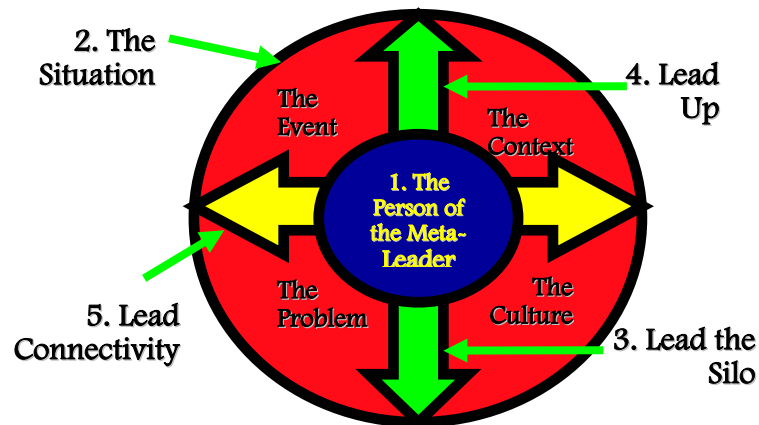


# THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF META-LEADERSHIP

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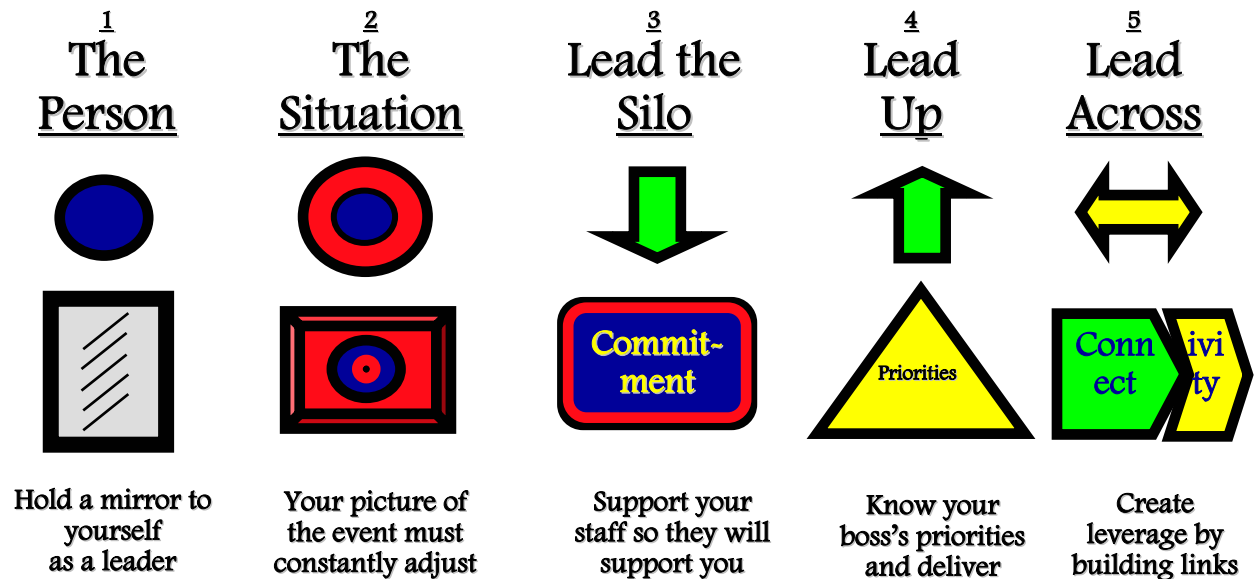
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**Abstract**

There are leaders whose scope of thinking, influence, and accomplishment extends far beyond their formal or expected bounds of authority. Just as “meta-research” seeks systematic themes across many lines of study, these “meta-leaders” generate widespread and cohesive action and impact that expands their domain of influence and leverage. Derived through observation and analysis of leaders in crisis circumstances, the five dimensions of meta-leadership practice and analysis serve as an organizing framework for classifying the foci of leadership study. These dimensions are: 1) the person of the leader and his/her awareness or problem assessment; 2) the problem, change, or crisis which compels response; 3) leading one’s entity and/or operating in one’s designated purview of authority; 4) leading up to bosses or those to whom one is accountable; and 5) leading cross-system connectivity. Meta-leadership is particularly valuable in circumstances when many different organizations and entities must be brought together for common purposes.



## **The Five Dimensions of Meta-Leadership: Introduction**

The complexities of leadership are often obscured by the inclination to view it as a top-down process of leader leading follower, typical of hierarchical organizations. The boss-to-employee relationship is formalized in clear roles, rules, job descriptions, and responsibilities that prescribed performance and productivity expectations (Fernandez, 1991). This dyadic image however does not capture what occurs when people – leaders – in bureaucratic organizations seek to influence and activate change well above and beyond established lines of their decision-making and control. These leaders are driven by a purpose broader than that prescribed by their formal roles, and are therefore motivated and capable of acting in ways that transcend usual organizational confines. We describe such broadly envisioned, overarching leadership as “meta-leadership<sup>1</sup>” (Marcus, Dorn, & Henderson, 2006).

The prefix “meta” is likened to its use in “meta-research,” which systematically identifies cross-cutting themes found in many different studies, or “meta-analysis,” which likewise combines and synthesizes findings about a range of questions in search of overarching thinking and conclusion.

