

Fractal Leadership: Emerging Perspectives for Worldly Leaders

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Abstract



Discussing the worldly mindset, Gosling and Mintzberg (2003: 59) speak of learning through 'immersion in a strange context'. This conference contribution starts with a video clip (You Tube, 2008), with a shoal of fish immersed in their environment. Where, the commentary asks, is their leader?

Insights from complexity theory challenge the dominant Western view of leadership, a Newtonian world of cause and effect. Reflecting on the pioneering work of biologists Maturana and Varela, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996: 49) remind us that, 'We can never direct a living system. We can only disturb it.' A disturbing comment to some, a liberating one to others. For emergence and self-organization challenge notions of direction and control (Streatfield, 2001). In particular, emergence illustrates how small interactions create large-scale patterns. This observation provides a way in to the debate on global and worldly leadership.

Is this debate characterised by a false dichotomy? And can another perspective provide insights which help to conceptualise worldly leadership? Small interactions and large scale patterns invite us to examine the concept of fractals: repeating patterns in nature observed at different levels (Mandelbrot, 1982). Popular examples range from coastlines to ferns, but our focus here is on how they might illuminate leadership dilemmas. The idea has been pioneered by Wineberg, who highlights the importance of consistency throughout an organization (2005: 29).

Fractals offer a different framework for studying organizations – from global corporations to small communities – while viewing them as complex adaptive systems. How can front line workers expect to behave in one way if their supervising board or individual managers behave in another? How can managers promote teamwork if performance management systems encourage individual reward? We should expect to see repeating patterns – fractals – at different levels.

A fractal approach can be applied to various aspects of the leadership agenda. We will examine two. First, where is worldly leadership situated? A fractal view accords with advocates of distributed, or dispersed, leadership (Raelin, 2003). The first line supervisor and CEO should demonstrate consistency: the subject matter of their work will vary, but a repeating (fractal) pattern in their approach should be observable.



The contrast between Newtonian and emergent views on leadership is illustrated by a case study comparing Southwest Airlines and Enron. According to a former senior executive, values were central at Southwest, 'but they just happened.' This leader's preference was clear: 'I think it's better to decide upfront what they'll be' (quoted in Gittell, 2003: 226). The quartet of Communication, Respect, Integrity and Excellence illustrate a typical set of such upfront values: according to its 2000 Annual Report, they were Enron's espoused values. Observing the behaviour of key figures within Southwest, from the early years to today, reveals repeating patterns: fractals.

A second example is provided by ethics. A fractal view of leadership sees consistency at all levels, from local to global (Griffin, 2002; Harle, 2009). Far from 'just happening', ethical behaviour can be seen as an emergent property, evolving from the relentless consistency of leaders at all levels.

This radically different approach offers both an alternative insight into the nature of leadership and an alternative explanation to the values which are so demonstrable at Southwest Airlines. Immersion in this strange context offers leaders a profound perspective to embrace the global and worldly agendas.

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