Sharing Power

WHY IT REQUIRES DEEP PERSONAL CHANGE

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Sharing power always means that someone has to let go of control, and someone has to accept more responsibility.

Power is a major variable around which our self-world relationship is formed. Some people maintain a sense of personal safety and worth by having power; others establish their identity by giving their power in exchange for protection and belonging. Our relationship with power is a big part of how we create our sense of identity.

Our approaches to change are far too casual about both asking managers to let go of control and assuming that others will want increased responsibility. When we redistribute power, we ask people to reconstruct themselves—and that requires deep personal change.

In most cultures, the name of the game is to color within the lines, do what's expected, learn what's required, behave or be passed over. Creativity and self-expression are rarely encouraged. If fact, we are usually asked to submit to authority, deny creative self-expression and sacrifice today for some future promise. On the day we report for work, we form this patriarchal contract. In effect, the organization says to us: "Welcome! We now own you. We are not really interested in you as a person, in how you feel, nor in whether or not working here is meaningful for you. Your job is to submit to authority, because here wisdom increases with altitude. In return for your submission, loyalty, and sacrifice, we'll take good care of you. Play your cards right, and great things can come your way."

This contract is part of the culture that governs behavior. We do not know the contract is there until we break it. We may give up self-expression and agree to submit in exchange for a secure future. We trade our passion, commitment and creativity in exchange for compliance. It is a seductive bargain. Since the future promises to be bright and secure, we may even feel lucky to have made it, and we work hard to live up to it, thus making the bargain even more attractive.

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Patriarchal structures no longer make sense, but change is slow to come, because power is an aphrodisiac and being taken care of, a sedative. Both parties have a lot to lose by re-negotiating the contract. Those with the power stand to lose the part of their ego-identity that grounds their personal security and self-esteem on control. Those who buy in to submitting, stand to lose the security that comes from making others responsible for their personal future. Both parties feel that they can't change the system without losing identity.

Slowly we are leaving this bargain behind, and yet despite our best intentions to lead differently, the patriarchal contract takes over. Since it is so familiar, comfortable, and normal, we are not even aware of it. We often block progress toward our vision unknowingly.

Leaders who are committed to change often fall into old patterns of behavior (over-control at the top, caution in the middle, blaming from below) that undermine the change effort. These behaviors create a climate of caution. Due to mixed messages, people do not take the change effort seriously. They sit on the sidelines, waiting to see which way the wind will blow.

The issue is often not the degree of commitment (or intention), but rather the tenacity of old behavior that is inconsistent with the direction of change. Being committed does not mean that behavior naturally aligns with intent.

We are so acculturated to patriarchal, top-down systems that we are blind to how we act them out. Hence, when we try to change the system, we run into ourselves as primary obstacles. We behave in ways that maintain control at the top and dependency at the middle and bottom.

We try to change culture as if it is separate from ourselves. We try to change it and not us. But we can't change the outer culture unless and until we do the deeper work of internal change—the part of us that needs control and hangs on to dependency. The deeper work is discovering how we contribute to the very culture we are trying to change.

I first discovered this working with an "enlightened" leader (Rick)—someone deeply committed to changing the culture, to empowering people, to moving decision making down, and to extraordinary customer service through involvement. His behavior, however, surprised me. He was managing the same way he had always managed while talking about empowerment.

Rick once asked me to conduct a team building session with his top team. He is an inspired, capable leader with a passion for empowerment, and a deep desire to let go of control and move decision making to the lowest possible level. The assessment of his group, however, showed that his behavior did not support his vision.

Rick met me at the airport the evening before the session, and we drove to his seven-bedroom cottage. His van was packed with all the supplies. He was looking forward to the session. He knew he had contributed to the team's problems, and he was eager to learn more. In fact, Rick talked candidly about wanting to receive feedback first so he might encourage others, through his example, to be open.

