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Shift Your Leadership from “Power Over” to “Leading Through”

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Summary

The traditional approach to leadership is best described as the pursuit and maintenance of power over people. However, this isn't the most effective method. The “leading through” paradigm engages middle managers and employees of all levels so that leadership is a collaborative effort which leaves everyone feeling valued, seen, and in turn, more motivated. In the leading through paradigm, the soul, heart, and mind of leadership are three dimensions in one. Without the mind, the soul and heart may produce commitment and engagement but struggle to mobilize it in the right direction. And without the soul and heart, the mind may gravitate towards the “power over” paradigm. Anyone who wants to do the work of leadership — and do it well — must attend to, and learn to lead with, their own soul, heart and mind.

In their new book, [*Leading Through: Activating the Soul, Heart, and Mind of Leadership*](#) (Harvard Business Review Press), former dean of Harvard Business School Kim Clark, his son, Jonathan, a professor of management at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and his daughter, Erin, a management consultant, call for the end of a power-focused leadership model and introduce a new approach: the “leading through” paradigm. This new leadership model consciously seeks to do good and to make things better; cares for people, helping them to thrive; and mobilizes people to solve tough problems. These three elements, they argue, are the soul, heart, and mind of leadership — and activating them requires careful attention to both the personal and the organizational dimensions of leadership. The following is a lightly edited excerpt from their book.

We live in a remarkable time. Truly exceptional value, with thriving people and communities, is possible when we learn how to combine the productive power of technology and organization with the power of our humanity and a deep sense of purpose.

We believe that realizing that potential more fully requires rethinking our organizations in a way that is truly different from what we've known. We've seen glimpses of this promise in recent years.

During the early months of Covid-19 we saw remarkable demonstrations of the power of the human spirit, in concert with technology and purpose, to drive unprecedented innovation and even growth. This in spite of a crisis impacting every facet of our lives; one in which no one was unaffected — one in which we all lost something. It was the best of our humanity on display.

At the same time, we saw the chasms that divide us widen and deepen — and not just on a global or geo-political scale. Within organizations the chasm of broad discontent among the workforce has quickly overtaken that spirit of unity and innovation.

The Great Resignation was our warning shot, and the widely reported, unprecedented levels of dissatisfaction and distrust in organizations must be our burning platform. We cannot afford to succumb to the familiar pressure to double-down on power and control, giving priority to quickly reducing costs at the expense of people, purpose and genuine gains in productivity. The real costs are too great. We see them in the growing prevalence of burnout and [the incidence of workplace bullying and harassment](#). We see it in the surge of adults [reporting significant symptoms of anxiety or depression](#). We see it in [the general discontent](#) as reported through annual engagement surveys of workers across organizations and industries. And, more than likely, we all feel it — to some extent — ourselves. We are technologically more advanced than we have ever been. And we are miserable.

But the glimmer of promise we saw in the earliest days of the Covid-19 crisis should give us hope. When we loosen our grip on consolidated power and control and expand our myopic focus on short-term costs (to prioritize people, purpose and real productivity) something great — even miraculous — can happen. This is the lesson of the last few years — and it isn't a new one.

But still — almost universally — we revert to power and control in the name of the need of the times for quick fixes. In doing so, we continue to embrace a legacy paradigm that is driven by the pursuit and maintenance of power over people. And the story we tell ourselves — and the one we reward — is that this is good leadership.

But the truth is that this paradigm — what we call the “power-over” paradigm — is the very reason executives find themselves frustrated that they aren't getting as much out of their people and organizations as they believe they could be.

This is the paradox of the power-over paradigm: We have a tendency to default to its ways of thinking, behaving, and organizing, even as it serves to limit our capacity to make things better.

We need a new paradigm of leadership — what we call the “leading through” paradigm — to help to break through this tendency. The aim of leading through is to activate the power of our humanity — soul, heart and mind — to create thriving organizations. Power to create amazing value for organizations; power to improve the lives of people; and power to heal the divides and bridge the chasms that exist between us. It is this power that we hope to activate, power that is realized through others.

The Cleveland Clinic saw the need for this kind of paradigm shift when it embarked on a journey to make empathy — and the overall patient experience — a defining characteristic of the organization. The organization's executives had come to believe that the patient experience needed to change so fundamentally that the empathy initiative would need to touch everything and engage everyone in the quest for improvement and innovation. And it did. From its objectives and standards to its strategy and structure, the empathy initiative transformed the clinic into [a place where](#) people “imagine what another person is going through, work to alleviate suffering, and create joy wherever possible.”

The results were remarkable. Between 2007 and 2019 patient satisfaction with nurses improved five times more than the national average, while satisfaction with doctors increased 11 times the national average. Over this same period employee satisfaction increased from a top box score of 55% to 92%. At the same time, the clinic continued its record of medical innovation and outstanding patient medical outcomes. It is perhaps not surprising that the clinic also grew substantially during this period, generating record revenues.