Meta-leaders seek to achieve results that cannot be accomplished by one organization, unit, or department alone - typically their own - in isolation. Their objective is often a “social good:” improved community preparedness and national security; better health, patient care and patient safety; or higher corporate productivity. These broad objectives both appeal to and require participation by people who work in different sectors – public, private, or community-

based - or different levels of a structured hierarchical framework. By intentionally linking the efforts of these many people and many otherwise disconnected organizational units, the meta-leader – operating often without direct authority - is able to leverage and integrate their activities to accomplish something that would not otherwise be achievable (Schein, 2004). There is value in both the outcome - the “impact value” - as well as in the experience of the process - the “collaborative value”. The tangible progress – impact - galvanizes the experience and personal rewards of working together – collaboration - and vice versa. The results are captivating and mutually reinforcing.

Meta-leaders inspire others with their capacity to articulate and achieve these linkages and outcomes, appealing to more than just personal gain or parochial organizational promotion. Meta-leaders convincingly make the case that by acting and interacting above, beyond, and across the confines of their own bureaucratic entities, the overall enterprise will know more and accomplish more, and therefore the work for people involved will be more fulfilling and satisfying. Able to identify the gaps between what could or must be done and the will and capacity to do it, meta-leaders coalesce the knowledge, organizational workings, and frame of reference to achieve an otherwise unachievable cohesion of effort (Kotter, 1996). When effectively practiced, the vision portrayed by the meta-leader and the process charted are so compelling that others follow (Nanus, 1992).

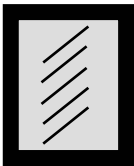
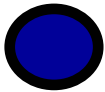
## **The Five Dimensions of Meta-Leadership: Design, Concept and Practice**

By design, meta-leadership concept and practice themes address the complexities of generating a unity of action when many different people, organizational units, and even competing priorities are focused into a broadly adopted strategy, plan, or mission (Marcus et al., 2006). In concept, it is a question of best linking solution to problem: what personal and contextual factors affect what meta-leaders see, perceive, decide, and ultimately act upon (Northouse, 2004)? In practice, it is a puzzle of optimally engaging three facets - up, down, and across - of organizational connectivity: who are the many people that must be influenced and how can they best be leveraged to prompt forward motion? And insofar as stakeholders wrestle with what they are able to achieve and their role in the overall enterprise, the meta-leadership model described here focuses attention and helps categorize the scope of people, factors, and considerations that are in the purview of this integrated enterprise.

These broad analytic themes translate into the five dimensions of meta-leadership practice: 1) the person of the leader and his/her awareness or problem assessment; 2) the problem, change, or crisis which compels response; 3) leading one's entity and/or operating in one's designated purview of authority; 4) leading up to bosses or those to whom one is accountable; and 5) leading cross-system connectivity. The meta-leader operates along these five domains of action, variably leveraging each dimension of thinking and practice as called for by circumstances, and always having these different yet complementary perspectives at hand.

One recognizes in these five dimensions long-standing themes present in the literature and practice of leadership. What is unique about meta-leadership concept and practice is the intent to draw these many elements into a unified method. The description of the dimensions below does not intend to describe or reference all that has been said or could be said on each topic, but rather to describe key aspects and their fit into the overall framework.

## <sup>1</sup> The Person



**Hold a mirror to  
yourself  
as a leader**

1. THE PERSON OF THE META-LEADER: Personality, experience, culture, emotional expression, and character are significant factors in the conduct and impact of meta-leaders: the “who” of the construct (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Trompenaars, 1994). And yet, these very individual and personal qualities vary significantly from leader to leader. Knowing that many different personality types can achieve the mantle of meta-leader, what common qualities distinguish those able to from those unable to achieve such far-reaching influence?

Meta-leaders tend to be “big thinkers.” These are people willing to take a large and complex problem and - with courage and fortitude in hand - search a wide expanse for solutions

(Giuliani, 2002). They have abundant curiosity and prolific imagination to contemplate and activate that which has not been otherwise discovered (Sternberg, 2006, 2007). They are integrative strategists, charting a course that allows stakeholders to operationally link and leverage one another in order to accomplish shared objectives. And most importantly, sometimes against the odds, they have a penchant and capacity for making meaningful things happen (Gardner, 1990).

Meta-leaders also possess what is referred to by Daniel Goleman as “emotional intelligence” (Burns, 1979; Goleman, 1996). People who direct large scale or complex initiatives must convey these attributes: 1) self-awareness; 2) self-regulation; 3) motivation; 4) empathy; and 5) social skills. Because they are watched and challenged by audiences beyond their usual social circles, meta-leaders must be comfortable in their own surroundings, in the milieu of others, and must have the talent to make other people feel comfortable and assured. The self-discipline, drive, understanding, and capacity to form meaningful and satisfying relationships are critical in the effort to cross the usual divides and boundaries of organizational, professional, and cultural association (Goleman, 2001).

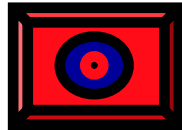
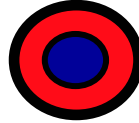
This meta-leader aptitude for seeing the bigger picture is particularly important in a crisis. When people are in crisis - or in a severe, high consequence conflict – the attendant reactions commonly drive them to their emotional “basement,” where fright sparks the “triple f,” “flight-fight-freeze” response. For example, in a disaster, fear and terror propel people to this emotional basement, driven by the amygdala – that portion of the brain that responds to fear - and the hindbrain (Cannon, 1929, q.v. Bracha, Ralston, Matsukawa, Williams, & Bracha, 2004). The

amygdala has important protective and survival functions (Society for Neuroscience, 1998) – as shared with lower order species - though it also acts to overtake higher level thinking and strategic behavior in favor of panicked reaction. Under such stressful conditions, the emotional intelligence, wide purview, and skills of the meta-leader are of critical importance. How does this work?