When we arrived at his cottage, I helped him unload the van. He asked me to load the food into the refrigerator. I complied. I grabbed the first jar of food and opened the refrigerator door. He said, "Put that in the upper right corner," which I did. I grabbed another container, and he said, "Put that in the lower left corner...No, not there...no... not there, over there." He then directed me through the loading of the refrigerator. What he didn't know was that I had once managed a kitchen, and packing a refrigerator for a group this small was no challenge.

I said nothing and tucked the experience away, thinking it might be useful. The next morning his group was trying to give Rick feedback about how he over-controlled, how he stepped into decisions that he had delegated, how he took over their meetings and basically undermined their credibility. Rick wasn't buying it. He sat there with arms crossed, and although he genuinely wanted feedback, his body language communicated: "I dare you to give me just one example." As a result, the group clammed up.

So, I said, “I’ll give you one.” I then told the refrigerator story from the night before. About 30 seconds into the story, he smiled, looked at me and said, “You got me!” With that, the group gave additional examples. Much of the meeting involved helping Rick see his contribution to the group’s problems, which mostly had to do with holding on too tightly to control.

From his point of view, the group had not proven that they were capable of handling more responsibility. They were not a team. They were unable to deal with issues. They often came to him bickering about the other team members, and despite his suggestions, they would not confront one another directly. They avoided and ignored controversial issues, letting them get out of control. Rick did not trust them enough to let go. Both points of view were right. This was a classic case of his over-control encouraging the team to excuse themselves from responsibility for the success of the organization. At the same time, team member’s avoidance, caution, and unwillingness to work together encouraged Rick to grip the reins even more tightly. Most of what I did in that team-building session involved helping them sense this dynamic.

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Looking Up and Looking Down

A series of reciprocal, self-reinforcing behaviors keep organizations stuck in old patterns. When we look down in the pyramid, we tend to act one way. Looking up triggers another set of behaviors. The behavior looking down is supported by the behavior looking up and visa versa. Both parties contribute to the other's behavior, yet usually it is easier to see how the other is at fault and not to see your part in the cycle. A few examples:

Taking/Denying Responsibility: Looking down, we tend to take too much control. Managers who are genuinely committed to change can reflexively continue to take over, take control, step into delegated decisions, concern themselves with detail they don't need to be concerned about, and not give authority that was promised. Looking up, we tend to take too little responsibility for the success of the business, expecting those above to have all the answers and walk their talk immediately, waiting for mixed messages to clear up before we act, and excusing all this by saying, "The mess we are in is not my fault. If management would get their act together, change would proceed." These two behaviors are linked in a self-reinforcing cycle. Taking too much control while talking about empowerment encourages those below to not take the change effort seriously and to avoid responsibility for its success. For those at the top, it is hard to delegate to people who seem to lack commitment and initiative.

Aggression and Caution: Looking down, managers act in aggressive/defensive ways. In worst cases, they many demean another manager in front of their peers. More common is the combative, competitive method of communication we learn for standing our ground, defending our position, and attacking others' points of view. This hurts others and encourages caution. When we look up, we tend to be preoccupied with irrational caution. The fear of falling out of favor with those above is the primary obstacle to the creative risk-taking required to change the system. Caution leads to manipulation and limits authentic autonomous action. The focus becomes that of waiting for a safe culture in which to act with greatness. People spend more energy carefully managing their political future, than taking action to create what is best for the organization. This is a self-reinforcing cycle: aggression encourages caution, and caution supports aggression (by not confronting its inconsistency with the new culture).

Mistrust, Secrecy and Blame: When we look down, we are influenced by bias for mistrust and secrecy that characterizes hierarchical systems. We tend to be reluctant to share financial data, pertinent information, bad news, and difficult times. The belief is that if people knew the truth, they couldn't handle it or would use it irresponsibly. When we look down in the pyramid, we tend to act one way. Looking up triggers another set of behaviors—we have a bias for mistrust. As soon as someone is promoted from the ranks, they become suspect. People below are wounding the people above them with blame, putting them under a microscope, and expecting them

to perform flawlessly. The belief is that our mistrust and anger at the people above us is justified. We often fail to notice how our mistrust is a response to our powerlessness, to the power we have given up in our preoccupation with caution, and not taking responsibility. Mistrust/blame from below encourages secrecy and invulnerability above and visa versa.

