

Leadership Perfected: Leading from the Whole You

By Brian Brittain

The choir that my wife sings in was recently practicing for a performance that included a sample of Leonard Cohen songs. Between rehearsals, Elizabeth would wander around the house singing these songs, which included **Anthem**, one of my favorites. The chorus stayed with me like a meditation:

"Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack - a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

I make my living advising CEOs and senior leaders on how to be more effective in their leadership style and conduct. If there is one message I would like to instill in these leaders, it is that phrase from Leonard Cohen's song.

Why would I want to say, "Forget your perfect offering?" The particular idea of perfection that Cohen talks about refers to situations in which we might present a well prepared, rational point of view based on what we have learned from others as the appropriate response to a specific situation. But when we operate from the perspective of always having to put forward our "perfect offering," we can easily become separated from our true nature and come across as too formal, distant and inauthentic.

During the past week, I found myself in two conversations over the assessment and development plans of a couple of senior executives. These were three-way conversations between the CEO, the senior VP, and me, the coach. In these meetings, the CEO was gently critiquing his direct report, suggesting they were too "robotic" or "clinical" in their presentations and interactions with their teams. Both leaders were encouraging their direct reports to be more authentic: "Just be yourself, Jim. Your presentation was all there - there were no holes in it at all, but we don't know who YOU are." What was implied was that the presentation was *too much there*; there was too much perfect presentation and not enough Jim in the expression of the presentation. The point being made to the

subordinate is that it's not this idea of perfection that connects, and influences conduct, but that interaction and delivery need to come from the integration of both the head and the heart; they need to be both prepared and not prepared.

In the corporate world, competitive pressures encourage younger aspiring managers to mimic the leadership behaviour of others, usually their direct superior, while adhering to the party line. Thus they become good performers, but they often lack the self-awareness and courage to project their own values, personality traits and specific points of view into their leadership interactions with others. They aspire to, and become accomplished at various external standards of perfection or excellence. These young, bright ambitious managers have largely been promoted because they have been among the best at "getting results" - results others wanted and expected of them. There has been little or no value placed on *how* they get the results. The "how" involves bringing their complete selves into the interactions. At some point, these young leaders need to abandon these external ideas and author their own leadership points of view. They need to become aware of and access their unique mix of gifts and talents and express these in their creative responses to the situation at hand.

Maturing as a leader involves responding to an internal calling or the urge to give our innate gifts away, "our offering" to the situation in which we find ourselves. Too often and for too long we are not aware of these gifts, deny them, don't trust them, or don't value them; therefore we not only deny the personal gifts we bring, but we also block the inner calling to give those gifts away.

Trusting in your Unique Gifts

The idea of "leadership perfected" needn't be thought of as a concept or standard that is preconceived, well-rehearsed, and risk free. Such an approach would of necessity exclude any scope for a creative response to new situations that can arise at any time. Instead, we could think of leadership perfected as an ever-evolving response to what is required in the moment. To be truly effective and to resonate

with an audience, that leadership response can't come from a notion of how we think we *should* act, but must come from the immediacy of oneself in the moment. In this alternative view of perfection, it is more about how well we understand and respond to a situation, rather than how well prepared we are in advance, for our best guess of how the situation will play out. To use a military analogy, the latter approach would be like that of a general whose strategies are based on what worked in the last war.

In a corporate world conditioned to equate the idea of performance with getting results through study and hard work, often like the boss did, the idea of equating effective leadership with spontaneity and improvisation in the moment could seem counterintuitive. But the creativity that emerges when we respond to situations from the immediacy of ourselves requires a high level of self-awareness, trust and comfort in who we are and what we perhaps unconsciously know, in order to respond to situations as they arise. This personal toolkit is our mix of mostly hardwired gifts, talents and stored skilled knowledge that we must learn to integrate, refine and express intuitively in the moment. Great leaders are masters of self-regulation in the moment, because they know themselves well enough that they are able to monitor and regulate those gifts, spontaneously, as the situation requires. This is a very different notion of perfection than scripting out what one should say and do ahead of time, or doing what one thinks one is supposed to do in any given situation, based on external standards and expectations.

Although the concept and language of "making an offering" may not have currency in the language of business, it is nevertheless what we do without thinking whenever we're fully engaged and committed to the situation we find ourselves in. As business leaders, when we address a situation both spontaneously and deliberately, by offering the benefits of our gifts as applied to vision and leadership, are we not offering up ourselves? People who are truly creating out of the immediacy of themselves would testify to the vulnerability and uncertainty they experience in such moments. Ironically, it is out of such moments of vulnerability and

uncertainty that we can be uniquely ourselves, because such moments mark the juncture where we've exhausted what we've learned from others and must start expressing what is uniquely ourselves. Words like "intuition," "faith" and "creativity" speak to our ability to step out from the known; and this is how we bring something new and spontaneous to the situation. This allows for the *crack that lets the light in*. It is in such moments that we are truly creative.