It takes great stamina during high stress circumstances to lead people from their basement to the “tool box” of effective routines and responses, functions of the middle level of the brain: the practiced procedures, protocols, or patterns of past experiences that trigger constructive activity and an aura of relative calm (Zander & Zander, 2000). The meta-leader - by virtue of emotional intelligence and wide outlook - has the perspective to chart the possibilities and prompt this vital climb (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Through disciplined self-awareness, he or she is able to manage the magnitude of his or her stress, and with that, rapidly recover the composure required to guide others systematically up from the “basement.” Having accomplished that and with constructive action in place, the meta-leader is then able to raise him or herself to the highest order of thinking, to the cortex or “new brain,” to formulate strategic links and leverages that guide and direct people beyond the crisis. The meta-leader has the experience and maturity to identify gaps between problem and the response to it and then to inspire the connectivity of action and confidence of purpose under even the most trying of circumstances (Goleman, 2006). This aptitude for the wide purview, strategic direction, and then capacity to influence beyond his or her immediate domain encapsulates the unique contributions of the meta-leader.



2  
**The  
Situation**



**Your picture of  
the event must  
constantly adjust**

2. THE PROBLEM, CHANGE, OR CRISIS: Finding the most appropriate solution to a problem or response to a crisis depends first on precisely determining what is occurring (Bransford & Stein, 1993; Pretz, Naples, & Sternberg, 2003). This is a difficult task because there is often - if not always - a gap between objective reality and subjective assessment (e.g., Hazleton, Cupach, & Canary, 1987). This is more likely to occur when many different people and organizational units are involved, when a great deal of information is required to diagnose the problem, when the stakes and emotions are high, and when the analysis and action are time constrained. In other words, the greater the complexity, the more difficult it is to develop a factual, evidence-based, clear, and actionable description of what is occurring. This objective though elusive depiction of reality is at the heart of dimension two of meta-leadership.

To understand the complexities of dimension two is to grasp the disparities between what one believes to be true and the actual truth (Mullin, 2002). This is a particularly cogent problem in the midst of an unfolding crisis. In a volatile and quickly changing scenario, the gap is

inevitable, since it takes time for information to emerge and assessments to evolve. In practice, this requires the meta-leader to grasp, to work with, and to narrow that likely reality-belief gap, aided by the collection of further information, the passage of time, and the perspective of hindsight. Such complex circumstances demand the capacities and skills for strategic “situational awareness,” (e.g., O'Brien & O'Hare, 2007) the connectivity between the personal capacities and understandings embedded in meta-leadership dimension one and the realities of the situation that are addressed in dimension two.

Why is incisive situational awareness – what could be called “gap closing” - key to meta-leadership? In a complex situation, the many stakeholders involved naturally each have their own analysis and interpretation of the “objective problem” in accord with their distinct interests, concerns, and purposes (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). In looking for ways by which those differences could complement rather than contradict one another, the meta-leader links, leverages, and integrates different perspectives into a value added prospect, in effect closing the gaps and building connectivity among those disparate views. With that, the differences are less likely to serve as detractors: potential discord is transformed into an opportunity for acquiring broad perspective. This analysis at times requires identification of confusing cross-cutting themes, priorities, and considerations in order to derive the most accurate “picture” of the problem or event that is unfolding. The meta-leader recognizes that the size of the gap will shift as time and events unfold. In practice, during a high casualty disaster, the anticipation of additional and more accurate information and the expectation that the situation will remain fluid for some time does not relieve the meta-leader of responsibility: it puts even more pressure to take action before all the facts are in place and the crisis has subsided. Herein

one finds both the tension and the paradox of dimension two. Often, a quick assessment that is close to the mark is better than a slow though more accurate one that comes too late to make a difference.

How does the meta-leader serve to close this gap between what is objectively happening and what is perceived to be in progress? How can he or she accomplish accurate situational awareness and problem assessment under stressful circumstances? What if in the vacuum of information there grow myths which then assume their own false credibility? Prompting the emotional intelligence and capacities outlined in the first dimension of meta-leadership, he or she applies the talent, fortitude, curiosity and experience to distinguish what is important from what is less so; identifies what are cohesive priorities from those that are not; and gathers the confidence and courage to make decisions and take action based on calculated speculation and risk. The meta-leader understands those risks, recognizing that any decision or action could impose differential perils and downsides for each of the different stakeholders. The meta-leader also calculates the upsides of those decisions and actions, again understanding that “success” will be measured differently by each stakeholder that is affected (Daly & Watkins, 2006).

What happens in the absence of meta-leadership? Pragmatic situational awareness and problem assessment suffers when the leader is distracted or simply misconstrues what is occurring: the gap between perception and reality has its own dangers (Mullin, 2002; O'Brien & O'Hare, 2007). There are numerous reasons why this happens and why it happens often. It could be a function of a parochial point of view: the leader is caught by a strong case of denial prompted by a multitude of personal or professional explanations, seeing the expected or the

desired and missing information that does not correspond. It could be from a lack of experience necessary to identify and understand what is happening. Some leaders demand to have all the information before making a decision, and in the process, cause a delay that further exacerbates the original problem. At times, there is an overload of information – much of it low quality and distracting - that becomes difficult if not impossible to use and decipher as important facts become lost in a mass of data (O'Reilly, 1980). Functionally, these conditions describe the leader who is in the “basement,” blind, impotent, or as often happens, solving what he or she sees as the convenient or soluble problem rather than the one that is really at hand. When this happens, the leader magnifies the extent or implications of the problem by frustrating or preventing effective corrective action. Myths like mold appear and thrive. This phenomenon was demonstrated in a number of leadership actions during the response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, as observed on-site by one of the authors.