Over-Extension and Helplessness: Top managers today are exhausted and over-extended. We are simultaneously cutting resources and expanding commitments. We hear a growing despair: "How much can I give? No matter how much I give, it's not enough."

People below are experiencing similar exhaustion, but it comes more out of their helplessness. Everything is priority, and they are too cautious to say no, set reasonable priorities, and confront limits. Consequently, there is a growing sense of helplessness about the inability to focus on the key things that can really make the difference.

Cycles of Control and Dependency. The looking up behaviors of not taking responsibility, helplessness, caution, manipulation, mistrust and blame, comprise a life-stance called dependency—a set of interrelated behaviors that, taken together, form a self-reinforcing Cycle of Dependency that begins with denying responsibility for business success. This reduces risk. If we are not responsible, we cannot be blamed. We often hear: "It's not my fault."

"It's not my job." "There's nothing I can do." "You don't understand the culture here." The payoff in not taking responsibility is that we are innocent and immune from the threats that come with mistakes and failure. The downside is it leaves us helpless. If we are not part of the problem, we can't be part of the solution. The more helpless we become in the face of powerful people, the more cautious we become. We are drawn into manipulation in an attempt to find cautious ways to influence. Caution implies threat from those in power, so it is natural to mistrust and blame them and refuse to take responsibility.

Dependency is a life-stance, a posture we take toward power—our own, that of others, and toward the circumstances of our life. We form a dependent relationship toward power by relinquishing it to others, or to fate. We submit to those with power and comply with their expectations or with the normative expectations of the culture. We do this as a strategy to gain safety and establish our personal identity. When we seek to redistribute power, we are asking people who have formed their ego-identities on some form of dependency to change the foundation of how they pursue being personally secure and worthwhile. It's no wonder that change meets with resistance. Acknowledging that dependency is a strategy for establishing and maintaining some of our deepest needs suggests that we have been far too casual about assuming that people will naturally want to take on more responsibility.

We once consulted with one department in a hospital with serious morale problems. Turnover was high among staff and managers. When asked to describe the culture, one person said, “We eat our young,” referring to the high turnover. This group complained that their managers never gave them enough freedom and decision-making authority, but the current manager (Mary) was bending over backwards to involve people.

Mary was learning what many managers learn when trying to involve people who say they want more freedom and responsibility—that those who complain the loudest about freedom often fear the responsibility that goes with it. Many people form their sense of worth and safety around being powerless. With power comes responsibility—to make decisions that may result in failure or may be unpopular. One way to maintain a sense of worth and safety is to eschew responsibility and become at best a loyal follower, at worst a hostile victim, where you always have someone other than yourself to blame for failure.

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Over-control, like dependency, is a set of interrelated behaviors. Taken together, the looking-down behaviors of over-control, aggression, mistrust, secrecy, invulnerability and over-extension, form a self-reinforcing cycle. We call it the cycle of over-control.

This cycle starts with taking control in situations where letting-go would be more appropriate. Control can also be a strategy to reduce risk and enhance self-esteem. As we take control, we reduce the risk of having others' mistakes make us look bad. And, by holding on to most responsibility for success, we become the hero. The payoff is that we protect ourselves from the exposure to messiness, mistakes, and failure that may come with sharing power and responsibility. As a bonus, we feel good about ourselves for being so important. The downside is that, as we hold on to control we become over-extended. Because we link how we feel about ourselves with being in charge, we tend to take on more and delegate less. This pushes us to the limit. We feel harried and harassed by competing priorities and tight time schedules. This frame of mind predisposes us to aggression. As people make demands on, disagree with, or confront us, it is natural and easy to get defensive and snap back.

In cultures where only the strong survive, we communicate in competitive, tough, and demeaning ways. The more aggressive we feel we need to be to stand our ground, the less inclined we are to share information—since information is a form of power. We also won't show our vulnerability

by asking for help or admitting weaknesses and limits. Taking charge is easier than the vulnerability of needing support.

