



Leaders as Middles

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In the American culture we think of leaders standing apart. The word “leader” stimulates powerful associations: the loneliness of the leader, the awesome responsibilities of the leader, JFK in the window at the White House the night of the Cuban missile crisis, Lee Iacocca single-handedly turning Chrysler around, Jack Welch revitalizing GE. Increasingly these images of the leader alone, the leader at the top, are at variance with the experience of leaders who feel in the middle, hemmed in, beset, besieged, crowded with people and forces impinging on their prerogatives or space to lead. Reich’s recent book (1997), *Locked in the Cabinet*, eloquently presents this point of view with an epiphanous moment in a meeting in which all his advisers are telling him that he must support a federal regulator, who had ruled that a 14-year-old bat boy was violating labor laws. He suddenly realizes that he is the boss, that he can decide this his way. Reich is honest enough to show that these moments are few and far between. The more painful truth is that leaders are deeply “in the middle” even as they occupy the pinnacles of organizations.

Oshry (1988) has been one of the foremost students of “middles.” He describes middleness as being in between a higher and lower group in terms of status or power. He has conceptualized four conditions or positions that people can occupy in any system, from a small informal group to a huge firm.

- Topness—That condition in which we have overall responsibility for a system or piece of a system, in which we shape the rules and allocation of resources.
- Middleness—That condition in which we are caught between the worlds of others, pushed, pulled and torn by their conflicting perspectives, priorities and demands.
- Bottomness—That condition in which we feel constrained by the system rules and in which we feel we have low or no control over the resources we need or want.
- Customer—That condition in which we feel outside of the organization or unit, often feeling neglected or not understood as we make our needs or wants known.

Although these positions can be easily mapped onto the layers in a formal hierarchy (CEO as top, middle managers as middles, front-line workers as bottoms), the argument is that every role experiences all of these positions in different proportions. The argument of this paper is that leaders are increasingly experiencing themselves as middles and that the behavioral implications are different for those in that position. Hence a developmental challenge for leaders is to know when they are in a “middle” position and access the appropriate skills.

Leaders are in the middle in three senses:

- *Organizationally*. In the hierarchy leaders always have some accountability structure above them (be it a board, a constituency, some governance mechanism or their stockholders or citizens). Hence they are between this “boss” and the rest of the organization.

- *Historically in time.* Leaders are always preceded by predecessors or by shaping historical forces and followed by successors.
- *In the value chain.* In a process sense any organization inevitably takes up its niche (products and services) in the middle of some larger service system or value chain. The leader has to attend to what comes “before” and “after” his or her organization.

By acknowledging their middleness in each of these three dimensions, leaders more appropriately direct their organizations. By coming to terms with the limits of their leadership, they paradoxically gain leverage.

Leaders as Middles in a Hierarchy

People who have just been appointed or won leadership positions are often overly attentive to subordinates and underattentive to their boss—the various accountability mechanisms that are above them. Peter Drucker (1986) has written insightfully that all leaders need, in his terms, to “manage the boss” and “to make the boss as effective and achieving as possible.” Many leaders do not put enough time in understanding and working upward. For example, a dean of a medical school is a powerful local figure and is rarely experienced as a follower in the larger university context. Therefore, there is an asymmetric saliency of their downward (strong) and upward (weak) reporting relationships. Furthermore followers collude with this biased focus. Followers often want to believe that the leaders are powerful and capable of gratifying their needs and wishes. Faculty over estimate the dean’s power as boss and underestimate the dean as a follower relative to the provost and to the president because that makes life simpler in their inner world of holding the dean accountable whether he or she supports their agenda.

It is striking how leaders like to oscillate between their sense of their topness in Oshry’s sense of the word (1989) and their ability to connect with and lionize the front-line worker who does the core task. They are less able to identify emotionally and connect with their own middle managers. In one micro-electronics factory where we were working with first-line supervisors, they experienced loss of respect and contempt for their role. Their leaders saw them as bureaucrats and a barrier. When one middle manager wanted to have top management take his ideas seriously, he would either plant them with a worker that would tell the boss when he was “managing by walking around” or would send it with the worker to some joint council of workers and top managers where it had the potential to be heard.

Scott Adams’s (1996) work in the Dilbert cartoon series exemplifies the empathic break between middles and tops. One can read the cartoons as the middles’ revenge on tops whom middles think have completely lost any emotional connection to what organizational life is like. It brings to mind Paul Fussell’s (1988, p. 15) characterization of the chateau generals in World War I, safely behind the trenches, making “errors occasioned by remoteness from experience.” As middles experience tops as out of touch completely with their world, they

then reciprocate by discounting the burdens of leadership and the value that the leader adds. The opposite position to the Adams's theme is captured by Max DuPree's (1989, p. 11) powerful phrase, "leaders don't inflict pain, they bear pain!"

Leaders should be particularly connected to middleness, their own and those of middle managers because in the middle, policy meets operations. The middle does not have the clarity and traction of the front-line task nor does it have the abstraction and the symbolic qualities of the senior leadership tasks. However without effective middles there is no drive train from the bridge to the engine room.

