

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP? AN INQUISITIVE, NONLINEAR AND HOLISTIC APPROACH

Maria HRIȚCU¹
Mariana NICOLAE²

Abstract

This paper focuses on a growing trend of interest in “spiritual leadership” and three important directions arising from a mindful and meditative approach to leadership - self-awareness, empathy and system awareness. The paper also tries to make sense of the experience one of the authors embarked upon in India, at the end of which she noticed significant changes in her understanding of and reactions to her professional and personal life. The methodology employed is of a qualitative type, being based on the narrative inquiry as the most appropriate to the sensitive issues discussed.

Keywords: spiritual leadership, narrative inquiry, holistic approach, life balance

Background

The world in which we live today has become more complex and the issues we are confronted with cannot be solved easily by any stakeholder in the process without producing various degrees of dissatisfaction in other categories. Dire poverty, daily death of around 20,000 children of starvation according to UNICEF, 27-28 % of all children in developing countries underweight, at least 80% of humanity living on less than \$10 a day according to the World Bank, global warming, global economic crisis, military expenses, biodiversity and environmental issues, racism, religious and economic conflicts, emerging economies, the rising costs of education, the falling capacity of governments to offer a credible vision for their constituents, new media and technology, the dissolution of moral values - these are but some of the issues that are constantly in the headlines next to the need for better leadership or even complaints against lack of leadership to help the world control or merely contain those issues.

¹ Maria Hrițcu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, maria.hritcu@gmail.com

² Mariana Nicolae, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
mariana.nicolae@rei.ase.ro

Management and leadership specialists, as well as business people, in the largest possible sense of the world, have become lately more aware of the need to reconcile company efficiency and productivity, the corporate agenda and mission with the need of the people involved to be recognized as whole human beings with their personal lives and their own intimate values. The triple bottom line, with its focus on people, the environment and profit, has become almost mainstream terminology and the need to develop new business models (Fry and Nisiewicz, 2013) is perceived more in terms of values and balance building than modeling and quantitative prescriptions. In the opening chapter of their new book *Maximizing the Triple Bottom Line Through Spiritual Leadership*, Fry and Nisiewicz present the case of a Canadian businessman (Fry and Nisiewicz, 2013: 2) who was genuinely interested in how to be successful in business while being sensitive to and acknowledging the spiritual needs of his employees. The answer, facilitated to the Canadian by Mother Teresa of Calcutta whose help he searched, was to make peace first with himself and find the unity of his inner self and outer appearance that he had been looking for a long while. Fry and Nisiewicz, an academic and a business consultant, integrate in their approach which can be best characterized as “pracademic” the latest trends in the field which look at workplace spirituality, ethical leadership, sustainability, employee issues, responsibility towards the community while taking care of corporate growth and profitability.

There is a long line of researchers interested in the spiritual aspects of the business world. Ciula (2000) explored the approaches people have had towards work and the way through which they have become alienated from and betrayed by an activity which occupies most of their lives and pointed out the need for rebalancing attitudes with a new understanding of business ethics (Ciula, 2003) which involves more than lip service to the corporate jargon of a certain moment in time.

The present paper has emerged from the interest of one of its authors in the importance of a spiritual discovery of one’s inner true self and the need to reconcile that discovery with the constraints of living in today’s business world in an emerging economy and a transitional society like that of post-communist Romania. The authors attempt to make sense of the experience one of them had in a retreat in India, at the end of which she noticed significant changes in her understanding of and reactions to her professional and personal life.

In the next section we are going to briefly look at the methodological option of presenting the results of the above-mentioned experience.

Methodology of research

The methodology employed is of a qualitative type, being based on the narrative inquiry as being the most appropriate to the sensitive issues discussed. Leadership in general does not easily allow a quantitative approach. From Peter Drucker,

Mintzberg and Maccoby to Handy, de Vries and Sinclair the most relevant approaches to leadership have been mostly based on a qualitative research. Which is self-evident since the processes the researcher would like to observe and analyze are mostly internal, belonging to the leaders' inner world made up, in varied degrees, of his or her mind and spirit, while their activities and actions are very often of a highly confidential nature and do not accept witnesses in negotiations or important board meetings.

