

## **THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE FOR HUMAN SERVICES AGENCIES**

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*ABSTRACT: Child and youth care is a burgeoning profession in which leadership capacity is a quintessential component. Effective leadership can maximize opportunities for children, youth and families to become functional, in spite of the odds. Attempts to strengthen this field will be just another nebulous detour should there be no intersection where we, as a child and youth care field, can confront our past and learn from our mistakes. Ignorance will mean that we are doomed to repeat those failures and that we have become chronic victims of the delusion of indulgence. This article proposes a laser focus on our field in order to identify the peculiar leadership challenge where authentic engagement is preferred to symbolic involvement.*

*Key words: leadership, child and youth care, capacity-building, empowerment, change management, environment, organizational culture, relationships*

Leadership is of paramount importance in the multifaceted human services field in which Child and Youth Care (CYC) is firmly embedded. On the one hand, we are aware of the need for leaders with the capacity to lead and on the other, for leaders who can facilitate capacity-building in the next generation of leaders. What advice will we give our leaders?

We are, indeed, shaped by our past and are always challenged to transcend our past in order to be effective, contemporary leaders. It should be our goal to build the leadership capacity in CYC that can meet the current challenges as well as the future needs of an ever-changing society. This is a leadership lesson we had to fast-track in post-apartheid South Africa. However, leaders will not be able to make a qualitative difference to effect the change that will meet the needs of a more diverse population, a changing economy, and the technology of the 21st century unless they are a product of the personal change crucible. Leadership is interactive-dependent and implies a paradoxical integration of being and doing, and leaders who do this well will make a meaningful difference to the quality of life of others and themselves. Current leadership research informs us of CEOs who talk about their resistance to change. We need leaders in CYC who do not bury their heads and dig in their heels for the wrong reasons.

Today, organizations operate in a post-industrial, post-modern, post-literate, post-Christian, co-creative, knowledge- and information-driven, entertainment-craving milieu. Many age-old traditions suffer as a result of the generation gap. It is savvy for organizations to have their primary

focus on outcomes and results--the bottom line. This is a bad omen for us. In child and youth care, our bottom line is a constant, bi-polar, creative tension of human dignity in tandem with the focus on the future and the horizon and its concomitant possibilities. We dare not discard any client because of present "unacceptable" circumstances. Circumstances can change, and the client has the power to change, over time.

It is said that psychiatrists often mimic the behaviour of their clients. I see this happening in the CYC field where the professional conduct of leaders is sometimes dubious. Leaders are oftentimes more dysfunctional than the clients. You need only observe the idiosyncratic behavioural styles at any regional or international assemblage of our field. Just observe the culturally inappropriate and insensitive innuendo and disrespect. To bring it closer to home, just reflect on the inertia to deal with destructive lounge talk that happens in many agencies, or observe the "groupie culture" at conferences. Here is the challenge: we can stay as we are, or we can run away, but we cannot hide. Sometimes, by concealing ourselves, we are actually revealing our authentic self. Our lack of leadership capacity will be conspicuous by its absence. Let us then look at the leadership challenge.

### ***Be Visionary Risk Takers***

Vision is the first critical dimension of effective leadership. Without vision there is little or no sense of purpose or direction in any organization. Direction gives the organization an identity. Without this identity, efforts drift aimlessly as people struggle for meaning. The lack of purpose leads to a lack of coordination among the work units in an organization and to divisive infighting among staff. The articulation of your vision energizes and mobilizes the leadership process and gives your followers a map of your expectations as well as the rules for the road. Vision always brings the future into focus: it motivates involvement, implies hope, and instills courage. The Wisdom Literature in the Bible states that, "Where there is no vision, the people perish". Vision is the cynosure and one of the paramount observable characteristics of effective leadership. A clearly articulated vision, with a purpose and core values, is best created from the mindset of aspiration rather than desperation. The vision may be general or specific, but it is the leader's passion and the mental image of a better condition than that which currently exists. The primary challenge for CYC leadership is discussed in Senge (1990) who said, "When people truly share a vision they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration" (p. 206). President Nelson Mandela made a public statement in the courthouse during his trial for sabotage and treason in 1964. He said:

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

In 1994, after being imprisoned for 27 years, after much bloodshed, pain, tears and the death of people in the struggle for liberation,

Mandela became the first Black, democratically elected president of South Africa. His vision attracted people to his movement even when the movement was banned and had to operate underground in pursuit of its goal and passion.

