



ENDING THE CYCLE OF LEADERSHIP MISTRUST

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current lack of public confidence in the leaders of private, public and civic organizations. While some authors suggest this may be remedied by those leaders making stronger efforts to appear more trustworthy, this paper argues that the lack of trust is the product of an organizational performance gap that is produced in the distributed governance environments in which leaders operate. The paper argues that to adequately address the issue of leadership mistrust, organizations must first close that gap by putting aside assumptions that leaders are 'in-charge' and adopting stewardship behaviours and mechanisms for collaboration that can address the social traps and free riding tendencies that emerge amongst groups of cooperating partners and stakeholders.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent article entitled “Trust us on this”, Robert Sibley (2009) wrote about the importance of recognizing the overall, system-wide lack of public trust that has emerged as a distinguishing and worrisome feature of the current period of economic slowdown. However, in attempting to map a way forward, Sibley’s analysis missed the mark.

Sibley suggested that in going into this recession, today’s leaders of private, public and not-for-profit organizations do not command the same degree of public confidence that past leaders have enjoyed, and consequently the climb out of recession is likely to be more difficult and fragile. Just think, for instance, of the shocks that have been piled upon the citizens of Detroit one after the other: they were devastated by the dual bankruptcies of GM and Chrysler; the collapse of the local housing market; the perjury and sex scandal that saw Detroit’s mayor removed from office; and the failure of the city’s Board of Education. Since Detroit does not have a special monopoly on ineffectual leaders, it is safe to assume we are all at risk of a similar fate.

In Detroit, as elsewhere in North America, leadership confidence, which has already been at record low levels, is being battered on almost a daily basis. Somewhat reflecting this trend, President Obama’s job approval rating has plummeted from a 52 week high of 69% to just over 40 % according to a recent Gallup poll (September 2010). The question for many citizens is to

whom should they turn? Who will reward them when they are willing to invest their trust in leaders?

“The breakdown in trust in recent decades has been, in part at least, the consequence of a loss of confidence in society's leaders, whether politicians or, more recently, chief executive officers” (Sibley 2009). “If so, any restoration of trust requires trustworthy leaders who can act as role models.”

While this issue is important, I do not believe that trust is the basic problem – merely a side effect of a much deeper dilemma. Nor do I believe that making leaders appear more trustworthy will have much impact on the effectiveness of their performance, which is ultimately the basis of public confidence. It is not as Sibley suggests that “we can recover our lost trust when we, politicians and plumbers, financiers and filing clerks, act in a trustworthy manner.” As I see it, the problem is our society’s misplaced and deeply ingrained assumption that *someone must be ‘in-charge’*.

This is an assumption that even corporate icons question, as Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, did recently when he commented to the *Financial Times* on the success of his predecessor, management idol Jack Welch. Immelt said that, “anyone could have run GE and done well in the 1990s. A *dog* could have run GE.”(Guerrera, 2009, italics added) Why? Because there were so many good people in the middle of the organization that did the actual job of running and coordinating the company for him. Being in-charge was irrelevant. It was essentially a figurehead position. A decade later, GE’s coordination challenge is even greater and more global than ever and the CEO has even less control over his organization’s fate.

THE ROOT OF MISTRUST

The assumption that *someone must be in-charge* proliferates throughout our public, private and civic institutions and has been commented on by authors like Cleveland (2002) and Paquet (2008). It is an element of faith in our management mythology that periodically a white knight will swoop in to restructure and set right the great ship of organization. The current crises of leader confidence challenges this view, however, because it exposes the lack of influence that CEOs actually have. Concern arises not from what we know leaders actually did or did not do but from the difference between a) our over inflated expectations of them that has been fuelled by our leader's over-hyped sense of importance; and b) our perceptions of their actual performance -- between what they promised to deliver and what we see their organizations providing. Because this *organizational performance gap* is large, leadership confidence is low regardless of how much influence leaders may claim to have on the performance of their organization. This has been underscored by a study of "superstar CEOs", which found that companies run by award winning executives consistently underperformed the market after their CEO's award (Fox, 2006a).