This is why the study of leadership has most often been done through qualitative investigations: interviews, shadowing, discourse analysis, life history, story-telling, metaphor analysis and narrative inquiry.

The present research is based on the actual experience of Hrițcu in India that she wanted to describe in her master dissertation as a good option for original research. She was encouraged to do so and suggested as a convenient method to keep a diary while in the retreat. Hrițcu, however, realized that this was not possible because it would have meant a detachment and an analytical observation of her experience. While the whole point of the retreat, as pointed out by her, was to allow the mind and the body to become whole, to stop the judgemental habits she had been educated to have. In her own words: „After the first few days of holding a journal of experiences I realized it is impossible to get detached and at the same time focus on writing the experience, as if I was running after two rabbits at the same time, so writing was dropped and a more experiential approach followed.” Hrițcu narrated her experience, under the very lax guidance of Nicolae, making it the central point of her empirical research needed to give substance to her dissertation. The authors are aware of the limitations of their study, but still think that for the Romanian context of leadership investigation this attempt has some merits.

Narrative inquiry is a form of reasoning that contributes to knowledge creation. Traditional forms of investigation (looking at the why, how and the results) are not sufficient or relevant in the case of leadership and management research and there is already an established line of reasoning starting with Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) pointing out the relevance of tacit knowledge creation in firms that needs to be addressed particularly in a knowledge based economy. Traditional forms of knowledge, of the explicit type, are not sufficient to cover the experiential kind of knowledge in the way that narrative inquiry can. That this is an important part of the epistemology of modern social sciences is underlined by the increased interest and publication of studies devoted to narrative inquiry. Both authors are painfully aware of the need to look much deeper into this direction, but they acknowledge the work of Clandinin (ed., 2007) in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* and find that the obstacles and methodological limitations described in that study are relevant and apply to this piece of incipient research as well.

Attempts to define leadership

The simplest definition of leadership that the authors came across is attributed to John C. Maxwell who says that “leadership is influence” (Maxwell, 2005: 1). It is getting clearer today that the concept of leadership has become more and more distributive and that we, as individuals, are not relying on a mass leader to influence us, but rather we are all becoming leaders through our own power of influence.

As we take a look at the world around us, we can see that even the smallest and apparently insignificant individual has the opportunity to, consciously or unconsciously, touch the lives of the people around. We can see this happening in real life, in relationships with our families, friends, on TV, radio, online and paper media, social media and so on. It is everywhere, and it reaches even the remotest corners of the world in less than a split second.

And this is partly caused by the fast and constant pace of change in today’s world. Starting from Heraclitus a lot of sages are convinced that “change is the only law that exists”. Every moment of our lives is different from the one before it and also from the one after it.

Watching the world before our eyes experience happens. In a world of increasing standardization, this raises important issues. Is what *I experience* the same with what *you experience*? Are we the same? Are we unique? Or are we both? Daniel Goleman (2011) talking about the future of leadership tells a story of one of the eastern philosophy masters he had once met, who said to him: *you can plan for 100 years but you don’t know what will happen in the next moment*. Goleman puts forward the proposition that the future of leadership will focus on three equally important traits: self-awareness, empathy and systems awareness. In the next few paragraphs we are going to explore those concepts.

What is self-awareness? At first and simple level it is one’s capacity to observe one’s self. At a more complex level, in Goleman’s view (Goleman, 1996: 78), it is a person’s capacity to identify own strengths and weaknesses and to build on that knowledge in a way that makes the best use of one’s strengths while trying to diminish the influence of one’s weak points. Goleman (Goleman, 2011: 50) shows that “our gut feelings — our deepest sense of what feels right and what is ‘off’ — provide critical information that we must not ignore”. What Goleman suggests is that self-awareness goes beyond our conscious self-assessment and it involves our inborn capacity for decision-making, thus influencing every aspect of our performance.

