

CREATING LEADERFUL ORGANIZATIONS

A Few Underlying Assumptions:

- The only circumstances people fully understand are those that they have experienced themselves and the only ideas they fully grasp are those they have participated in formulating.
- The capacity to lead is common and broadly distributed in society.
- People are motivated by self-interest and the broader good.
- There are no “right” answers: good decisions demand engagement of stakeholders to develop mutually acceptable answers.
- If power is exercised mutually rather than unilaterally, the total amount of control in the system increases, as does the system’s effectiveness.
- People aren’t resistant to change, they are resistant to loss of the known and fear of the unknown.
- *Advocacy* and *management* are skills, not forms of leadership. They are only helpful if engaged in a way that serves the whole. (ex. Advocating in a way that doesn’t pit one group against another and managing only those aspects of organizational life that need managing- technical vs. adaptive).
- Conflict is a natural and desired feature of human systems.

Individual behaviors that contribute to a leaderful organization:

- Focus on the “being”/process as much as on the “doing”/content (i.e., relational productivity). And work on building the capacity to facilitate group processes and dynamics.
- Really listen to each other. Wynton Marsalis observed that in playing music, as in conversation, the worst people converse with are those who, “while you are talking, they are thinking about what they are going to tell you next, instead of listening to what you’re saying.”
- Stand still while running- take time to understand the current reality.
- Actively seek out ways of implementing and experimenting with each other’s ideas (a natural reaction to deep listening).
- Don’t let our fear of the things that make us vulnerable motivate our actions. Turn our fear of the unknown into a love of adventure.

- Engage with each other in a non-judgmental way- regardless of power and affiliation differentials.
- Regularly voice our respect and appreciation for each other so that it is widely heard and felt (“the best of me meets the best of you”)
- Don’t be quick to blame others for the problems we encounter. Always look at how are we contributing to the problem ourselves.
- Concerns about sharing power often arise from the fact that people don’t have a history of working together and thus do not know much about each others’ intentions, competence, and reliability. Trust only builds with time. In the meantime, act with empathy. Think in win-win terms rather than seeing our interests in conflict with those of others.
- Encourage each other to stretch into new leadership behaviours (supporting continual self-improvement)
- Work with and learn from diversity. Creativity and innovation have the best chance to emerge precisely at the point of the greatest tension and apparent irreconcilable differences. Instead of smoothing them over, engage with them. These creative tensions give birth to new ways of thinking and working (“a radical way of holding on to the status quo”). Many of us value the same things, but we live out our values in different ways. Understanding the alignment of values creates a congruence that holds our differences.
- Communicate directly and honestly with each other, addressing issues head on instead of denying or trying to minimize them.
- Consistently remind ourselves and each other of the core values and vision that fundamentally bind us.
- Phrase positions as interests (this helps to ground and humanize the issue).
- Have faith – all work in complex systems needs to be guided by faith.
- Focus on bringing out the best in each other and encouraging/supporting each other’s participation. It’s about being your best not the best.
- Alternate between going solo and supporting. Supporting means stepping back, not shrinking inward.

Group behaviors that contribute to a leaderful organization:

- Strike a balance between technical (efficiency-focused) and adaptive (creative-focused) approaches to navigating organizational life. Issues that involve a higher degree of uncertainty and disagreement call for a more adaptive/self-organizing approach.
- Encourage experimentation and then gradually move to what is working at its best (both in terms of content and process). Like a group of jazz musicians, discover the future that our actions create as it unfolds. With such an approach indicators of change become more important than outcomes. In biology, the adaptability of a species depends on the multiplicity of experiments.
- Pair experimentation up with open and honest reflection.
- Broadly distribute organizational responsibilities.

- Make decisions by consensus, with a fall back decision-making process defined ahead of time (ex. need 80% of the vote to go to majority vote on an issue).
- Frame issues in an open-ended way (i.e., the result is not predetermined). Ex. Best city to raise a child.
- Once you've gained enough stability, strategically invite "unusual voices" (those outside of the org, in the margins, with different views) into organizational conversations and activities.
- Work together to build a strong and inspiring shared sense of collective purpose (core values and vision).
- Let directions within the organization's shared vision arise from multiple actions at the fringes of the organization.
- Create communication mechanisms that ensure wide and multi-directional information flow and connectivity between the different parts of the organization. Without this much of the value-added of the collaborative is lost. Not all types of communication mechanisms work equally well when there are differences in communication styles. People may have sharply diverging expectations of timing and extent of communication, what types of information should be conveyed, and even the language employed. Communication must be appropriately structured to bridge these cultural gaps. This may require redundant channels, multiple forums, or novel media.
- Embrace rather than battle against the "shadow system"- the informal conversations and ways of doing things.
- Have a shared orientation toward minimal structures/principles that allow maximum flexibility (vs. elaborate systems, policies, procedures that hamper flexibility)
- Integrate collaborative competencies into routine performance feedback processes.
- Create moments/spaces of just hanging out together.
- Celebrate achievements.
- Create a network of simple modules that operate independently and synergistically, making localized decisions with the whole and the interconnectivity of all of the parts in mind. This is hard to do- we have to continually remind each other to look beyond individual/small group interests to the needs and priorities of the community a whole. Goal: make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.
- Seek maximum appropriate involvement in tasks and decisions.
- Name and engage with power dynamics. We often think that as soon as we collaborate power dynamics will disappear. This is not true.
- Change the language we use to help us shift the way we think and work (ex. Hub vs. committee)
- Leadership is about identifying the precious dimensions of our past that make the pains of change worth enduring.

POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS OF TAMARACK RETREAT FOR EMERGING LEADER LEARNING CIRCLE

- Frame leadership as collaborative
- Engage alumni of ED learning circle in design and process and hold a parallel reunion.
- Surprises at each break keeps it fun.
- Incorporate alternative approaches to change- ex. tai chi, yoga. It got us moving and got us thinking about change differently.
- Use best-self exercise. “Improving areas of weakness will get you to average...building on your special talents begets excellence” (Buckingham & Clifton). There is a universal over-emphasis on weakness and deficit in most work settings. When we receive both positive and negative feedback, we pay disproportionate attention to the negative. We remember negative feedback, but are more apt to act on positive feedback.
- Ask group to decide on “guiding principles” of group functioning (ex. respect for people and their levels of comfort with process, listening to understand, fairness and equal time, openness to different points of view and outcomes, commitment to be present.)
- To quickly process an issue, give people a few minutes to think about it on their own → ask them to pair up and share with one other person for 5-10 min each.
- Use IMPM/McConnell approach to dealing with someone’s specific issue.
- Create a learning community- learning doesn’t happen within a confined period of time. Everyone is a student and a teacher.
- Do quick evaluations periodically so that the experience can be improved along the way- instead of waiting until the end.
- Have people work in triads- 2 people speaking to each other. One person drawing the other out for 15 minutes (we only got 5 at that was way too short!) and the 3rd person listening, timekeeping and then only at the end giving feedback on what they heard.
- Give examples of yourself (facilitator) when helping people understand how to do the best-self analysis. It gives the work a real human feel.