

# PAMPHLET 67

## A CHANGE OF MIND

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Everything I thought I knew about leadership is wrong.

Mort Myerson

Former Chairman and CEO of Perot Systems

In Pamphlet 66 I discussed leadership at the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and HealthPartners (a family of non-profit health care organizations in Minnesota) and the need for leaders in those organizations to change how they think about work, leadership, and organizations if they are to become healthy, innovative, and sustainable enterprises. I wrote that the reports on these organizations only captured the “tip of the iceberg.” I also wrote that the “the cancer within MnDOT runs wide and deep.”

Recent new reports confirm that belief. Employees report on engineers at MnDOT “cozy” with consultants and of contractors who build roads with inferior products and poor workmanship. Employees tell of “fuzzy” math used to justify the use of consultants and a lack of accountability for contractor errors—often costly. Employees describe overtime abuses that pad retirement benefits, “fluff” training, and luxurious meeting locations for this state agency. The list goes on and on. One employee asking for leadership wrote: “We are not all corrupt employees, you know.” MnDOT is a leaderless organization of abusive, entitled, irresponsible, paternalistic, and unaccountable executives. A deeper look at HealthPartners would uncover the same dynamics—organizational systems rot from the top down. MnDOT and HealthPartners are not unique.

How do we “change our minds” about how we lead in the profound way the quote of Mort Myerson describes so we can lead healthy, innovative, and sustainable organizations that can solve the massive problems that face the world as we enter a prolonged period of local and global crisis?

Quantum theory is a strange, unexpected, paradoxical reality utterly different from Newtonian physics. The early scientists who studied quantum theory found they lacked the thought processes and language necessary to understand their new observations. Emotionally this change was painful, confusing, frightening, and required an inner shift to make sense of what they saw in the subatomic world.

Physicist Werner Heisenberg:

. . . when new groups of phenomena compel changes in the pattern of thought . . . even the most eminent of physicists find immense difficulties. For the demand for change in the thought pattern may engender the feeling that the ground is to be pulled from under one's feet. . . . I believe that the difficulties at this point can hardly be overestimated. Once one has experienced the desperation with which clever and conciliatory men of science react to the demand for a change in the thought pattern, one can only be amazed that such revolutions in science have actually been possible at all.

The existential crisis of the quantum physicist, not unlike the spiritual awakening of the alcoholic (most similar to what is needed at MnDOT and HealthPartners), and the moment of metanoia (a change of the inner man) of leader Mort Myerson are similar as each requires a temporary surrender of the ego, a re-ordering of the psyche, and a fundamental shift of perception. None will ever see the world in the same ways again. From this new understanding, new mental models and techniques emerge.

The inner shift needed to change our leadership to fit the times in which we live is not “from” something “to” something else. Instead the shift expands our consciousness to a more encompassing view of life. We become open to such an expansion of our awareness by pain, choice, or accident. Involuntary pain is the historical path to change—fraught with delay, danger, and unnecessary loss.

We can change faster, more effectively, and with less threat to our existence if we go into our despair intentionally. Few have the courage to do so. Rollo May described despair as a refusal to be oneself. The great enemy of pretense, despair acts as the foe of denial and demands that we face the realities of life. Despair prepares us for creative new possibilities. Instead of waiting to “hit bottom,” (and resisting every step of the way) we can go into our despair intentionally, confident that we can come out the other side ready for exciting new possibilities. In the process we can ignite spirit in our lives and bring maturity to our souls.

MnDOT and HealthPartners are organizations in despair. They can resist change, defend their shortcomings, demonize the messengers, and suffer greatly. Or new leaders can be responsible, accountable, lead, and step courageously and intentionally into the despair of these organizations.

The shift of mind requires that we learn much and begin to change how we perceive the world and our organizations. We open our minds but also our hearts so we can feel the “rightness” of new ways to perceive life and can connect with ourselves and others. We increase the diversity of the lenses we look through. My late friend Bob Terry wrote in *Authentic Leadership*: “Our creativity is proportional to our metaphorical diversity. The more metaphors we use, the more

we enrich our view of life and the more unexamined aspects of life reveal themselves to us.”

While I led the change process I wrote about in Pamphlet 59, I realized that we think of organizations and the people in them as machines. Leadership from this metaphor emphasizes the qualities of a machine: control, stability, efficiency, reliability, prediction, measurement and production of results, and the whole arsenal of competitive, adversarial systems. Life in this world is black and white; the grays are denied. Most of what is important in life is found in the grays.

The machine metaphor provided the conceptual framework for how we designed organizations and management practices over the past 300 years. We created bureaucracies with hierarchal, compartmentalized, and functionalized departments with rigid and impermeable boundaries. Managers control people with performance appraisals, discipline procedures, and an unlimited variety of incentive plans. Conformity became the first rule of organizational life. Heroic leaders stay away from workers and creativity, initiative, and innovation come from the top or from outside the organization. Organizations became entitled, addictive, and paternalistic. The cultures of MnDOT and HealthPartners reflect the shadow side of this organizational model.

