great Wizard.

The answer appeared in the next scene. It wasn’t the lion, the scarecrow, or the tin man. It was Dorothy!

At first glance, Dorothy is all wrong as a model of leadership. She is the wrong gender (female) and the wrong age (young). Rather than being a person with all the answers, who knows what’s up and where to go and what’s what, she is herself lost, a seeker, often bewildered, and vulnerable. These characteristics would disqualify her from modern leadership. But they serve as her best credentials for a new style of leadership.22

McLaren identifies ten Wizardly characteristics of modern church leadership, like “bible analyst” and “broadcaster” and “problem-solver” and “knower.” He compares Dorothy to this picture and the result is completely different. Dorothy is a bit disoriented, and she gathers other needy people in the belief that all their needs can be fulfilled in a common quest. Dorothy doesn’t have all the answers and can’t solve all the problems, but she believes that somehow they can journey forward together. McLaren contrasts the characteristics of this post-Wiz leadership to the modern mode.

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21 For a helpful glimpse of this movement see Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* and Addision, *Movements That Change the World.*

One leadership type that McLaren does not list is the poet. Alan Roxburgh, in *The Sky is Falling*, sees a needed leadership type in the poet. Roxburgh argues that poets had little value in the churches of modernity. In modernity we sought to define problems toward a solution. But poets don’t bring solutions; rather they bring questions that invite dialogue. Poets are non-utilitarian. They don’t accept the view of a congregation as a tool for impacting the world. Rather, they see the congregation as the location of God’s work of redemption and the mysterious presence of the future kingdom.

The poet helps people make sense of their experiences. Poets remove the veil and give language to what people are experiencing. “The poet listens to the rhythms and meanings occurring beneath the surface.”

The leadership of poets is not expressed in a modern manner. Poets “are not so much advice-givers as image and metaphor framers... What churches need are not more entrepreneurial leaders with wonderful plans for their congregation’s life, but poets with the imagination and gifting to cultivate environments within which people might again understand how their traditional narratives apply to them today.”

**Authority and Service**

> Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus,
> Who, being in the form of God,
> did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.

-- Phil.2:5-7

The empowerment of the early Christians by the Spirit of God sounded the death knell of the old priesthood. Suddenly all God’s people were directly connected to the Head, with unmediated access to God.

The rising generation reject authority in position in favor of authority in relationship. They do not buy into hierarchies, and they tend to respect authority only when it is earned. They don’t listen to leaders who are “over” but not “among.” This aligns with the NT teaching on mutual submission in the Body, and Jesus teaching that “the greatest among you must be the servant of all.” Dee Hock, the founder of VISA, writes that,

In the deepest sense, distinction between leaders and followers is meaningless. In every moment of life, we are simultaneously leading and following. There is never a time when our knowledge,
judgment and wisdom are not more useful and applicable than that of another. There is never a time when the knowledge, judgment and wisdom of another are not more useful and applicable than ours. At any time that "other" may be superior, subordinate, or peer.26

Where the modern church echoed Reformation doctrine on “the priesthood of believers,” cultural forces pushed us in practice toward a professional class.27 The priesthood remained, with a more friendly face, limiting participation to the few rather than equipping and releasing the many. As a consequence, the church as a whole has asked men and women to open their wallets and shut their mouths. Since the medium is the message, and large gatherings tend to be stages for the few, it’s no wonder that believers do not feel empowered to reach their world and instead defer to a special class of priest or missionary.

Younger leaders may admit that hierarchy grants the illusion of structural efficiency, but they recognize that the model is from the corporate and technological world. In the biological world (young leaders prefer the organic metaphors), life loves redundancy. Why not have fifty pastors in a community of two hundred adults?

Is leadership an ability, a relationship, or a dynamic and collaborative process? Our current understanding may not allow room for the new kinds of leadership rising around us.28 Peter Senge writes that, “Leadership is the capacity of the community to bring forth new realities; The leader is a designer (of the learning process), a steward (of the community vision and values) and a teacher (of the ability to learn and grow).”