CYC needs leaders who will enable staff, children, youth, families, and the community to build a vision for the agency, to articulate a vision, and to make that vision concrete to others. Leaders need to provide an environment and culture in the organization where creativity, risk-taking, and experimentation in pursuit of excellence and equity are shared by all partners, and to understand, facilitate, and manage change in themselves, in others, and in their organizations.

### *Embrace Diversity*

Our agencies are becoming more diverse, and navigating a changing workplace is both art and science. The "people factor" is critical in human services. However, cultural chauvinism will not promote teamwork in the 21st century workplace which propagates internationalization and globalization. Triandis (1993), the godfather of cross-cultural psychology, observed that the influence of culture on organizational behaviour is that it operates at such a deep level that people are not aware of its influences. It results in unexamined patterns of thought that seem so natural that most theorists of social behaviour fail to take them into account. Many aspects of organizational theories produced in one culture may be inadequate in other cultures. Leaders will: model respect, understanding, and appreciation for all people; respond to the needs of persons with special needs and to the needs of a multicultural and economically diverse society; and function effectively in a multilingual community. Embracing the diversity mosaic does not necessarily imply that you either embrace the "cookie-cutter" approach or the "melting pot" approach. However, perceptual prejudice, stereotyping, xenophobia, victimarchy (word coined by Warren Farrell in *The Myth of Male Power* to describe a society which conceives of its members as victims--perpetually unable to direct their own affairs or to control their own destinies--in other words, both men and women are victims of patriarchy), or any other trend, fad or wave can lead to the onset of leadership scotoma. People from diverse backgrounds can make an effective community without having to display an attitude of superiority.

### *Have Excellent Professional and Ethical Human Relations Skills*

It costs nothing to have good, decent, professional, workplace conduct and manners. Leaders will: respond to the needs of other staff members, children, students, parents, and the community; facilitate communication that yields teamwork, consensus, and inquiry; and help resolve conflicts and manage stress. The behaviour of followers is often validated by the leader's example. Parenting has taught us that behaviour is context-dependent. The quality of interaction between people in the higher

echelon of the organization is replicated by those in the lower. Professional conduct, etiquette, and simple human courtesies are certainly embodied in good practice and are a sure way of optimizing leadership effectiveness and success.

### *Know the Work of Their Agencies*

CYC leaders will work with others to facilitate the creation of a safe and healthy environment where young people's growth, both academic and social, takes place. They will: promote learning for customers, staff, parents, and other community members; have knowledge of the structure, function, and purpose of their organization in a democratic society; understand stages of human development; have an understanding of the care continuum; have knowledge of strengths-based assessment and evaluation; and know how to assess and evaluate staff and program effectiveness and to promote excellence in both. Finally, CYC leaders will collaborate with other social service agencies, other state agencies, and business and industry.

You would do well to remember that organizational culture is the key to success. Culture to the organization is what personality is to the individual. Agencies are expected to design developmental plans and identify developmental goals for clients. Agencies are embarking on training programs for their staff. However, nothing is being done to develop the organizations in which staff has to perform their functions. The wellness of agencies as change agents is often questionable. Our often hostile staff relations and toxic environment is not therapeutic.

A tantalizing thought often haunted me: from whose perspective are we viewing best practice? If you tell the story of the three little pigs from the perspective of the wolf, you will, no doubt, have a different ending. Be aware of the "many points of view" variance. Likewise, if cultural mismatch was the pinnacle perspective, conduct disorder would not be the assessment. Policy makers, politicians and funders often have no idea of the real struggle with clients in a cottage during meal times or of the other 23 hours, à la Brendtro.

### *Model Leadership*

CYC leaders will be intellectually stimulated and reflective. They will: have a sense of humour and high self-esteem; be ethical and accept responsibility for their own actions and behaviour; function as generalists who make connections between different fields; have a clear sense of power and authority; identify, create, and use resources; and understand and utilize short- and long-range planning processes. They will exhibit skills in marketing and public relations and have an astute understanding of the politics in their agency, system, and community.

### *Empowerment*

Taking risks is an important component of gaining mastery over one's

personal and professional life. The biggest risk for leaders is empowerment. Leaders must allocate resources and decision-making authority to their followers and give them the freedom to fail without fear of retribution. Zero tolerance does not lead to empowerment. Bennis (1994) described empowerment as the power reciprocal requiring transformative leadership in the individual as well as in the organization. This requires a keen sense of judgment and the wise and judicious use of power by the leader.