Who am I? What am I? are questions that have been rooted in the human psyche probably since the beginning of mankind, yet only some people claim to have glimpsed or have found the answer: Tibetan Buddhist monks, ascetics of various denominations, world teachers and other sages, until recently mostly unknown to science or to the 'common', mostly secular world. Those people show a deep understanding of the problems of the world, demonstrate compassion and a sense of happiness that nowadays, in the era of high technology and rapid modernization, have attracted the interest of the 'scientific' community. Studies are being designed and conducted to find out, from a scientific point of view, why humanity still struggles in stress, anxiety, unbalance and poverty when on the whole the conditions of humanity have improved compared to the past.

Recent scientific and neurobiological research shows that some of our well rooted assumptions about education and motivation may have to change as they are not supported by evidence. When talking about consciousness, behavioral neurobiologist Antonio Damasio (Damasio, 1999: 5) describes it as "a quality of mind, the special features that exist in the mind, that permit us to know, for example, that we, ourselves exist and that things exist around us." It is a sense of presence that he calls a sense of ME-ness, a very important quality of subjectivity that allows people to take a distant view to themselves and be aware of the world around as well, a sense of having a self that observes one's own organism and the world around that organism. Damasio (Damasio, 1999: 11) points out that "the neurobiology of consciousness faces two problems: the problem of how the movie-in-the-brain is generated, and the problem of how the brain also generates the sense that there is an owner and observer for that movie. The two problems are so intimately related that the latter is nested within the former." And talking about the methodology of this research that, obviously, has always been an issue with narrative inquiry as well, Hrițcu points out that in India she met a wise old man that people in the Eastern cultures call an "enlightened master" or a "realized master", a "Buddha". On Hrițcu's first day at the retreat, he stood in front of around 50 people and asked everybody: what are we? There was a deep silence as no one could answer. Slowly, the old sage started to say that "we are consciousness". What is consciousness? A sense of presence, a sense of being or as he called it a sense of AM-ness that you get if you drop the "I" in I AM. Those few simple words that come from direct experience are the same ones that Damasio reached through scientific research: we are beyond our mind, we are more than our accumulated knowledge, life facts, relationships, feelings, emotions, perceptions, something beyond, as a witness, watching all, yet getting involved in nothing.

The question that arises from a practical point of view is how can one become more and more aware of this phenomenon? How can one become more aware of herself/himself? Techniques and guidance are becoming more and more accessible to ordinary human beings interested to develop and become self-aware. One such technique is *mindfulness*.

What is empathy? The most repetitive idea about empathy and its simplest definition is that of putting oneself in the shoes of another. May we see problems arising from this? One worth noting issue could be that this approach is coming from a mental mechanism rather than from an emotional or feeling center. So, how can empathy arise in this way? Isn't this masked rationalization? Isn't this creating a certain feeling or even, in the long run, a complex of superiority and inferiority? The line is very thin, but can we tell the difference and should try to avoid the trap of "judging" when we need to use our emotions, intuition and feelings. In this way, empathy is indeed very much related with one's self-awareness. Goleman, discussing empathy, concludes that "the act of compassion begins with full attention, just as rapport does. You have to really see the person. If you see the person, then naturally, empathy arises. If you tune into the other person, you feel with them. If empathy arises, and if that person is in dire need, then empathic concern can come. You want to help them, and then that begins a compassionate act. So I'd say that compassion begins with attention." (Goleman, 2011: 39)

Borrowing from psychology, Coombe (2010) analyzes secure base leadership and points out that parents who empathize with their children create a safe place for them to begin exploration and feel confident in taking risks. The same principles apply in an organization as well. Human beings cannot have a set of values and principles in their personal life and a different one in their professional life without creating damage to their person. Coombe underlines a person's need to have both people and goals as secure bases in order to ensure a healthy approach to life and to survive in today's fast changing world.

From a practical perspective a call for being true to our inner wisdom and self does not need to avoid the professional field, but rather needs to focus on it more, pushing it slowly towards an area where individuality as well as authenticity are encouraged and, with proper guidance and leadership mentors around, the whole organization can transform itself completely.