The meta-leader has the perspective and measured patience to work with ambiguity. If the situation was clear and every action had a certain and predictable cause and effect, the skills and aptitude of the meta-leader likely would not be called into action. However, crisis situations, high consequence organizational predicaments, and difficult inter-personal conflict each by their nature do not come with clearly obvious computations for what is right and what is wrong (Slaikeu, 1998). Not everyone faced with these ordeals is equally able to establish a calculated assessment and then rise to the challenge: these are among the strategic and analytic capacities uniquely associated with the meta-leader.

<sup>3</sup>  
**Lead the  
Silo**



**Support your  
staff so they will  
support you**

3. LEADING ONE'S ENTITY AND/OR OPERATING IN ONE'S DESIGNATED PURVIEW OF AUTHORITY: In complex environments – typified by multiple organizations, departments, and units operating in overlapping domains - those people who arise as meta-leaders rarely operate as independent actors: they have their own organizational base of operations within which followers see them in charge (Phillips & Loy, 2003). In that entity, the leader carries authority, has resources at his or her disposal, and functions within a set of rules and roles that define expectations and requirements. Those subordinates expect adherence to allegiances and loyalties, trusting that the leader will advocate on behalf of their best interests (Heifetz, 1999). In bureaucratic terms, these accomplishments are often measured in expanding resources, authority, or autonomy for the entity and its members. In many bureaucratic settings, departments and divisions compete amongst one another, and followers expect their leaders to triumph on their behalf (Lee & Dale, 1998).

For the would-be meta-leader, the support of his or her constituents is essential to achieving influence within the larger system. After all, why would people outside the organization respect and follow the meta-leader if his or her people are not in support? For the meta-leader, the potential quandary is in treading that fine line between advocating on behalf of the larger system mission and meeting expectations of his or her direct reports. There are a number of elements required to make this happen. The meta-leader must articulate and embody the shared mission in a way that respects the identity of each individual constituency while not negating that of his or her own. And there must be demonstrated commitment to constituents if he or she is to get that same commitment in return (Romzek, 1990). It is as if leader and followers interact on the premise, “What could I do to make you a success?” Oftentimes, that commitment is expected to run uni-dimensionally from the subordinate up to the leader. Not so for the meta-leader. If commitment is to be generated and championed in many directions and for shared purposes, it must first emanate from the meta-leader’s home base. The meta-leader is expressively committed to his or her followers, and so generates that same commitment in response.

The meta-leader is a leader of leaders, and fosters leadership development throughout the system, though first at home among his or her constituents. Leadership, after all, does not reside with one person. In robust organizations, it is embedded among many people and at multiple levels of the hierarchy (Northouse, 2004). Meta-leaders drive the leadership learning curve – effective leadership is a continuous learning process - encouraging those who work under their supervision: building, marshalling, and communicating a vision and a message that is as a group developed, executed, assessed, and persistently adjusted and improved as contingencies require

(Senge, 1994). In this way, the meta-leader fosters meta-followership within his or her entity: proactive thinkers and doers who are able to greatly expand and inspire the impact which they together seek to achieve. Doing this requires a sense of leadership confidence and security: strong, smart, capable followers are not seen as a threat but rather as a vital asset (Sternberg, 2007). In this way, the meta-leader seeks “dogs that hunt:” empowered people who share the passion, commitment, instinct, and capacity to get things done<sup>2</sup>.

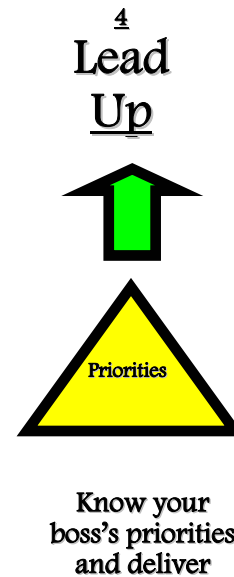
Guiding and directing behavior from atop the hierarchy, the meta-leader recognizes that a collaborative, attuned strategy among senior leadership sets the tone and tenor for the organization. To be sure, problems, differences, and conflict are likely to emerge among people in charge (Ury). The question is whether those differences are readily resolved or conversely played out as policy and procedural contests that put lower ranking personnel at cross purposes. The meta-leader understands this “shadow effect” (Marcus, 1983) – the way relations at the highest levels affect operations at the front line – and uses it positively and proactively to enhance moral and shared purpose throughout the organization (Susskind, 1987).

What if the would-be meta-leader has not effectively engaged the commitment of his or her direct followers? It would be awkward and difficult for him or her to establish credibility in the wider system if that quality is not established in the home base of operations (Romzek, 1990). Followers in fact serve as ambassadors of the meta-leader’s vision, work, and intentions, amplifying the efforts of the meta-leader by creating their own linkages among counterparts in other organizations. Without their support, it would be difficult to leverage influence and activity beyond the scope of immediate authority. And of course, much of leadership is

modeling – thinking, behavior, and action that others not only follow, but mimic. Both strengths and weaknesses are imitated (Hermalin, 1998). If the leader demonstrates respect for subordinates, it is more likely that subordinates will do the same for those they supervise. And if subordinates are treated in a rude and punishing manner, that same behavior can be replicated out to the organization’s public, such as when customer service representatives who themselves are mistreated do the same to clients. Close-in colleagues and constituents know best their leader and often are the arbiters of their leader’s climb to meta-leader.

The unity of purpose and reliability of achievement that the meta-leader inspires throughout his or her direct domain of responsibility is the foundation for work beyond the direct confines of official authority and power. The confidence, direction, and dependability fostered within serve as the exemplar for what is communicated to the larger system of influence and action. That same momentum could serve to impress or intimidate his or her boss, a critical factor for the fourth dimension of meta-leadership.