This metaphor of the machine works fine—for machinery, space travel, and linear work processes. The gigantic and life-altering mistake was the application of the machine metaphor to people and other living things, including organizations. People began to think mechanically and acted like machines and treated one another as machines. Leaders in this metaphor act like mechanics who fix machinery.

With the machine metaphor the five senses no longer mattered and ethics, spirit, values, quality, and consciousness were marginalized. We see in MnDOT and HealthPartners (and so many other organizations) the outcome of this marginalization. How does thinking of the organization and people as machines work for us?

This simple “awakening” began a profound expansion of my awareness and, therefore, my life and leadership options. I began a personal journey that took me deep into quantum physics, chaos/complexity theory, and other life sciences as well as the humanities, spirituality, humanistic psychology, and existential philosophy, and I learned new ways to live and lead.

Our learning requires that we internalize the craziness of a belief system and behaviors that deny so much of our aliveness--our spirit, our emotions, and our intuition--and then ignore, for the most part, the destructiveness of those aspects of ourselves when expressed indirectly. We see how the “framed for public consumption” values, commitments, and statements of our integrity show our ethical potential but not its actuality, in so many cases. In the depths of our

despair we see the inhumanity and even evil that emerges from the large shadow world of organizations. We grasp the insanity of a system of thought that requires people and organizations to be mediocre and that continues to jump at every quick-fix solution put forth. A quick fix for what? To be mediocre in new and exciting ways?

We finally, like Mort Myerson, understand that much of what we think we know about leadership is wrong. The foundation of beliefs and practices that provided meaning and structure in organizations in the earlier stages of our development are now understood to be false, destructive, and filled with unintended consequences when applied to people and organizations. Even if we had superficial material success, we, as leaders, realize the impact our behavior has on others and on the sustainability of our organizations. We may feel, like Werner Heisenberg, that the ground has been pulled out from under us. We see so much more possibility. We study and begin to learn the essence of a new worldview.

In the past century new metaphors that offer a more comprehensive and inclusive view of the world emerged from biology, ecology, quantum physics, chaos and complexity theory, and other sciences. These metaphors describe “living systems,” such as people and organizations, as alive, interconnected, and energy filled creative potential. Joined with psychology, philosophy, and spirituality the metaphors of these sciences provide the concepts of a new worldview. The science teaches us about adaptation, creativity, and sustainability while the spiritual, psychological, and philosophical teach us about freedom, responsibility, and accountability.

The implications of an ecological worldview for leadership and organizational life are profound. The diversity we force into conformity becomes the essence of life and sustainability. The truths we do not talk about become essential to our development. The information we hoard becomes nutrition for the enterprise. The chaos and conflict we dampen become the energy of creativity. The relationships we refuse become the conduits of innovation. The emotions we deny become life’s energy from which vitality emerges. The false values we espouse become real and inspire courage. The personal and organizational identities we neglect to get acquainted with become the path to authenticity and provide the conceptual controls that guide members of our organizations toward a common destination.

Our role as leaders shifts from heroic control to authentic influence. We create conditions that free life’s natural processes within our organizations and align the organization’s energy around the shared identity of purpose, values, and vision. We confront employees with their freedom, accountability, and responsibility so they can lead the movement toward the organization’s vision.

We still lead, but differently. Instead of telling people what to do, we ask them questions and provide them with information. We give them time to be in

relationship together so the wisdom in the system can emerge. We give people freedom to make decisions and to take action about the work they do, and we hold them accountable. We don't do their work for them. We teach others how to do things for themselves and require them to do so. Instead of talking we listen. Instead of trying to control people we create conditions that free them to use their capabilities. Most of all we model the change we want to see in others. Leaders in this metaphor act like mature human beings in relationship with followers.

We see changes in people. We notice that those who have been among the walking dead for years come alive and make important new contributions. We recognize unnoticed talents in people and feel new energy in them as they make new contributions. People take new initiative, and teams perform great feats. The organization's performance improves in dramatic and unpredictable ways.

Leadership development is difficult and requires tremendous commitment: to new learning, feedback and dialogue, a deep examination of beliefs, and a decision to change fundamental assumptions. Our maturity requires the development of latent capabilities, and the practice of new skills.

Our insights and "change of mind" invite us to rebel against the traditional ways we live, think, and lead and to do so in creative ways. This personal development requires the courage of a pioneer, the honesty of a child, the imagination of an artist, and the confidence of the naïve. We go forward courageously into the chaos of life with wise uncertainty. This describes the new leader—a combination of rebel and artist.

This kind of change can take place at MnDOT and HealthPartners. But first those organizations need to find leaders with the courage, maturity, integrity, and commitment to make the values the organizations espouse real. The rest of the world yearns for the same kind of leadership.

Why would we do this hard work? We do it because we want a sustainable world for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. People who care do this hard work willingly.