What is system awareness? The complexity of today's world is accepted universally and one of the answers to the many problems that development has triggered is the search for solutions through a diversity of approaches. New sciences are slowly emerging in an attempt to bring new and innovative solutions to the environmental crisis which is perceived by an increasing number of people as a crisis of humanity. Such a new science is industrial ecology, a young but growing multidisciplinary field of research which uses input from engineering, economics, sociology, toxicology and the natural sciences. Industrial ecology has been defined as a "systems-based, multidisciplinary discourse that seeks to understand emergent behaviour of complex integrated human/natural systems" (Graedel & Allenby, 2009: 7). The field approaches issues of sustainability by examining problems from multiple perspectives, usually involving aspects of sociology, the environment, economy and technology. The name of the field comes

from the analogy with natural systems that may facilitate the understanding of how to design sustainable industrial systems.

The complex issues that humanity has to face today cannot be solved with the same conceptual framework that we have used when creating them. Industrialism has developed an over-confidence in “scientific” solutions that is still prevalent around us and can be easily seen in the dream that most issues, including illness or solving the depletion of natural resources, can be cured and/or solved. Particularly the Western world considers that humanity is the highest form of life evolution and as such entitled to be master of the universe. When severe problems have started to accumulate the idea of humanity’s privileged position in the universe starts to fade away and long forgotten ancient truths of unity and connectedness reveal themselves to the ones who are prepared and willing to understand. The approach that some people try to use in addressing those complex problems has been developed in the last half century and is called system thinking. It consists of a holistic and integrative approach to the complex systems that exist in today’s globalized world and is based on the assumption that the parts will function atypically if they are studied in separation from the whole or out of their natural environment. The philosophical rationale that underlines system thinking is opposed to cartesianism and its scientific reductionism and is based on cyclical, nonlinear thinking rather than on the linear one.

To conclude this section, we have shown how Goleman suggests that the future of leadership will have to address and solve very complex issues. Besides their at least basic technical and management competencies, which are taken for granted, the new leaders will need to develop new capabilities: self-awareness, empathy and systems awareness. Business education and training need to incorporate the development of these capabilities in a way that is not done yet except as alternative approaches to problem solving. What Goleman and the new developments in neuroscience predict, as an echo to the long ago revealed truth of the old sages of the East, is that these capabilities will have to become mainstream if business leaders want to have successful organizations and happy and balanced followers.

The Meditation and Mindfulness Experience – India

This section represents the actual narrative inquiry as written by Hrițcu for her master dissertation. For practical purposes the narrative has been condensed by Hrițcu herself.

“What begins here is a journey. ...A journey that has no beginning and no end in sight. It is a journey in itself. It is an experience. Take nothing from it. That which is important, if it is important, will remain with you.” (Whosoever)

Those words still resonate inside me while embarking on a 40 day meditation retreat in the south of India. As any human being I was born. Life came, started to unfold, sometimes going up, sometimes going down, on the way gathering knowledge and “wisdom”. Somehow, though it is hard to explain in words, probably because of what neuroscience says today, that words and wisdom have different locations in the brain, an inner sense of suffocation came upon me and a bubble was about to burst from all the thinking, the worrying, the stressing and what not that were happening to me lately. Becoming susceptible to everything outside oneself and forgetting one’s own place in the world may have this effect sometimes.

A situation like the one described above moved something inside myself and, as a quiet stillness before a storm, things slowly shaped into reality. What followed was a journey to India in search of my peace of mind, in search of a STOP. All in the presence of a wise master, who dropped all identifications and shared his experience and wisdom with meditators and people who crossed his doorstep. Between 11 December 2011 and 19 of January 2012, I underwent a meditation retreat in India. The retreat focused on three main steps:

1. Cleansing: 14 days of cleansing the psyche and releasing emotional stress
2. Centering: 21 days of silence
3. Celebrating: 5 days of expressing joy

Cleansing. For the 14 days of cleansing many active meditations and techniques were used as dancing, play therapy, corporal movements and breathing exercises. All these techniques slowly relaxed the body helping with the release of tensions and stress as well as unburdening the emotional tensions inside. In those 14 days many feelings and emotions emerged, building a cathartic experience.