4. **LEADING UP:** Most people who work in organizations have a boss. The Chief Executive Officer of a publicly traded corporation has the board of directors. Below the CEO are a series of subordinates who serve as boss to their staffs. Government agencies have strict supervisory oversight. And even the President, Governor, or Mayor must account to their electorates. Embedded in the culture of this country – founded as a rebellion to the monarchy - is a reluctance to invest too much power or authority in any one person to avoid its being exercised for abusive or inappropriate purposes. As a result, our culture has in both its public and private sectors a complex system of checks, balances, and oversights to limit autonomy and autocracy (Haynes, 1959).

Therefore, being able to effectively influence one's boss is an important element of wider leadership within the system. In government as well as in corporate settings, subject matter experts often report to elected or appointed authorities who are responsible for policy direction and strategic decision-making. While subordinates may not know more than their boss, they

often have a perspective on the work at hand that their boss does not. Because they are in closer proximity to that work, subordinates have a better sense for both real problems on the ground as well as solutions to address them. This perspective and functional interdependence could be a valuable asset to the boss, though much depends on how the information is delivered and how it is received.

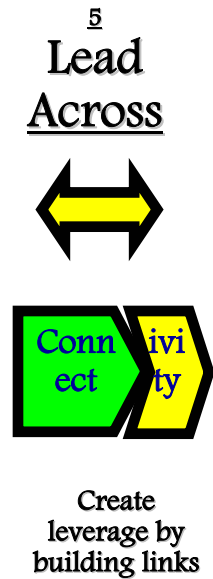
How is this leading up accomplished? The great meta-leader is a great subordinate: dependable, honest, reliable, and loyal. He or she validates the power and command equation, respecting and serving the objectives and proclivities of those in charge. In so doing, the meta-leader crafts vertical connectivity and bi-directional feedback. Influence is shaped by informing and educating his or her boss. Bosses of course vary in style and temperament, and the meta-leader appreciates that as with any relationship, this is one that must be carefully and strategically managed (Marcus et al., 2006). When this works well, the boss appreciates the prioritization and management of problems and decisions: the focus is on the truly important questions that are worthy of his or her time, thereby reducing distractions. In shaping that focus, the meta-leader intentionally and transparently communicates information and a variety of reasonable options in order to craft strategic assessment and solution building. The great subordinate manages assumptions, does not promise what cannot be delivered, and assures that the boss is never surprised. This last point is a sensitive matter. While bad news and valid criticism are hard to deliver, the meta-leader practices “truth to power”: anticipating and managing the dangers and distractions of explosive problems. In the best of circumstances, complements balance criticisms, and both are equally welcomed when honest and deserved (Kotter, 1999).

There is another important aspect to the fine art of leading up. What if the boss engages in immoral, illicit, or dangerous activity with the expectation that followers will do just that: accept without questioning? Herein reveals a moral responsibility for followers (Smiley, 1992). Just as the check and balance system works from boss to subordinate, so too must it at times function from subordinate to boss (Kellerman, 2004). Being a good subordinate does not imply passive compliance with inappropriate, unlawful, destructive behavior: it is not blind loyalty. It also at times requires the subordinate to draw the line, bypass immediate leaders and lead up above them, or at the extreme, to demonstrate the courage to resign.

It would be difficult if not impossible to meta-lead without the concurrence and support of one's boss. Since one function of the boss is to reign in and curb abuses of power, a boss with an overly active subordinate meta-leader may not only stop these activities, he or she may find them threatening to the point of dismissal. An unsympathetic boss could limit the would-be meta-leader's access to outside people. Worthwhile ideas and proposals could be disparaged. And obstacles and barriers could be imposed that would undermine the cause and purposes of the meta-leader.

In the ideal, with the boss on his or her side, the meta-leader is able to fashion wide influence throughout the system by virtue of the support and opportunities the boss is able to open. Herein rests the larger and very sensitive question of who gets the credit and reward. There are some bosses - often those high on the continuum of self-confidence - who welcome and encourage a subordinate with valuable ideas and strategies and who endorse the meta-

leader's larger presence in the system of influence and impact. That independence and those accomplishments are viewed by such a boss as a testament both to subordinates' talents and motivations as well as his or her own. Other bosses – obviously those far less secure with their role and presence – prefer to claim sole credit for those ideas and strategies in order to enhance their recognition and status on the larger scene. As appropriate to the situation, the meta-leader may very well conclude it best to allow the boss to take the recognition if it advances the larger purposes. In other words, one can at times generate significant though quiet influence through the domino effect: having other people join in carrying the ideas and intended impact forward. Most importantly, the meta-leader recognizes that one can guide the direction of an organization or system through numerous vantage points, and they are all worth exploring (Hesselheim, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996).



5. **LEADING CROSS-SYSTEM CONNECTIVITY:** In building a wide sphere of influence, the meta-leader grasps that just as vertical, “up-down” linkages are important, so too are horizontal linkages. By leveraging the capacity of many adjacent centers of expertise and capacity, the meta-leader is able to engage the spectrum of agencies and private interests that are to be recruited to a shared enterprise (Ashkenas et al., 2002). This is the value-added of the meta-leader: the ability to generate a common, multi-dimensional thread of interests and involvement among entities that look at a problem from very different yet complementary vantage points. By combining their assets and efforts, the meta-leader envisions and activates more than what any one entity could see or do on its own.

