

PAMPHLET 21

HEROIC LEADERSHIP

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@1999**

The newspaper article announced the selection of Patricia A. Harvey as the new superintendent of the St. Paul, Minnesota public school system. The article, which described Dr. Harvey as a national expert on urban education, read like a celebrity sighting:

- Wow, she said, smiling before a captivated audience of school officials and community members....

-...met with school people who had whipped themselves into a frenzy over her visit. Everyone wants to meet her and talk to her....

-...she received the celebrity treatment.

-I think it's a love feast because for so long we've been wallowing around in confusion without a leader....

-...everybody has very high expectations...it's going to be difficult for anyone to live up to. But if anyone can do it, it's Pat Harvey.

Acknowledging high expectations, the school board cautioned that Harvey cannot enact change alone. Harvey said she wasn't worried about it: "Expecting more of me gives me the incentive to meet those expectations."

Is Ms. Harvey joining the growing list of heroic leaders who leap naively upon the pedestal provided them by deifiers in search of a magical fix to massive systemic dynamics? If she is, Ms. Harvey will pour her heart and soul into her work, and she will fail ultimately to transform single-handedly a chaotic and complex system networked in a world undergoing multiple massive transformations. She will then be scapegoated by those who deify her today.

Heroic leaders are especially prevalent in times of crisis and transformation when traditional mechanisms for transition and conflict resolution are under great strain or have broken down: customs; traditions; established authority; and shared vision, values, and purpose. In his book *Leadership* James MacGregor Burns described heroic leadership as a relationship between leader and follower in which followers place great faith, often unfounded, in the hero's ability to overcome obstacles and crises. The followers avoid personal responsibility by projecting their fears, aggressions, and aspirations onto the hero as a symbolic solution to the conflict inherent in transformation.

The indomitable hope for heroic leaders is reflected in the exorbitant salaries paid to CEO's, athletes, and celebrity authors who are expected to rescue the company, team, or publishing house. For example, in October of 1996 AT&T gave John Walter \$22 million to leave R.R. Donnelley & Sons to become their next chief executive officer. Ten months later the board of directors decided he could not provide the intellectual leadership the company needed and denied him the position. Walter received an additional \$3.8 million severance payment. AT&T spent \$25.8 million to hire a CEO and 10 months later decided he wasn't smart enough to do the job. Stockholders should ask: Where was the leadership? Who was responsible and accountable for this blunder? When will we quit looking for heroes to rescue us from our responsibilities?

Those who deify leaders must recognize their collusion in the heroic leader syndrome. It's difficult to resist being treated as someone special. It feels good to be treated like an expert who is all wise and to receive mass support directly from followers as Dr. Harvey did. Many who know better succumb to the euphoric feelings of celebrity and adulation and eagerly play out the role designed for them by irresponsible followers.

By deifying leaders we render them ineffective, we take away their humanity, and we place extraordinary pressures upon them. How can a leader be effective if she is unapproachable and if we are afraid to tell her the truth? I know many leaders who, believing they have to appear perfect, will not admit mistakes and, therefore, will not apologize for their mistakes and the negative impacts of their behavior on others. Isolated, inauthentic, and alone they cannot empathize with others and lose their humanity. Others, knowing they cannot live up to the expectations placed upon them, become nothing more than figureheads who spend their days constructing the appearance of competence and contribution. Some find the emotional highs so addictive and feel the responsibilities so greatly that they literally die from the stress created trying to live up to the expectations of others. They are eulogized. Others use up their energy, burn out, and quit or are fired. They are demonized.

Heroic leadership is also harmful to followers. People become overly dependent on the leader. They become compliant, conforming, and disempowered, waiting helplessly for the hero to save them from what they fear. People lose their authentic sense of self and by doing so escape personal responsibility. Natural leaders within the organization are not developed, self-organization is driven underground, and tremendous potential is constrained. Mediocrity is the norm when only a few function at their full potential. Paradoxically, heroic leaders often prevent the change they desire by their efforts to return control and predictability to their organizations. By doing so they inhibit natural processes that provide the energy and creativity they want. Such a sub-optimal organization is vulnerable to outside threats.