Leaders like Senge are building on the concept of team leadership to look for more open models. Some postmodern leaders like the metaphor of air traffic controller (ATC). An ATC doesn’t fly the airplane, he only establishes safe paths for flight and coordinates their interaction once airborne. The ATC is almost an invisible part of the process, but his or her role is essential in enabling the flight. Others prefer the metaphor of symphony conductor.

A good conductor does not merely tell everyone what to do; rather he helps everyone to hear what is so. For this he is not primarily a telling but a listening individual: even while the orchestra is performing loudly he is listening inwardly to silent music. He is not so much commanding as he is obedient.

The conductor conducts by being conducted. He first hears, feels, loses himself in the silent music; then when he knows what it is he finds a way to help others hear it too. He knows that music is not made people playing instruments, but rather by music playing people.29

Recently the buzzword has been teamwork. Unfortunately, we tend to understand teams in a secular corporate sense: a team is a group of people coordinated by a competent manager. Larry Crabb argues that we have a choice to make: we can be managers or mystics.

**Team or Community?**

_I always remember the regent's axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind._30

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30 Nelson Mandela in his autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom*.
A team is not the same as a community. When Ephesians 4 gifting is functioning in a community environment, it can be very difficult to tell who is leading. Leaders may be invisible, encouraging, empowering, and equipping as they work alongside others sharing similar tasks.

There are two types of ministry environment. In one environment a team or teams are formed to assist leaders to develop and implement their vision (purpose). In the second environment a community is formed around a shared sense of passion (belonging). In the team environment success is understood as empowering the group to reach agreed goals. In the community environment success is understood as empowering individuals to belong and to reach their creative potential.

In the team environment roles tend to be set in concrete and leaders are indispensable. In the community environment leaders may be invisible, and leadership roles and functions are often shared. At different times in the life of the community, depending on need and context and the empowerment of the Spirit, various ones take the lead depending on their competencies, deferring to the leading of the Lord. The key qualities in this context are those of Dorothy: humility and discernment.

*But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise,*  
*And God has chosen the weak things of the world*  
*To shame the things which are strong.*

1 Cor. 1:27-28

Where belonging and shared purpose are the center, vision is not imposed from above, nor does it only rise from below. Leaders can only lead by learning to follow. Vision rises in the Body from a mysterious synergy of context, Spirit, and gifts. The Spirit releases vision to the Body, often through the initiative of distributed and decentralized leaders. This is a long way from the cliché of leadership as vision, which was often another way for positional leaders to exercise dominance and achieve alpha status. Len Sweet recalls that Governor Gray Davis of California—subsequently recalled—was toast the minute he said, early in his term, that the state legislature’s job was to “implement my vision.” When leadership development is disfigured as “the vision thing,” we are “teaching a dysfunctional system to leaders whose success will hinge on their ability to dismantle the very thing they’ve been taught.”

**Conclusion**

Chaordic leaders are comfortable with paradox, and they lead by building consensus. Chaordic leaders empower the vision of all God’s people and leverage the power of networks, building a leadership culture. They are boundary-crossers and poets, who renew missional imagination and cultivate environments where people discover their callings in the world. The authority of chaordic leaders rises not from their position, but from service.

Whether you see leadership rooted in people or process, an individual gift or a communal calling, leadership remains a key tool for sense-making, and sense-making is the great need in a world where foundations are crumbling, and grand narratives are fragmenting in favor of local ones.

Rather than seeing the problem, let’s recognize the opportunity. The rising generation want to participate; they have a contribution to make and they have unique voices. They want to see the world change for the better, and they want to understand why certain actions make sense. They want to be part of a big story,

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31 JR Woodward describes the functioning of five-fold gifting as “polycentric leadership.” *Creating a Missional Culture* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2012)


33 Ibid., 17.
God’s work of redemption in healing creation and setting all things to rights. They want authentic church, where people get real with each other, and to belong to a people who make a difference.

Let’s help them discover their place in God’s kingdom!

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BIO

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