Centering. In the 21 days of silence there was no talking and little or no provoked eye contact. The body and the mind were a little more relaxed and ready to go even deeper into each individual’s inner universe using special techniques.

Within the next three weeks mindfulness techniques were followed among which:

1. mindful and slow motion walking: becoming aware of the movements the body makes whilst walking; focusing on becoming conscious of the bodily mechanism of walking and of getting out of the habit of walking automatically or robotically.
2. unfocussed seeing: standing still, on two feet for 30-45 minutes a day, seeing something yet watching nothing, training the eyes to look from a broad perspective, enlarging the visual space from a focused angle to peripheral vision creating a panoramic picture.

3. sitting seated, concentrating the attention on the hearing sense, tapping in and tuning to all the sounds the ears hear, though keeping in mind not to focus on anything in particular but rather hearing everything as a concert.
4. lying down, being attentive to all the sensations the body feels at the touch of the wind, the clothes on the body, the touch of the ground underneath the body, etc.
5. sun gazing at sunrise and at sunset.
6. different meditation techniques designed to grasp one's whole personality and the difficult or sometimes painful inner resorts and aspects that each of us are reluctant to face and rather avoid.
7. dancing and rejoicing meditations.

Celebrating. The last five days were focused on celebrating one's own uniqueness and life as a whole, letting joy express itself and overflow.

Effects, understandings and findings

I had the intention to document the experience in itself step by step. However, it was actually impossible to do so and participate in the program as well. I started to realize why it is so difficult for scientists to measure the effects of meditation using traditional, orthodox quantitative methods or to determine how meditation changes the body and the psyche in real time. It is because of the detachment and focus of the meditator towards her practice that brings the desired effect and is the ongoing elucidation of its effects.

After the first few days of keeping a journal of my experiences I realized it was impossible to get detached and at the same time to focus on writing the experience. It felt as if I was running after two rabbits at the same time, so writing was dropped and a more experiential approach followed. Among my findings right from the first days were the dependence I had on the mind, and how everything I was going through was first passed through the filter of my mind. In some cases, though my body wanted to follow a certain movement, even in dancing, the mind was getting in the way, generating thoughts after thoughts that were jumping from superiority to inferiority and back. This was the first moment when I realized the assumptions the mind makes and how it works between extremes.

For the first time in my life I noticed, after discussing it with many of the 50 people participating in the camp, that until that moment I had held a very tight grip over myself, all coming from a thinking center, that judged everything and everyone, and that I too was a subject of judgment for myself. I became aware that most of the fears that surface within are projections of past events that have nothing to do with the present time. Another understanding was about the past and the future and

how very easy it is to alternate from one to another, working from a purely thinking state, and thus missing the present.

Thus slowly, I dropped the habit of writing as I felt it was not really helping and the words that reached the paper had nothing to do with my inner recorder that was a true insight. I thus reached another understanding – that words do not and cannot sometimes express the deep meanings we receive. We do not know exactly from where those deep meanings come or what they are and we can but categorize them as “just that feeling that I KNOW, though pinpointing seems impossible.”

When the silence period arrived the mind became even louder. The first 14 days of silence were filled with noises and theories and mental chatter like nothing I experienced before. This was the moment that I realized that staying with one's self, as one is, is not an easy task. Since birth human beings are indoctrinated about who they are or who they should be. This aggression of external stimuli over the person has increased with the advance of technology and that does not really help us keep a clean and clear mind, stick to our sense of nature and being natural, as one is. These realizations made me think of the old peasants that are still present in the Romanian archetypal collectiveness and help us remember that being natural and authentic is not something that happened in a far, far-distant past, but rather yesterday, with our grandparents and grand-grandparents.