Middleness in Time

Leader's narratives excessively talk about beginnings, as if they entered a blank slate. Sarason (1976) has written about this obliteration of the relevant dynamics "before the beginning" that inevitably shape a leader's tenure. Leaders are often disproportionately attentive to what happens on their watch versus the longer view of what kind of legacy and shadows they will in turn cast forward. One of the imperatives for effective leadership is embracing this historical middleness. One owes debts to people shaping forces and traits that were present before one's arrival. One has to acknowledge that future leaders will see your contributions in both positive and negative ways. Leaders need to be time travelers—going back into the past, scouting the future—to act in the present. (Gilmore and Shea, 1997).

No one has conceptualized this sense of living simultaneously in the past, in the present and in the future as powerfully as Marguerite Yourcenar (1963, p. 167) in her brilliant memoirs of Hadrian. She writes:

Even in my innovations I liked to feel that I was above all, a continuator ... I looked for example even to those twelve Caesars so mistreated by Suetonius: the clear-sightedness of Tiberius, without his harshness; the learning of Claudius, without his weakness ... It devolved upon me, to choose hereafter from among their acts what should be continued, consolidating the best things, correcting the worst, until the day when other men, either more or less qualified than I, but charged with equal responsibility, would undertake to review my acts likewise.

Hadrian conceptualizes the leader's task as joining with positive features of one's predecessors, pulling those forward, humbled by the awareness that future leaders will at some future date be looking back on their acts and similarly having to render judgments on their actions.

In her writings about stewardship from a board and governance perspective, Regina Hertzlinger (1994) has written about inter-generational equity as one of the issues that board members as leaders (in the middle between the present

generation and the future generation) need to pay attention to. How have the finances of the organization been constructed with respect to delivering value to current vs. future beneficiaries? Is the organization eating its seedcorn or making investments that will pay off in a longer time frame than the particular tenure of one leader?

Chess offers an analogy that powerfully captures this sense of middleness in time and suggests some strategic principles for guiding action in the middle. Aron Katsenelinboigen (1989, pp. 100 – 179) has written about the evolution of chess strategy and the reconceptionalization of the middle game. Because of its phenomenal complexity, no optimal, linear path exists from patterned openings to a better understood end games. Katsenelinboigen argues that the guiding principle for sophisticated chess since the turn of the century has been this notion of positional development or making what he calls “robust” moves. These are moves that create latent capacity for a variety of unknown alternative futures.

This suggests that in the middle, leaders need to think about the enhancement of capability and adaptiveness both in terms of what assets are preserved and their suitability for a variety of future “end games.” By embracing the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of middleness as opposed to fighting it, leaders can develop valued competencies and capabilities that will serve the future of the organization in general ways.

Middleness in the Value Chain

One of the tasks of a leader is to set the boundaries of an organization or to shape the niches within an overall value chain, what Galbraith (1993) has termed its “center of gravity.” This sense of middleness has this leader attending to the relative attention he or she pays to “before” and “after” the services of one’s organization. In this frame of middleness the leader very much sits on the boundary between the enterprise, its supplies and its customers.

Early in his tenure Gerstner conducted a retreat at IBM with 100 chief information officers of IBM’s top customers without the enormous layers between those customers and himself as CEO. He embraced his middleness between the assets that he was stewarding and deploying within the organization and the needs, values and performance specifications of the market place or his customers. Again leaders who can embrace that middleness are more likely to be effective and to have their authority experienced by others inside their organization as legitimately flowing from marketplace imperatives rather than as fads articulated by the leader.

Summary

In summary, what I am suggesting is that leaders increasingly need to push back against the myths and dynamics that set them apart from their organization, that put them on top, on a pedestal. Rather they need to embrace what Oshry, (1989) has termed middleness and what I argue has three dimensions:

- Middleness in the sense of acknowledging superior bosses and feeling in between those higher sources of authority and the rest of the organization that reports to the leader.
- Middleness as in historical time, attending to one's predecessors and successors.
- Middleness in the sense of between activities that precede your organization and activities that follow.

Middle power is integrative, making connections and deriving intelligence from seeing patterns. This leads to paradoxical advice that leaders even as they feel beleaguered, torn apart and overloaded need to stay open, take in *more* intelligence or *more* relationships until there starts to be some larger gestalt that makes sense of all of the information. This stance needs to be enacted in the hierarchy, in time and in the process flow.

Middle power is more social than individual. It is the ability to stay connected and think with a number of colleagues and put together a larger pattern that any one person is capable of seeing.

This is best exemplified by some of the writing and studying that has been done of cognitive complexity and cognitive carrying capacity. If one takes a chessboard and randomly puts pieces on the board, an expert and novice are not significantly different in their ability to recreate the board after seeing it for a very brief amount of time. However, if the board is in a genuine middle game of chess, the expert can accurately recreate the board having only seen it for a second and the amateur is very poor at it.

This confirms the wisdom of Kurt Lewin's famous dictum that "nothing is as practical as a good theory." A leader, by having a theory or working hypothesis about some emergent pattern or emergent shift, can more effectively guide the organization.

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