When things went well, as they did over the last decade, corporate and public sector leaders were quick to point out their importance and the impact of their wisdom and decisiveness and even quicker to claim their rewards. Now as fortunes fall, the chorus of leaders has changed its tune, suddenly claiming it's not them but the system that's been responsible all along. Having

previously been persuaded of their crucial importance, the incessant “corporate scandals and worldwide financial catastrophe shook the cult of the heroic CEO to its foundations” (Collingwood, 2009). When confronted by the hugely underwhelming performance of their organizations, the public is perplexed and sometimes angered by the appearance of evasion of responsibility. In reality they may be no more responsible today than they were yesterday (all the Bernie Madoffs aside). “CEOs can matter, but we all might be better off if they didn’t”, says Collingwood (2009), because their potential to invigorate an organization is much less than their potential to damage it.

Today’s recession is the consequence of multiple policy and market decisions taken in numerous places, by governments and businesses, and by many people who were generally well meaning in their intent. When combined, however, they created a house of cards which eventually collapsed in the fall of 2008 in a global cascade. It is often argued, mainly by the leaders themselves, that these unintended consequences are what put the recession beyond the ability of any individual leader to control. Consequently, they suggest, the public should be cautious about falling into a leadership blame game. Yet the corollary of this is that if our leaders didn’t get us into the mess, then they are equally incapable of getting us out. Therefore, not knowing the truth or falsehood of these contradictory claims, a more prudent path for the public should be to question not just individual leaders but also the assumptions and systems under which they have operated.

The presence of an *organizational performance gap* makes predicting the outcomes from interactions of institutions and their leaders increasingly unreliable, especially for outcomes that really matter to people. What is said and what is committed to can not be accepted at face value.

It is this lack of predictability that makes leaders ‘untrustworthy’ and subsequently discourages broader cooperation amongst or with them.

One could, for example, be a forest company partnering with the federal government to reduce green house gas emissions. As a company you meet your commonly agreed targets but then see that the government has not only failed to meet theirs but also failed to produce even a coherent strategy – as was the case with the Liberals in Canada between 2000 and 2006. Despite clear agreements among business and political leaders, the requisite partnership was not generated. As a company you might feel taken advantage of but as a citizen you’re likely to feel that your leaders, both private and public, have become untrustworthy and unresponsive. Why then would you be motivated to do the socially cooperative thing and buy a premium-priced hybrid car or install expensive solar panels when the big guys -- governments and corporations – aren’t cooperative. The situation fuels cynicism, suspicion, ennui and apathy.

What many authors consistently fail to note, is that the lack of public trust is not simply a matter of badly behaving leaders, but it is the product of a social culture that persistently encourages the fantasy that we are autonomous, rational actors. While that may be partly true, as human beings we stopped being purely autonomous, rational actors the moment we came out of the grasslands and forests to form groups, tribes and communities to *share* the burden of our survival and progress. As Robert Wright (2002) has written, the one discernable theme in human history is the story of our increasing degrees of cooperation and the development of a *non-zero sum* logic that underpins it. It is such a distinguishing feature of our species, that we might more accurately be called the “social man”, *homo congregatio*, than the more debatable “wise man”, *homo sapiens*.

As social actors, we live and work together often unconsciously cooperating in a complex web of mutual exchanges and obligations. Yet despite this, we continue to subscribe to organizational, social and political cultures that foster the values of independence and self-interest at the expense of all else. “Democracy ends here,” is the unwritten sign above the boss’ door. We have elevated the gospel of autocratic leadership in our organizations to the status of an incontestable, while simultaneously minimizing the values and practices of human association that bind people together in common cause and that ensure appropriate balances are struck between people, work and society.

Consequently, we continuously encounter what John Platt (1973) and Bo Rothstein (2005) have termed ‘social traps’, wherein rationally acting leaders fail, unsurprisingly, to produce cooperative results. What’s missing, and this is profoundly highlighted in today’s economic crisis, is our understanding of how to be together. While the global information economy has made us increasingly interdependent and knowledgeable of each other, our pursuit of self-interest has made us blind to the potential collective downsides of purely independent action. It is not by seizure or appropriation that economies prosper but by reciprocity and mutual exchange.

For the rational actor what does it matter if the financial system crashes tomorrow if he can make a million dollars today? Yet in today’s context, we are belatedly discovering that it does matter and it matters a lot to a lot of people. Relying too heavily on self-interest, our society remains stuck in an endless collective action problem (Heath, 2001), with its associated quandaries of cheating and shared resource depletion (technically referred to as the “prisoners’ dilemma” and the “tragedy of the commons” respectively) that continue unabated.

These tendencies exist because the requirement to work together creates incentives for *free-riding*. In other words, in situations where we need to work cooperatively we tend to defect, “let the other person do it”, rather than sharing in the costs and burdens ourselves. While the desire to minimize our contributions is absolutely in keeping with being rational actors, it is highly unproductive, even destructive, to expect something for nothing in a cooperative relationship or to take advantage of another’s cooperativeness (Wilson 2007).