Leaders must also know what is right and what is necessary. This has to do, partially, with the ultimate nature and quality of the innate character and personality of leaders that enables them to make fair decisions. In this sense, the faith and loyalty of followers is not lost even in the most difficult human encounters. Truth and honesty are at the heart of judgment. Leaders must be willing to investigate the facts; often, this is just when they have the least amount of time to do so. CYC leaders have to know that facts are interpreted truths. It is never the facts of the matter but the facts for the matter. We know that behaviour is purposive. Whether it is the reporter or the reported, know that facts do not speak for themselves.

Empowerment implies knowledge and nurturance of the most important attributes of leader effectiveness: a) personal knowledge; b) knowledge based on content; c) problem-solving ability; d) the ability to analyze critically and to develop visions for the future; e) effective communication skills; f) the ability to translate visions into goals; g) the ability to take risks; h) a good sense of judgment; i) flexibility; and j) the willingness to work within an organization as a team member. The difficulty in defining leadership and extricating the most important attributes lies in the uniqueness of each individual leader.

We know that the work of particular leaders differs greatly because of differences in individual characteristics, situational variables, and organizational contexts. The situation is further complicated when the concepts of management and leadership are applied to youth service agencies. These organizations often are ambiguous; frequently, they have no profit motive and the bottom line is absent.

So we, largely drawn from the social science, educational, and youth-serving community, are people generally employed in non-profit organizations. We like to define leadership as the ability of an individual to influence the values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions of others by working with and through them in relationships in order to achieve their functionality and the organization's mission and purpose. Management is usually defined as the ability to integrate different organizational functions such as policies, procedures, systems, and equipment for the purpose of organizing the component necessary to accomplish the mission and purpose.

The role of leadership for learning organizations is described by Senge (1990) in this way:

Leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental modes . . . They are responsible for learning. (p.340)

### *Proceed With Vigilance*

Our technologically advanced world is witnessing its own inability to stem the current shedding of blood caused by waves of terrorist attacks. Leadership is the vehicle through which change will be effected. The trajectory of world events is evidence of a leadership crisis. The concomitant miasma created by those leaders who have failed, not so much because of poor business sense but rather because of ethical failure, challenges us to rethink leadership. Leadership is the ideal tool to transform and liberate us and our organizations from being prisoners of the past to being pioneers of the future--from trouble to triumph and from fear to faith. In spite of the continuing debate about charismatic and values-based leadership, we should continue to explore the effect of personal faith as well as any cognitive dissonance inherent in the leader's profile (the allocation of space for prayer rooms in airports is becoming a common feature because it meets a need).

### *The Leadership Manhattan*

We will utilize the New York Skyline as a graphic for the following concerns. CYC leaders will deal with a provocative phenomenon that plays out in the daily lives of those people who might be in the wrong position in an organization or the system, and who continue to live unfulfilled lives. The delusion of indulgence has made them indifferent experts of the art of masking, hiding, and pretence. Holding on to a position for the wrong reason constitutes a risk for self and others. Continuing conflict in the workplace poses a challenge to leaders. More and more employees are taking legal action because of employment discrimination, affirmative action, sexual harassment, violence, and bullying in the workplace. Managers spend at least one third of the company's time in dealing with conflict. Staff conflict in the therapeutic milieu is a key toxin in the onset of organizational dysfunction and suicide.

Workplace compassion has been catapulted as a prominent issue since the events of 9/11. The response is indicative of the quality of both leadership and the workplace. How does the workplace respond to disaster and to grief?

Ethics and ethical dilemmas in the workplace demand our attention. What about professional gossip or destructive lounge talk? Ethical leadership will be essential in our work with human beings who cannot afford another disaster. Current events involving questionable ethical behaviour of many businesses and church leaders remind us that the responsibility for an ethical organization belongs to its most senior leaders.