Letting go does not mean abdication or the abandonment of control. If control is defined as the ability to get intended results, then the only reason to let go of control is to get more of it.

Over-control, too, is a life-stance. The Expansive-Controlling types think that self-worth and personal security come from being in charge, on top, in control, and seen as movers/shakers.

Asking new leaders to let go of control is like asking a novice cliff climber to lean away from the cliff. Novice climbers tightly grip the rock, keep the butt in, and hug the cliff. Experienced climbers lean well away from the cliff. This transfers weight to the toes and pushes them into the cliff, giving better stability. The legs do most of the work, and one only needs a light grip on the rock—better performance and more security with less effort. But leaning away from the cliff, with a 100-foot fall below, can feel like death.

Similarly, asking managers to give up control, even though it will increase control, feels like death—the death of an old self-world relationship—to the part of ourselves that has "who we are" tied up with "how well we are doing." We can't casually ask managers to simply let go. Control is a deep issue—we are asking the person to reorganize their self-concept.

If we take both the cycle of control and the cycle of dependency and put them together, we see that they form a self-reinforcing system of interrelated behavior. The inner circle is the cycle of dependency, and the outer circle is the cycle of control. Left unchecked, these behaviors and their side effects can block progress. If we ignore the personal work of changing these behaviors, we put our vision of empowered partnerships in jeopardy.

Leadership has its roots in our individual maps of identity—in the conclusions we make about what will make us safe and worthwhile. In this sense we are all carriers of the old culture. We grow up unaware of all the ways we have been acculturated to patriarchal thinking and behaving. We never notice that, at the core of our identity, we learn to feel safe and secure by playing a certain role in the patriarchal system; that even our sense of worth is, in part, sustained by being good at the role we play. In a sense, the patriarchal culture has created us, and then we go on to make the culture over again in our own image.

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The holograph is a metaphor for the relationship between culture and self. A holograph presents a life-like image. Laser beams, reflecting off etched reflecting plates, create the image. If the reflecting plates are broken into small pieces, and the laser is reflected off one piece, the whole image is still projected. The whole image is contained in the smallest fragment, so no matter how small the piece, it still reflects the whole. However, as the reflective fragments get smaller, the image becomes more unclear.

Culture is like a holograph. Each of us is a fragment. Individually we contain within us the entire dynamic of the culture. When we come together, we interact, and our experience of the culture becomes clear, compelling, real, and lifelike. We are tempted to think it is real—and separate from ourselves. But it is not separate—it is us. Culture and performance are intimately linked to how its members think and behave. The organization we contribute to creating is the one we leave in the wake of our thinking and acting, and the higher our position, the bigger the wake. One high-leverage way to change the system is to look in the mirror (as we navigate system complexity and resistance) and change ourselves.

When trying to change from patriarchy to partnership, we run smack into ourselves as the primary obstacle. Only as we deploy ourselves differently does the culture around us change.

Looking down, leaders tend to establish new vision without making the behavioral changes required to support the new vision. They blame others for not being aligned, buying in, or being committed—not noticing that these are the consequences of not remaking themselves into a reflection of their own vision.

Looking up, top leaders become easy scapegoats for all that is not working. Blaming is the easiest way to excuse ourselves from responsibility—a defensive substitute for an honest examination of life that seeks guidance in our own mistakes. Blame allows us to maintain the illusion we are not part of the reflecting plate that projects the culture—so we need not change.

When we share power, we face a personal development challenge if we are to break with old patterns. We must change some of the basic strategies for maintaining our sense of security and self-esteem. In short, we are not only asked to behave differently, but to be different. And to that change there is great resistance. **Leaning mindfully and creatively into the resistance, however, is a high pay-off endeavor.**

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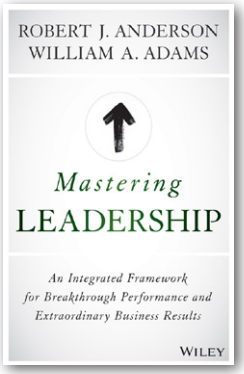

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