This is also when I realized that any system of control based on fear has no chance of creating consciously aware individuals, ready to make a change or make a difference around them. But this system too is rooted in the subconscious of our parents and grandparents, as well as in the country's collective awareness and culture. Many issues and fear based memories and emotions surfaced, only to make me realize that they are completely unfounded and useless if not destructive, yet they are still being used unconsciously in the world. For example” if I don't study, I'll get a bad grade, the teacher or my parents will punish me”, or “I will lose my job if I don't finish this project” and many other such examples. Realizing that fear is a powerful motivator, but not the most constructive one, made me open my eyes on how this mechanism is creating itself, based on comparison with past events that most often do not apply to the present situation.

Within the next weeks I had many insights on how the mind-body mechanism works. I also developed a receptiveness and openness towards nature. All senses were attuned and concentration and attention both to detail and to the bigger picture grew considerably. Mind became more and more silent, and a sense of presence became stronger. Towards the last week of the silence period more peace of mind and soul aroused and a detachment from the issues that were present upon arriving in the camp.

In the last days of celebration a complete state of wellbeing, peace of mind and joy overflowed creating a space of human connection based on authentic communication and relatedness. The experience in itself could not be put into words or measured quantitatively, but was rather something that emerged from direct human contact and from a center of individuality, not personality.

The main shock and sense that something more than a simple vacation had happened was revealed to me upon returning home. It was then and there that I saw in what a robotic and automatic way we do things and drag awareness only from the present moment. Talking happens very fast, walking happens very fast, everything that we do in our lives is moving in such a rapid pace that suddenly a week has passed, or a month or a year and we just cannot say what happened... Did life pass by, in the meantime?

With every day that followed my feeling of presence, of being in this moment, continued. Also I realized how listening happens without effort, how being attentive is also heightened, the ability to focus on the task at hand has also grown and the memory function has improved considerably from trying to remember what has happened on the day about to end to remembering things, small details from early childhood.

Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to provide a larger view of some key aspects that have an influence on the present of and give directions for future changes in the area of leadership. The assumption of the authors is that everyone is a leader, as long as s/he becomes conscious of herself/himself and focuses on being self-aware, compassionate and empathetic towards the people around while also keeping in mind that we all have a place in the world and can influence it. We can and have to be aware of our life, both our professional and personal life and have to balance them wisely in such a way that both ourselves and our community benefit from our presence in the world. We do not shed our skin every time we leave the office, as in the old Romanian folklore tales, or at least we shouldn't do so only to fit the generally accepted dichotomy "personal versus professional". We need rather learn both individually and organizationally how to assimilate and reconcile "work" in our life as individuals, as a human beings.

A more positive approach to everything has a deeper impact both on the individual and on communities alike. What wise people have known for centuries, scientists are discovering now; psychologists are saying it, sociologists too. It is time for leaders to take up this knowledge and integrate it into their organizations so as to lead from a resonant position, from a secure base that will empower their followers to increase their performance and make their organizations excellent.

Today we live in a world where we have the freedom to create the space we want to live in and it is up to us whether we want to remain in the same past constraints, or we are willing to accept a change that begins here, with each of us and indirectly with the world.

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The authors

Maria Hrițcu has graduated the Master in International Business Communication in June 2012. She has a background in Management - Public Administration from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE-București), as well as over 7 years professional experience in multi-cultural and top-management work environments. She has developed a genuine interest in the spiritual aspects that she feels need to be present in today's world in order to have complete, harmonious and whole human beings.

Dr. Mariana Nicolae is a Professor of English and business communication with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE-București) and the director of the Master in International Business Communication programme delivered in English. Besides teaching, research and academic management, her current duties involve institutional building, coaching and mentoring, networking with people and organizations, publishing, travelling both in-country and abroad to attend conferences and seminars and organizing (inter)national conferences in Romania. She was a Fulbright senior scholar in 2005 and participated as an expert evaluator in the Framework Programme FP7 of the European Union. She is a founding member of the English-Speaking Union-Romania, an honorary member of Phi Beta Delta, Gamma Lambda CSUSB, a member of the Romanian Association for American Studies, of the Association for Women Entrepreneurship Development, of the Society for Business Excellence and of the professional association *Lingua Economica*.