### *Leadership Context*

Leadership takes place in a context. It emerges from within us as we engage communities, and civic and professional life. Since it takes place in context, it is important to consider first the changes taking place around us--changes that are literally transforming the world as we experience it. Wealth distribution has a profound impact on the social landscape. What is the product of unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high-risk crime environments, ill health, and fractured families--social detachment or social exclusion? To be socially excluded means to be disengaged, disconnected, and detached--and this spawns a myriad of ramifications for leaders and policy makers. This large percentage of people is often powerless and voiceless until they grab the world's attention as a result of one or another calamity. This social detachment or exclusion happens to the poor not by choice but by design. The U.S. President, George W. Bush, in his commencement address to the United States Coast Guard Academy in May 2003, stated that more than half the world's population--nearly three billion people--are forced to survive on less than two dollars per day. Billions of men and women can scarcely imagine the benefits of modern life because they have never experienced them. The danger is that if they have nothing, they have nothing to lose. It is no wonder that drug cartels and drugs are gaining ground. The drug trade is flourishing and often swells state coffers in spite of the irreparable damage caused, especially to children and to families.

Poverty is not a shame; it is just very inconvenient. For the poor, poverty is not a matter of definition. It is a harsh reality that poverty has a paralyzing effect on individuals, and that it shapes societies. Verbal categorization and stereotyping does not dissipate poverty. Defining a poverty line, judging the behaviour of the poor, and tracing the causes of poverty are good but not good enough. Leaders should not assume that the poor have no pride or power. It is indeed tough for children, youth, and families to overcome the heavy odds of poverty, ignorance, and scarce resources.

### *Authentic Leadership*

You are, hopefully, aware of the current mood that is sweeping the global village. People, and especially young people, seem to be cynical and frustrated at this time when, they contend, the government continues to warn us about the possibility of more terrorist attacks and is not able to guarantee homeland safety and security. People seem to have lost their optimistic flair and replaced it with one of pessimism, despair, and disillusionment.

The study of leadership has never been as vital and as needed as now, when there is renewed search for meaning in life. Frankl (1988) posited that the striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man.

One can distinguish symbolic involvement from authentic engagement in this field. What is authentic leadership? The sheer number of theorists who have tried to define leadership is indicative of the impossibility of

reducing a complex process to a simple statement. Kouzes and Posner (2002) define leadership as the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.

Trying to define leadership is like defining the shape of a human nose. Noses might be classified into shapes and sizes. However, everyone's nose is different. Thus, a universal leadership catechism will retain its conjectural façade.

Leaders, according to the theorists, must recognize, own, and be comfortable with their unique leadership style, viewing it as a positive style. Such recognition emerges, nurtured by ongoing self-reflection. Personal knowledge of strengths and the capacity to compensate for weaknesses are first steps in achieving positive self-regard (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997). Self-reflection enables one to arrive at points of critical choice. Within each developmental stage or choice points, there are tasks to be accomplished that enable a person to move from one stage to the next. Being able to accept and healthily use criticism through self-reflection is an achievement, yet it is not without feelings of emotional discomfort and restlessness. There are legitimate choices to be made. Leaders, the theory goes, must strive to gain more and more personal knowledge, as we learn from Senge (1990). He called this personal mastery; yet, personal knowledge is only one kind of knowledge needed to produce effective leadership.

In any professional field, knowledge establishes credibility—a critical component of leadership. A knowledge base is not something to have and keep; it must be periodically renewed. It demands that one remain current, and one way of remaining current is to review the literature on a periodic basis. Remaining current is, as one businessman described it, a goal without a finish line.

Leadership requires critical analysis of process and strategy. Leaders engage in complex mental tasks. They are alert to contextual evolving patterns. The uniqueness of leaders is that they dream, of course, but they also have the capacity to achieve those dreams. In this sense, a leader must begin with the goal, and then do everything to reach it. It's a matter of planning backwards, beginning with the goal. The urgency of effective and honest communication cannot be overstated. This, in itself, will bond diverse and independent people into a single enterprise. This kind of communication includes more than just clarity. There must be a genuine open-door policy expounding an approachable attitude. An effective leader must have "conquered his own ego problems" and be able to listen to criticisms. "Unfortunately, much more common are leaders who have a sense of purpose and genuine vision but little ability to foster systemic understanding" (Senge, 1990). That is the essence of the "learning organization". The mastery of communication is inseparable from effective leadership (Bennis, 1994). Leaders must be able to speak, write, and listen in order to gain support and cooperation from followers.