Leading in a VUCA World

From the perspective of creativity, *the crack that lets the light in* has huge possibilities for interpretation and meaning. Our willingness to be our authentic selves, trust our intuition and stored skilled knowledge in the moment creates space - a "crack" or an opening for inspiration that can be channeled through our unique selves. The inspiration of insight we bring to the situation at hand is perhaps facilitated by the crack, which in turn is facilitated and necessitated by the VUCA world we are operating in. A VUCA world is a term currently in vogue with the U.S. military. It represents a world full of volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity. This reality is certainly reflected in the world of leadership and business these days. In such a world, a perfect offering as Cohen meant it, is out-dated as soon as it is created.

The "crack" can mean different things. It is a powerful symbol of "undoing," or irregularity, or randomness. It is an artifact of this VUCA world. It is something that occurs despite our best efforts, our most laid-out plans. We can also think of the crack as something "unscheduled," and it can be something as mundane as an uninvited guest or as profound as a life-disrupting (and thus, life changing) event.

In the pre-VUCA era, we enjoyed many years of relative stability and predictable growth in the world of business. Most of our leaders grew up in a world where certainty was prized and where uncertainty was to be avoided. Leadership was expected to provide the answers with assuredness. No one liked to be surprised.

Remember the slogan from the Holiday Inn commercial: *"The best surprise is no surprise at all."* In the VUCA world of today, that is no longer the responsible view. A good leader has to expect surprises, has to expect cracks, and become an expert at anticipating, adjusting to, and accommodating cracks.

The crack can therefore represent life and circumstance as they actually unfold; something that we do not control. It is something that disrupts our internal mental model of how the universe works. It is the outlier, the "Black Swan"¹ - something existing in the tail of our "normal" distribution. It forces us to redefine our conception of "normal" and "perfect."

The crack lets light in simply because the crack opens us and exposes us to a larger reality existing outside the confines of our "mental model" of order and regularity. What is "light" but awareness and insight -our "aha" moments?

Light is not something we can factor in, since the power of light, in this context, is its surprise factor. What we can do, however, is anticipate its inevitability, prepare ourselves for its likelihood, through paying exquisite attention to our situation and then just adjust to it, revise our preconceptions, and then self-regulate our behaviour and response. The light and the crack are therefore coexistent, for without the crack, there is no illumination.

The challenge, and therefore the true test of character, lies not in the presumed perfect plans we make, the apparently perfect life we've built, or the apparently perfect career trajectory we've traversed; but in how we respond to the unscheduled events, the cracks, that interfere with our conceptions of the perfect offering, or the perfect life. The healer must become wounded, and empathize with the wounded, to become a better healer. The leader must become lost at times in order to become a visionary leader.

¹ The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

First, Know Yourself

How do we prepare ourselves as leaders to be able to see and respond to the light that the crack enables? We begin by taking stock of ourselves; knowing what our particular mix of gifts, talents and flaws are. We need to take time-out to witness, appreciate and be able to laugh at our vanity, our interpersonal derailers, as well as understand and celebrate our emotional competence. In essence, we need to "reboot." It is only when we can step outside of and observe ourselves as we are seen by others, that we can free ourselves of the drudgery of being foot soldiers to conformity; and ironically, it is only having done that, that we can constructively be ourselves and re-brand and re-offer our unique set of talents. This is the job of the executive coach; to help in this process and journey.

Leadership perfected is now reframed, because it is now offered from the uniqueness of who we are - a self-perception that we can appreciate our individuality blended with our shared foolishness, our yearning for perfection with our collective inertia and fear of change. Previously our leadership offering was made only from a place of artificial and superficial strength, others' expectations, and more than likely from a place of arrogance. But now, thanks to the light the crack made possible, we can offer our gifts from a place of humility and wholeness, which really is nothing more than our awareness of our commonality, as simultaneously gifted and foolish creatures.

This is where true leadership is born, out of our vulnerability. For as Lao Tzu says,

"One who knows his lot to be the lot of all other men is a safe man to guide them."²

² Witter Bynner, Trans., *The Way of Life, According to Lao Tzu*, Stanza 31. Capricorn Books, 1962 printing

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