Because the focus is on the hero (rendering the accomplishments of others fuzzier) and because many think of cause and effect as being linear (obscuring actual long-term systemic interrelationships) the contributions of heroic leaders are often illusionary, inflated greatly, and a threat to long-term sustainability. Heroic leaders are not authentic leaders. No true relationship exists between them and their followers: a relationship based on shared vision, values, and purpose and characterized by authentic conflict, managed transitions, and sustainable change. Dee Hock, founder of Visa, wrote that heroic leaders, once a godsend, are now a public menace. We need to think about organizational leadership in a new way--a way that fits the times in which we live.

The primary metaphor of the industrial era was the organization as a machine. Scientific management institutionalized and operationalized the model of the organization as an orderly, rational, and predictable place of constraints, uniformity, and efficiency regulated by rules, regulations, and procedures to be obeyed under threat of banishment from the enterprise. Leaders were separate from workers and creativity, initiative, and innovation came from the top or from outside the organization.

In times of greater stability the machine metaphor and scientific management enabled people to ignore much of what was alive and real in organizations. The mechanistic worldview and traditional managerial thought perpetuate the beliefs that some (those at the “top” of the organization) can see the entire system, which people (like consultants) can be independent and objective, and that one person (the heroic leader) can direct and control the organization. These are false beliefs that mesh with the emotional needs of followers and leaders to create a system of thought conducive to the emergence of heroic leaders.

What is authentic cannot be denied forever. Today those aspects of life

long denied are pushing themselves to the surface of our consciousness. Most leaders, if they are honest, will admit their confusion and sense of inadequacy as to what is really going on in the world, in their industry, and in the organization they lead. The metaphor for the times in which we live is the organization (and other networked systems) as a living system that is chaotic, complex, creative, confusing, ambiguous, paradoxical, uncontrollable, and unpredictable filled with conflicting values, choices, and demands. Living systems, in time of great transformations, are simply too complex and unmanageable for one leader to bring about superlative performance.

We know one person cannot rescue us even as we look for heroes. We know we cannot solve our organizational problems by replacing leaders on a regular basis. We need leadership behavior by everyone at all levels of our organizations. Leadership in a living system might be thought of as a fractal pattern of authenticity and influence that brings forth the inherent potential of the system. Or, in other words, leadership in organizations is the natural and authentic behavior of people throughout the organization as they work together to live the enterprise's vision, values, and purpose. In a living system each authentic life expresses nature's potential for the whole. We bring forth the potential inherent in any community by creating conditions that allow each person to be who they are and contribute their gifts to the enterprise when the moment comes for their unique talent or knowledge.

The job of the most powerful leader is to know the organization's reality, to guide the process of developing its shared identity (vision, values, and purpose), and to create conditions so people can share information and interact authentically with others as they self-organize around the organization's identity.

We need, however, more than distributed leadership in our organizations. We also need the few extraordinary women and men who go far beyond leadership in their own development. People, who move through chaos with courage, maintain their ideals, carry our hope, and reflect back to each who follows the deep potential within each of us and within each organization. People with such gifts are not always visible in our organizations. They are often the rebels and outliers of the organization marginalized because they are threats to the established people, methods, and ways of doing things. We need these people to be courageous as they stand out from the ordinary and lead our own evolution. The wise leader looks for these people and supports them and does not scapegoat, demonize, and denigrate them.

I hope Patricia A. Harvey has the wisdom and strength to resist the

attraction and trap of heroic leadership. I hope she knows that the leadership she needs is waiting to emerge from within the school district. She doesn't have to do all the leadership work by herself. I hope she creates the conditions that will bring forth the natural system dynamics and vast untapped human potential in the St. Paul public school system. Finally I hope the members of that school system take personal responsibility for creating the future they want for their children and themselves.