Why is this both important and difficult? Often, wide social problems and questions demand the engagement of a wide set of constituencies. These different groups and entities will not, on their own, recognize the lines of influence and capacity which they could generate together. In fact, they might very well see themselves in competition with one another: if credit

or benefit falls to one entity more than another, the noble purposes can be undermined by those who question “what’s in it for me?” The meta-leader is able to focus attention on the shared purposes while at the same time tempering those forces of suspicion and jealousy that constrain their achievement (Marcus et al., 2006).

How is this accomplished? The meta-leader is keen to identify and understand the individual intrinsic motives of these different stakeholders and constituencies in generating a connectivity of thinking and action. The job is in aligning these disparate yet complementary cognitive spheres into a unified plan of action. Each entity must be recognized for its unique profile of interests, experiences, and contributions to the shared enterprise. While it is common for people to focus upon the differences and conflicts among them, the meta-leader turns the attention to points of agreement: shared values, aspirations, objectives, and circumstances. With a new appreciation for their points of commonality, stakeholders are able to creatively envisage what they could accomplish if they were to join forces, building new equations and strategies of common ground and achievement. The meta-leader knows actions speak louder than words, and early triumphs are a critical factor in demonstrating the value added of working together.

Push-back and resistance are to be expected in fashioning this new alignment of strategy and action (Bornstein, 2007). Bureaucratic entities characteristically reward internally focused leadership that simply builds the budget, authority, and autonomy of their own endeavors (Thompson, 1965). The introduction of collaboration may require some traditionally competitive constituencies to turn away from well entrenched attitudes about and behaviors toward one another (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). If such push-back and resistance is anticipated

and planned for, it is far less likely to undermine the shared purposes (Yukl, 2002). Expecting it, meta-leaders craft an alternate reward structure, through which stakeholders are acknowledged and encouraged for their work in building shared solutions. The compelling message, which is the theme of their meta-leadership work, should speak to what can be accomplished if these traditional rivalries can be replaced by the advantages of the shared enterprise. Often, this requires strange bedfellows to work together, enemies to be invited to a common table, and people to appreciate a new or different set of values, objectives, and incentives. The intrinsic motives of each individual are thereby harnessed to achieve what is accepted as the greater good (Marcus, Dorn, Kritek, Miller, & Wyatt, 1995).

Cohesion of action cannot begin in the moment of decision and action: it must be embedded into the thinking and activity of agencies and people, a purpose and mission upheld by the meta-leader (Daft, 2005). It is akin to crafting gears whose inter-linking teeth and shapes are carefully formed: when it is time to move, the cogs link in a way that ensures movement and not stasis. For this reason, designing cross-system connectivity of action is a strategic and methodological building endeavor, by which both the process and outcome of the effort attest to the value and benefits of working toward common purposes. As stakeholders experience the advantages of leveraging the knowledge, resources, and expertise of others, and as they recognize the benefit and added influence gained when their contributions are likewise leveraged by others, the efforts and connectivity generated by the meta-leader builds a momentum of its own: impact and collaborative value both arise and thrive. Even so, the meta-leader recognizes that to keep the connected effort on track, it must be carefully monitored and adjusted: so it

perseveres beyond the expected bumps and challenges; and so that it remains current with new developments and demands.

### **Connectivity: The Outcome and Effect of Meta-Leadership**

The work of meta-leadership is in forging a strategic connectivity of coordinated effort among stakeholders and constituencies, reaching past the usual bounds of isolated organizational thinking and functioning. This connectivity is carefully orchestrated among distinct parts of an overall operation that must be intentionally and broadly assembled, shaped, and linked. In a connected system, each individual and organizational unit is aware of its role in the overall enterprise: those up and down the organizational chart as well as those across the spectrum of entities that are part of the shared endeavor. There are a number of critical questions: Who depends upon me? Upon whom will I depend? How will information, resources, and assets flow? What is the intended outcome of our joint efforts? How do we know when we are successful? It is up to the meta-leader to compose creatively this integrated picture, engage each person and component, and chart the impact and collaborative enterprise they together will activate (Dorn, Savoia, Testa, Stoto, & Marcus, 2007).

Connectivity is fundamentally a very human process (Maslow, 1970): people sharing a common and compelling purpose that blends their organizational allegiances with their commitment to what can only be achieved when different bureaucratic divisions – groupings of people - are working together. This requires the meta-leader to strategically understand who needs to be involved and what would motivate their participation. People moved by the mission



and message of the effective meta-leader are inspired to reach out beyond the confines of their particular roles. They envision, spawn, and then implement linkages with others that spark a power and potential that otherwise would not be present, institutionally embedding those connections so they persevere beyond the tenure of the personalities involved. These people-to-people and organization-to-organization linkages overcome the barriers and gaps imposed by strict bureaucratic thinking. Whereas organizational structures can mold and confine the behavior of people in roles and procedures, when connected, people find ways to accomplish the shared, overriding, and inspired social or policy impact value that, with their combined effort, is achievable (Schuman, 2006). This does not necessarily imply that rules are broken. Rather, rules are seen less as restrictions and more as levers to make good things happen. It describes the difference between succumbing to obstacles and seeking out opportunities.

The first challenge for the meta-leader is crafting a compelling message that accurately portrays the shared problem and advantages of a mutually beneficial solution. The compelling message, if effective, influences, perhaps inspires, and certainly engages the many different people that are to be linked into the shared effort envisioned by the meta-leader. To be persuasive, this purpose must appeal to “logos – ethos - pathos:” reasoning and logic; character and credibility; as well as the emotion, motivation and conviction of those who would be involved. People must be convincingly moved by the powerful advantages of a wider purview for a problem of mutual concern and by the possibilities generated by working together to solve it.