### *Teaching Change*

The undertaking of change will be a difficult one as stated in Belasco (1990) as he weaved a metaphor about teaching an elephant to dance. He emphasized how organizations are tied to the past either by tradition or by success. Like powerful elephants, they are bound by the memory of earlier constraints, which may no longer be in existence. This pessimism also extends into CYC leadership where a number of traditional constraints and concepts must be understood and challenged in order for the "good news" to become a reality. For systems thinking to be effectively implemented in the child and youth care system, it requires the individual care giver, the social worker, the psychologist, the teacher, and the administrator to see themselves as a part of a larger entity. Role players would begin to focus on interdependence and interaction rather than on a simple cause and effect relationship. Senge (1990) stated that *systems thinking* is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than "snapshots". We, therefore, need to remind ourselves about the purpose of the CYC field. It is not a breeding ground for political opportunism and social control. It seeks to enhance the science of healing and wholeness, and to perfect the art of caring. Just rearranging individual prejudices is not change. Sometimes the systems, when they are no longer a humane and safe place for children, have to change. In CYC, the maxim remains: first, do no harm, (then) promote functionality. Often, this is not easy. Thus, leadership is for tough people because, often, the prevailing system will do everything to maintain the status quo. In this system, the challenges are often subtle and implied, or the result of some innuendo or political agenda.

### *The Transitional Period*

During the period of transition--the letting go of the old and, an almost in tandem activity, of embracing the new--leaders have to be aware of the impact that this phase in the cycle of change has on both the leader and the followers. Sustained primary or first-order change is difficult in any structured organization. However, leaders are not always prepared for, or cognizant of, the forces and factors inherent in the transformational change. This is the time when most people feel that they are in a desert or dry place. They are like a voice crying in the desert--in a worst-case scenario, simply feeling deserted. Leaders have to be cognizant of both the mental and emotional states of followers and take appropriate action in the transition period. Often, the energy spent in damage control renders the leader unable to nip in the bud attempts to sabotage the vision.

A child who was admiring a shiny new car parked in the street outside an old house asked a man, who appeared from the house, whose car it was. "Mine," the man said. "Mister, this shiny new car and that old house do not match." "Oh, my brother gave it to me as a birthday present." "Gee, mister, I wish..." What do you think he wished for? I suppose many

of us would wish for a brother like that. He said, "Gee mister, I wish I was a brother like that." I suppose that it is easier to want instead of wanting to be the brother. We have to be the leader we wish for.

### *Development of a Pinnacle Perspective*

Development of a pinnacle perspective will enhance your systems-thinking skills. Do not let the halo of your professional arrogance dim the radiance of your personality. The client is human and has feelings, just like you do. Get to the point where the real things really matter. Get to the point where you are not as obsessive-compulsive about everything. Learn that your way is not the only right way. Learn to know that the most important thing to know is to know what we do not know. Learning can only take place when one admits that you do not know. I realize that there is so much about life that I do not know.

The personal 21st century leadership quest is a call to grapple with current issues and, in tandem with this, to let die those previously held conclusions that were based on past lived experiences and centuries and seasons of pain. We are both the continuation of previous generations and a unique expression of that continuity. Many leaders are identifiable by the baggage and unfinished business of previous encounters that reduced their speech to oral poison. They continuously operate, habitually, almost mechanically, anchored in, and driven by, past conditioning forces and dispensations. As much as they want to be heralds of their leadership vision, they often falter and give credence to self-fulfilling prophecy statistics. Many potential leaders remain just that because they either lack the will to overcome the odds or the strength to accept the challenge. The irony is that, whether they step up to the leadership plate or not, the masses will continue to be led and the ball can continue to bounce irrespective of who participates. The issue in leadership is that we participate not because of but in spite of.

My late father used to say, "Young man, get enough education so that you will never have to look up to anyone and then get a little bit more so that you do not look down on anyone." It is your turn at bat. Celebrate joy, enjoy, and let your joy overflow and envelop your contemporaries, even your adversaries. We are more productive when we are having fun. Praise improves the performance of people. You can force your way through a crowd but not into a single person's heart. Leaders who are wrapped up in themselves contribute little, make very small packages, and are like dynamite without a spark or fuse.

Leadership in CYC is about capacity-building. Leadership is allowing and energizing the self and others to become functional, co-creatively. Thus, be aware that, if people do not get what they want, they take it anyway, anyhow. Ignore a baby's attachment cries, and observe the dysfunction during adolescence. Be the leader you would want others to be. Long live Child and Youth Care.

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