To experience this kind of paradigm shift and move from “power over” to “leading through,” organizations need to embrace an approach to leadership that strengthens their capacity to:

Increase organizational “light.”

In our view, leadership is always and everywhere a moral work. Leadership derives from moments of influence. What a potential leader does with that influence will impact the people involved for good, or for bad. That makes leadership a moral concern and we believe that effective leaders always seek to do good, and to make things better for the long term. This is what we call the soul of leadership, and it demands that leaders (and those they lead) strive to do what is right, because it is right, even when it is hard. This means that the work itself and the people who do it need a moral context — a shared framework of moral values and beliefs that guide and direct action in the organization.

In that spirit, the work of leadership must overcome what we call organizational darkness — attitudes, behaviors, and practices that make seeing the right way forward more difficult. Darkness is generated by things like arrogance, infighting, abuse, bullying, backstabbing, exploitation, harassment, discrimination, corruption, fraud and the waste of talent and capital, among many others. And, borrowing from the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.” Thus, the most important work in the soul of leadership is to generate light in the organization.

Organizational light is generated by attitudes, behaviors and practices that make doing what is right easier. Light guides and energizes people and is sustained by things like kindness, generosity, respect, love, personal meaning and growth, shared purpose, a vibrant community, honesty, transparency, high standards of excellence, and the productive use of talent and capital, among many others. Just like physical light, organizational light is a source of vision and energy, creating the conditions for growth and increased strength in individual lives, reputations, assets and in the organization itself.

Harness the power within people.

Thriving organizations are created and sustained by thriving people. Great leaders understand that creating an environment where people thrive is crucial to the viability and vitality of the organization. A thriving human being is a wonderful source of power — with significant capacity for action. That is why great leaders place people — including their personal growth — as a first-order objective. This means care and concern for people above and beyond the functional tasks or outcomes of the work. This is what we call *the heart of leadership* — promoting human thriving. Relationships are central to the heart of leadership. To effectively communicate, motivate, mentor, teach, direct, counsel, learn from, inspire and energize the people they lead, leaders need to build relationships of mutual commitment and care. It is through relationships of care, trust, high standards and accountability that leaders help people thrive.

We capture the heart of leadership with a framework we call LIVE. The acronym represents four drivers that help people engage and thrive — love, inspiration, vitality and expression. The framework gives leaders a way to connect the work people do every day to their deeper needs. And it really is about the heart — about caring for people, getting to know them (love); about inspiring them with a vision of a better future and of their own potential (inspiration); about establishing energy-creating patterns in their lives (vitality); about giving people voice and room to create (expression). LIVE is a tool for unleashing the power and potential that is already in people and making the heart of leadership real.

Drive action, learning, and change.

The soul and heart of leadership generate commitment and energy but unleashing it in a meaningful way requires something more. This is where effective leaders mobilize people in a process of action, learning and change aimed at solving tough problems and pursuing meaningful opportunities. This is what we call *the mind of leadership* — advancing purposeful action, learning and change.

We capture the mind of leadership as a process — the leadership process — that reflects specific patterns that are common, useful and effective in every situation that calls for action, learning, and change. It is the domain of sizing up problems and opportunities, creating a vision of the work, and setting direction. It is where leaders build teams, establish plans, and engage people in the work. It is through this process that leaders activate the potential energy in people and teams and help them maintain disciplined attention and focus.

The leadership process is a powerful, but flexible framework for initiating change, and mobilizing and empowering people. It can be used with a single individual, with a small team, a major project, an acquisition, or any other situation where action, learning and change are necessary. It requires leaders and their teams to think clearly, creatively and strategically. It requires the mind of leadership.

In the “leading through” paradigm, the soul, heart, and mind of leadership are three dimensions in one. Without the mind, the soul and heart may produce commitment and engagement but struggle to mobilize it in the right direction. And without the soul and heart, the mind may gravitate towards the “power over” paradigm. These metaphors — the soul, the heart, the mind — are inseparable characteristics of effective leadership. Anyone who wants to do the work of leadership — and do it well — must attend to, and learn to lead with, their own soul, heart and mind. They need to focus on doing good, on caring for people, and on thinking innovatively and creatively to mobilize people to act, learn, and change in ways that makes things better.

Leading through is a paradigm designed to activate that kind of leadership all throughout the organization, from the C-suite to the frontlines. It is a paradigm to help organizations thrive by unleashing the power and potential of their people. Making that happen is work — the work of leadership. And we know this kind of work can be hard. Mobilizing people is not easy, and the path to solving difficult problems may be uphill and rocky. Yet, that is precisely why leadership is great work. It is meaningful and fulfilling because it takes initiative and creativity and stretches both leaders and teams.

But we also know there is joy in this work. Joy comes from working together to make things better, seeing people grow and learn, and changing the organization so that it is more productive and more purposeful. Effective leadership opens up opportunities, gives people meaning, and strengthens the health, energy and vigor of the organization. It is the promise of making things better that is the focus of the leading through paradigm



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