There are many hurdles to overcome. Chief among them is egocentric opposition from potential collaborators: the “silo mentality” of people and organizations as well as turf battles among those involved (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2006). Within the comfortable and familiar confines of distinct organizational units – akin to “silos” or “stovepipes” - success is measured, careers are advanced, and objectives are sought attuned to the interests and well being of the silo and its constituents. There is a natural tendency for people to ask “what’s in it for me?” The potential for creating cross-cutting benefit is curtailed when silos that could be working together see themselves merely as competitors (Schuman, 2006). When a broad social cause requires active participation by multiple constituencies - for example advancement of measures to protect the public’s health - a lack of connectivity thwarts accomplishment of these broadly worthwhile objectives (Lencioni, 2006).

Building connectivity does not require, as it is often described, “tearing down the silos.” In fact, silos have important functions. Training, practice, professional advancement, and new knowledge and skills occur in the concentrated environment of the silo. There is so much to know and to do: no one person or group of people could do it all. Strong silos not only provide for proficiency in complex work environments. They also offer a modicum of familiarity and comfort that can be assuring, especially during periods of high stress or crisis.

When connectivity is achieved, individuals and the entities in which they work are better able to leverage one another. They can do more because they have a wider scope of resources at their disposal. Information is more readily available, expertise is more widely accessible, and tangible assets are more generously shared. Competition as a primary motivator is reduced

because success is less about prevailing over one's neighbor – “turf battles” - and more about achieving the overriding goals of the shared enterprise (Dorn et al., 2007).

In pragmatic terms, stakeholders become clear about three discreet themes: 1) My distinctness: What I do to the exclusion of or different from others; 2) Others' distinctness: What I don't and someone else does; and 3) Collaborative possibility: What we might be able to do together to address both system gaps – critical tasks or topics not belonging to any one entity – as well as objectives that no one entity could independently achieve. This role clarity reduces both collisions among those involved and chasms where no one is involved. If accomplished, clear role delineation translates into less attention devoted to competitive forays and more energy directed at what could be done together (Hughes et al., 2006). The possibilities are expanded, and with that, so too is the capacity to satisfy more appetites.

### **On Being a Meta-Leader**

What does it take to be a leader and what further is required to assume the added challenges of being a meta-leader (Bennis & Nanus, 1985)? To be sure, there are many who occupy positions of formal authority who may think themselves a leader when in fact their influence is marginal or their position even resented (Bennis, 2003). These people beg the question of just what is leadership and how it differs from management or command and control power (Zalesnick, 2004). Similarly, it is tempting to anoint oneself a meta-leader, a distinction that personifies an analytic perspective and scope of influence that is broad, knowledgeable, and

prominent. Just as the literature has pained to distinguish leadership from management, it is useful to understand what more is necessary to achieve this leap from leader to meta-leader.

What is the difference? Leadership refers to the recognized or expected span of authority that a person would have in his or her formal role. For example, the chief executive officer of a business could demonstrate leadership in the way the company is operated, how employees perceive his or her influence, and the strategic direction and accomplishments of the enterprise. That same CEO would be considered a meta-leader when he or she: 1) directed other similar businesses toward a common purpose, such as advocating broader industry interests; 2) used the prominence of the position within the company to wield community influence and action on far-reaching social or humanitarian issues; 3) or engaged related organizations to negotiate joint ventures that would allow each business to accomplish more than if they were operating in isolation. A fire chief is a leader when he or she expands loyalty and commitment to excellence among those working within the fire house. That same fire chief is a meta-leader when he or she: 1) convenes and inspires other firehouse leaders from different communities to advance their shared purposes and improve mutual aid capacity; 2) uses the firehouse as a location and resource to advocate social objectives in the surrounding community, such as better fire prevention and safety or support for the adjacent homeless community; or 3) reaches out to other public safety organizations to advance the capacity for coordinated preparedness and response in times of emergency. While not all leaders are meta-leaders, all meta-leaders operate from the base of influence and capacity derived from successful leadership of their own organization or frame of reference.

Meta-leaders combine two aspects of the leadership equation to create a broad expanse of influence.

The first is traditional hierarchical leadership, their primary source of recognition and authority (Jaques, Clement, Rigby, & Jacobs, 1985). The CEO and fire chief above each are bolstered by the formal structure of their organization. They each have a sanctioned job description that describes responsibilities and span of control; that provides them hiring and firing power along with budgetary parameters; and that establishes stature within their organization and their community of organizations. Recruiting for such positions often involves finding the right person, with the background, standing, and expertise, to assume the job: people infused with the character, credibility, and inspiration to effectively lead.

The second aspect of this leadership equation is akin to social movement leadership (Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001), what religious leaders, political figures, and humanitarian advocates exercise to inspire and engage people when they do not have the power of a pay check, promotion, or sanction to persuade followership. It is that blend of commitment to a purpose, personal charisma, the talent to motivate, and appreciation for the fine art of timing that is at the heart of the informal side of leadership performance. While the exercise of formal leadership incorporates a measure of these informal qualities, meta-leaders must do both as they influence and rally - without direct authority to command participation - others to a shared, broader purpose.

While one can be hired to the role of leader, one must earn the mantle of meta-leader. It is accomplished without formal sanction. Not all CEOs and not all fire chiefs become industry advocates, community leaders, or conveners. Those who do are meta-leaders.

Meta-leaders connect the intentions and the work of different organizations or organizational components to achieve a shared purpose. Working without direct authority and leveraging enormous system influence, they motivate often overlooked opportunities to facilitate interaction, encourage communication, build confidence, and foster collaboration. Of greatest significance, meta-leaders - by virtue of their willingness to venture beyond the usual - are able to achieve a connectivity of actions and outcomes that otherwise would not be realized.