It is this attitude of letting ‘someone else do it’ that underlies our acceptance of the idea that ‘someone is in-charge’. If the leader is in charge, then we don’t have to be. If someone else is willing to make decisions then we don’t have to. In the realm of interests that are shared and common, such thinking is a convenient way of shirking our collective responsibilities. To put it another way, it is a form of entitlement to put off a shared responsibility to others; ‘they’ somehow owe us for the work we’ve done, for the taxes we’ve paid, for the slight we’ve experienced, for the special-ness we feel we somehow embody, or for us just showing up.

Unfortunately, if *free-riding* becomes commonplace, the social ‘trap’ is that no one contributes to a common solution because everyone expects someone else to do it. This is what produces the ‘tragedy of the commons’ and it is exemplified in:

- ◆ corporate cultures that reward managers for short term stock market gains at the expense of long term vitality (Enron);
- ◆ electorates that rush to cut taxes and then complain of poor public services; and
- ◆ the inability of the global community to secure nation state commitments to help reduce GHG levels to avert further climate change.

These are major collective tragedies but they have been created by large numbers of *free riding* individuals -- not just leaders. They result from people, organizations and countries winning in the short term but losing in the long term and they are the epitome of a collective action failure. In the end, according to Adam Smith, even the invisible hand of the market is not sustainable without the stability and social cooperation afforded by good governance and a strong associational life (Smith, 2005) that reinforces our commitments to one another.

There is a bit of cognitive dissonance present in our expectations of leaders to act like altruists and saints even though we choose them for their hard-nosed success as rational actors. Having placed these rational actors in positions of authority where they have an almost irresistible temptation to look after themselves first, we then become shocked when they do so. It's like putting a drug addict in charge of a drug store. Enron, the Wall Street 'bailout parties' held in the fall of 2008 by companies like AIG, or the MP expense scandal that wreaked havoc on the UK Parliament in 2009, demonstrate how irresistible this temptation can be. But what can one reasonably expect of ordinary people when the reward for pursuing one's own interest is so great in comparison to working for the interests of others? The real question is not why so many leaders succumb to this temptation but why so many more do not!

In part because of this ubiquitous belief in rational acting, most people understandably hold that strangers are not cooperators, and so when entering into a situation of potential cooperation they do so with suspicion, if at all. If they do risk cooperation, then at the slightest hint of non-cooperation, they become uncooperative and self-serving seeking to gain advantage over others before they themselves can be taken advantage of. This is precisely the fragile state in which our economy finds itself today.

Getting out of this ‘trap’ is not easy. It requires a cultural shift to help people extricate themselves from the biases they hold about working with others (Heath, 2001). Within organizations, such shifts are often supported by changes in internal and external incentives that have the effect of either encouraging cooperation or discouraging non-cooperation.

Internal incentives tend to strengthen the bonds between people and their willingness to cooperate and may include:

- ◆ attitudinal changes to values such as fairness, unselfishness and reciprocity;
- ◆ changes in behavioral norms, such as the co-location of partners to reduce the us-them antagonisms;
- ◆ an acceptance of mutual ownership in both the current problem and its potential solutions;
- ◆ the application of social learning mechanisms, such as the encouragement of experimentation and the acceptance of error; and finally,
- ◆ changes that increase the level of moral contracting or other ethical promises, through things like joint public announcements.

Typically, education and social capital development are seen as the primary routes for improving these internal incentives.

On the other hand, external incentives are aimed at improving the perception of the benefits of cooperation and / or the costs of non-cooperation and may include:

- ◆ increasing the risks associated with defection (including the risk of being detected);
- ◆ increasing the positive gap between the benefits and costs of cooperation (including reducing the uncertainty of those benefits / costs); and

- ◆ changing the social rules or institutional conditions that may levy additional penalties for non-cooperation, further increasing its costs (including clear threats of sanction).

While it is true that external incentives often tend to focus on rules and punishments, other emphases are also possible, however.

For instance, the risk of detection and penalty can also be heightened by increasing the degree of informal monitoring (such as in the use of champions, brokers and facilitators); informal relationship building that promotes regular information exchanges; and strengthening inter-dependence through pooled funding or shared governance (Wilson, 2007). These relational devices not only contribute to social capital but they also have the effect of discouraging non-cooperation because they reduce the uncertainty associated with partner behaviours and they increase the risk of free-riders being detected (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002).

