



Thinking Out Loud

Cultivating Leadership Everywhere

*Tim Dutton
Executive Director,
SCOPE*

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Have you noticed that we have managed to disembowel perfectly good words that seem to have real power in Webster's Dictionary? It is probably true that every generation picks a handful of words, falls in love with them, overuses them and takes away all their real meaning. What is a "paradigm" anyway?

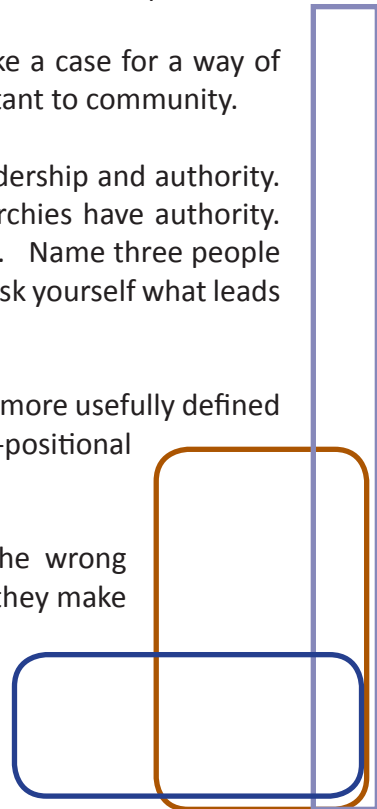
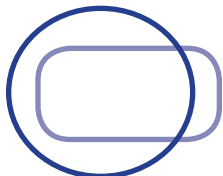
Can that also be true of the word "leader?" One of today's leadership scholars (Warren Bennis) contends that "...no clear, unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders...It's as if what Braque once said about art is also true of leadership: "The only thing that matters about art is the part that cannot be explained."

For a guy that had to look up who Braque was, I am going to make a case for a way of looking at "leadership" that helps me explain it and why it is important to community.

There is and maybe always has been some confusion between leadership and authority. People who are elected or appointed to positions in power hierarchies have authority. Their positions give them power to influence decisions and actions. Name three people that you think have shown real leadership through the years. Now ask yourself what leads you to that conclusion.

What did those people DO that makes them leaders? Leadership is more usefully defined as an activity rather than a position. This is personified by non-positional leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

So what activities distinguish someone as a leader? This is the wrong question since people are not endowed as leaders; they learn and they make choices. As businessman, Harold Geneen says, "Leadership cannot really be taught it can only be learned." People choose to exercise leadership on some issues and not others. No institution or individual is always leading on all



issues. What then defines leadership? It is the activity of mobilizing people who care about something in common to tackle tough problems, to achieve progress.

In the community setting these tough issues are very complex and often their solutions are not technical. That is they are not a simple formula of who to do something, how to fund it, what technology can be applied and what outcomes can be expected. The kinds of problems that communities typically face are complex, have no clear answer and there are many stakeholders; these problems demand “adaptive solutions” and “adaptive leaders.” These solutions are hardly ever solved with just more money.

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The “adaptive leader” has an opportunity to bring attention to an issue that they care about, invite others (stakeholders) to join them and structure the work so that the solutions are owned by everyone. This work requires innovation and learning and mediating conflicts.

The Kettering Foundation recently looked at how citizens relate to and work with one another and their governments. Here is where the idea of leadership, citizenship and authority are both confusing and hold so much promise. This report finds that “...high-achieving communities aren’t distinguished so much by the qualifications of their leaders as their numbers, their presence throughout the community and, most of

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all, by the way they interact with other citizens.” Those communities have “...redefined leadership by making it everybody’s business, not just the business of a few and by not equating leadership with positions of authority.”

Over the next months and years let us work on discovering how we can all learn the activities that democratize and make powerful the notion of community leadership.

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