### **Value Added of the Meta-Leadership Model**

The meta-leadership model is derived from observation and analysis of leaders in action: those who succeeded in surmounting demanding challenges by generating a broad connectivity of action and those who faced similar circumstances and failed (Goleman, 1998). The purpose of the model is to educate and inform, so that leaders – in particular those operating in complex environments and addressing circumstances requiring immediate response - will have a frame of reference to help direct and expand their thinking, decisions, and actions.

Much of that observation and analysis occurred in reference to crisis scenarios as well as preparedness for leadership through crisis circumstances (Carter, 2003). The immediacy of decision-making during a crisis and the readily observable impact provides a unique perspective

on the complexities of generating influence through intentional connectivity with other entities that are part of the shared enterprise. While the cogency of insights on crisis leadership has particular application in those circumstances, we argue that they are equally relevant to non-crisis circumstances.

The model serves as an organizing framework for the immense volume of leadership analysis, practice, and scholarship. Each topic or dimension of leadership endeavors to encompass a body of research and a literature. For example, the first dimension, the persona of the leader, incorporates the breadth of psychometric analyses, personal discipline, and leader characteristics and experiences. So too, the objective situation, event, or circumstances of the problem, the second dimension, and closing the gap between reality and perception, reflects the span of human factors, complexity theory, risk analysis, and the mental model that is used by the leader in assessment and decision-making. Leading one's silo embodies the bulk of the organizational leadership literature, including management strategies and techniques. Leading up refers to the more modest literature on leading one's boss, follower-ship, and generating influence beyond the immediate scope of one's control. And the connectivity dimension refers to the body of work on inter-organizational relations, boundary spanning, and systems theory. From the perspective of practicing leaders, there is benefit in crafting a model that organizes and incorporates this breadth of leadership thinking into a unified framework.

The model also strives to challenge the purview of those who practice and study leadership. Each dimension is intentionally plastic, extending as called upon by the circumstances of the leadership undertaking. Time, for example, is a factor that can play a role

in problem assessment and situational awareness: distinguishing what can be done in the short, near, and long term, with the advantages of considering each individually as part of an overall leadership strategy (Koehler-Jones, 1995). Generating cross-silo connectivity could be limited to proximate organizations, or could be more broadly defined to incorporate constituencies, such as citizen groups, that may not be traditionally considered. This capacity to expand thinking and practice – the discipline one gains in learning and implementing the model – provides a framework that can apply to a broad range of leadership endeavors and analysis. With that, there is recognition that different circumstances will require more emphasis on one dimension than the other. Intentional flexibility and balance are both essential and endemic to effective meta-leadership.

As we have observed adoption of meta-leadership across complex public and private organizational systems and networks, we note three important advantages: 1) A conceptual framework and vocabulary that describes intentional networking and cohesion to connect the purposes and work of different or even disparate stakeholders; 2) A strategy of action designed to advance coordinated planning and activity; and 3) A purpose and rallying-cry for both leaders and followers that inspires, guides, and instructs, setting a higher standard and expectation for performance and impact. By deploying the skills, strategies, and abilities of meta-leadership, significant positive and powerful outcomes become more achievable.

We have also found reason to add a cautionary note. This person to person process of shaping connectivity is augmented by operational mechanics that put connectivity into practice: inter-agency or multi-disciplinary task forces; interoperable radios and electronic messaging or



data transmission; and effective lines of communication that facilitate personal exchanges. One however should not be confused with the other. At times, the mechanics are installed without also attending to the human side of connectivity: it is relatively easy to purchase equipment or to schedule meetings that accomplish little. When this happens, the results inevitably disappoint. Understanding this, the meta-leader grasps the complexities of social interaction, timing, protocol, and expectations, anticipating the sometimes quixotic sensitivities among those enlisted to the effort. Meta-leadership is difficult because it is about people. And people are never as predictable as machines, policies, or protocols.

### **Conclusion**

The meta-leadership model described here emerged out of observation and analysis of difficult times. The United States and the world were reeling from the unprecedented events of 9/11, the devastating failures of the Hurricane Katrina response, and the specter of further crises that could rock the foundations of society. It also emerged out of the triumphs and failures of leadership at the time: the difficulties in getting organizations and people to work together when that connectivity of action was the best hope for mounting an effective response; the inspiration and results when communities, businesses, and public agencies joined forces to accomplish what otherwise would have been inconceivable.

The meta-leadership model speaks to the complex web of values and beliefs that have shaped this country and others around the world. This is a culture that cherishes the competitive spirit along with the independence and freedoms afforded individuals and entities to pursue what

they - in the wide realm of what is legal and appropriate - see fit to do. It also values limits on power that ensure that no government official or company executive will be able to abuse their authority for illicit or corrupt purposes. And finally, it appreciates what can be accomplished when people come together, rally, and overcome daunting obstacles.

In that complex web, extraordinary leaders emerge, able to balance those values and beliefs by virtue of their strength of character and keen analytic skills along with their ability to lead, follow, and engage others. They forge both impact and collaboration that would not have otherwise been achieved. These meta-leaders - who certainly predate this model that seeks to describe them - deserve further study so that their important work and contributions can be better appreciated and understood, better supported, and taught to others.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> The initial work on meta-leadership emerged from crisis scenarios in which leaders were effectively or not effectively guiding preparation for or response to a major disaster. This paper broadens the application of the meta-leadership model to non-crisis yet high stakes everyday leadership challenges.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Commandant of the United States Coast Guard Admiral Thad W. Allen to the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, a joint program of the Harvard School of Public Health and John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 10, 2007.