In recent years the demand for collaboration, partnership and other forms of cooperation has grown dramatically in direct response to the increasingly complex and chronic nature of society's problems including: healthcare, education, poverty, economic development, climate change and many others. In fact, it is difficult today to find any issue of significance that does not require the involvement of some combination of stakeholders: governments, businesses, educators and / or voluntary organizations.

However, when the leaders of these organizations come together in search of solutions and then proceed to act rationally, as they are often hired to do, then they do not produce the collective outcomes that people expect. One such example involving public and not-for-profit leaders in the Voluntary Sector Initiative was described by Hubbard (2002) in *Herding Cats*. The voluntary sector leaders were seen by public servants as subordinate, needy, and somehow

unworthy to be equal partners. Neither senior bureaucrats nor NFP leaders wanted a loss of control that cooperation would entail. And so since it was control or nothing, the VSI was dismantled, despite a clear awareness that neither could affect its intents without the other.

In fact, the rational acting among leaders can result in some completely irrational outcomes (Heath, 2001) – and even to the most irrational outcome of harming of oneself or one’s children, as seems likely on the climate change file. Jared Diamond (2005) has compellingly documented a historical record of societal collapse that results from this collective inability to resolve even recognized problems. In complex environments where the system of governance is highly distributed, the challenge of real collaboration will not met with a veneer of trustworthiness and transparency, as Sibley seems to suggest. Authentic collaboration will emerge only from a different and pragmatic set of skills that allow each partner or stakeholder to benefit from shared contributions to a common purpose. Trust then follows shared performance.

RESTORING TRUST

An appropriate response, therefore, to the current ‘lack of trust’ issue lies in closing the gap between the public’s expectations of its leaders as commanders and their required performance as collaborators. Given the limited degrees of freedom available to leaders to begin with, calls for more trustworthy leaders are really just empty rhetoric. Besides, framing the issue of declining trust as being a leadership issue simply continues the cycle of shirking collective responsibility among those responsible for performance. If it’s the leader’s problem, then it doesn’t have to be mine.

Fundamentally, trust is not the issue. I would argue that we are trusting just fine for the *organizational performance gap* we are experiencing. What is at fault is our assumption that we achieve social cooperation primarily through the acts of individual leaders, rather than through the willing contributions of so called followers. The hard truth of the matter is that no one is in-charge. The corollary of this, says Harland Cleveland (2002), is that *everyone is in-charge*.

In other words, it is not the scarcity of trustworthy leaders that is problematic, but the scarcity of people willing to act as leaders. Or better yet, it is the scarcity of people acting both as owners and stewards and who have learned the principles and practices of effectively working together. It is “our expectations [that] create the leaders we receive” says Block (1998). “They are the effect, we are the cause. High control bosses are created by our reluctance to care for the whole and assume the risks inherent in our own freedom”.

The definition of trust proposed by Fukuyama (1995) and endorsed by Sibley (2009) is too woolly and unhelpful. I suggest *trust is the subjective sense which we use to predict the behaviour of the world around us*. Such a definition draws on decades of work in the field of game theory and the writings of such people such as Axelrod, Rheingold, Ostrom and others. Trust is the complex synthesis of both subjective and objective inputs that inform us about possible futures. It provides us with a base level of certainty for acting into the future, which is, by definition, full of uncertainty and risk. Absent some degree of trust, we can only act for the moment. Our sense of trust is, therefore, one of our most important tools for guiding us forward into the future, for innovating, for evolving and generally for improving our lot together.

When this *sense of trust*, like our senses of balance, space, and homeostasis, is applied to people, it is informed by a variety of signals (mostly subjective) that bias our assessment of each other's future behaviour. "For example, person A may interpret signals from person B based on:

- ◆ A's history of direct experience with person B;
- ◆ A's knowledge of person B's prior history and reputation, including both objective reports and gossip;
- ◆ Third party reports from "trusted sources" on person B; and
- ◆ A's cultural preferences for altruism, fairness, equity, reciprocity, or morality" (Wilson 2007, 4; Heiner 2002).

The net of this is that A produces an opinion of how B might perform in the future. Initially A may trust B but as A's opinion is informed by B's actions, that trust will either be confirmed or modified. B will become perceived as reliable or not. This is what makes trust is so fragile. Once trust in someone is shown as unreliable, that experience becomes an ongoing data source for future estimates of uncertainty and unpredictability.

In the current context, our sense of trust in leaders and institutions seems to be functioning quite well. The incongruity of expectations and performance generates a sense that institutions and leaders are not predictable. Therefore, they are seen as unreliable and so are less likely to serve our interests as well as we would like. Consequently, the reciprocal response as amply demonstrated in game theory, is that we should begin acting more rationally and less cooperatively so as not to taken advantage of.

How do we end this cycle of leadership mistrust? Or more to the current requirement, how do we restore social confidence, in the leadership of our economy, our communities and our collective ability to move forward into the future?

The simple answer is to close the *organizational performance gap*. But to do so in an environment of increasingly distributed governance means emphasizing a very different set of leadership skills than those that are currently being promoted by most management gurus and business schools. What's needed are more of the familiar team skills -- facilitation, educating, networking, brokering, and conflict resolution. Block (1993) and Paquet (2008) even suggest an entirely different leadership language based on the notions of stewardship and service.

MOVING TO STEWARDSHIP

Good stewards are ultimately bridge builders and relationship managers. Their principal task is to help to sustain the commitment that each employee, partner or collaborator may have to the shared work. These are the self-effacing insiders identified by Jim Collins (2009) who put their companies ahead of themselves and focus on surrounding themselves with good people. In so doing, they nurture ongoing improvements in the organization by those same people. In contrast, "bad leaders", according to Jeffrey Pfeffer, "can make a huge negative difference – because they drive [good] people out" (Fox, 2006b).

As Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, describes (2008), a powerful leader is someone who does not appropriate power from others, but, "depends for his power on making other people powerful." While this description seems out of step with popular

concepts of modern leadership, it nonetheless is one of the simplest and most erudite definitions of stewardship. It also demonstrates the frequent confusion that arises between the two terms.

In as much as leaders are created by followers, stewards are created by owners. Making others powerful is not something that can be imposed, for it depends on individuals who are willing to shoulder the burden of owning their own condition and acting as the authors of their own future. Fostering that empowerment is the steward's most important task. Others can help, but the principle choice remains with those being empowered. It helps though by being confronted by a situation in which no person -- leader or otherwise -- can be expected to resolve on their own. If one recognizes that I can't do it alone, then just maybe I can do it with others. This is often the first step towards empowerment and shared ownership and is, in fact, the basis of any human community.

However, such recognition only goes so far as getting people together and opening them to the possibility of change. It is not sufficient in itself to sustain collaboration. Working collaboratively is almost invariably an exercise in contingent cooperation (Wilson, 2007) and therefore to sustain that, the willingness of partners to cooperate must be continually reinforced while the potential for non-cooperation vigorously resisted. This is not effectively accomplished either through altruism or decree but through the application of a variety of mechanisms which can be applied heuristically as the need requires.

These inter-related mechanisms can be grouped into six basic families:

- ♦ possibility mechanisms, which reinforce the purpose and future towards which collaborators act;

- ◆ commitment mechanisms that encourage risk-reward sharing and elicit contributions in an environment of openness and transparency;
- ◆ social learning mechanisms, which encourage mutual understanding and permit partners to experiment, prototype and learn from each other;
- ◆ shared governance mechanisms, that reinforce shared ownership and decision-making while allowing for dissent;
- ◆ mechanisms for joint action that coordinate and align the capacities of partners towards a common goal; and
- ◆ mechanisms of mutual accountability, monitoring, and evaluation, including mechanisms to jointly celebrate progress and success.

Applying these tools is not the task of a single fatherly figure acting for the good of all but rather, it is the responsibility of all those willing to participate authentically in a collaboration or partnership.

In the end, good stewardship is not limited to a single person or even to the same group of people if you consider a group over time. It is a collective attribute that reflects the status of participants as owners with interlocking obligations to each other and it ultimately gets embedded in the culture, customs and norms of their respective organizations. Everyone is in-charge.

“Large corporations are vast and complex entities, with customs and attitudes that are hard for any one leader to change. So why do we talk as if the CEOs are truly in charge...” (Fox, 2006b). The cycle of leadership mistrust ends, not by whitewashing our faith in leaders as Sibley suggests, but in evolving a more mature confidence in ourselves as the principal actors in our

own lives and organizations. Without enlivening this sense of shared ownership, good stewardship will remain elusive, and we will fail to make the individual and collective commitments necessary to close the gap between the shared expectations of our organizations and the outcomes we observe.

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