Learn how to create an authentic servant leadership culture.

4TH DIMENSION LEADERSHIP: A Radical Strategy for Creating an Authentic Servant Leadership Culture

by Ron Holifield

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CAVEAT LECTOR

What you are about to read is going to be hard. It's going to be hard for two reasons — maybe three. For one thing, it may be hard to read. You may have to read some things more than once to really understand them. I'm going to try to write in as accessible a style as I can, but there are some things that we cannot afford to dumb down. So, I may be a little verbose (*it wouldn't be the first time according to my friends and colleagues*), and some of the sentences may be long, and some of the paragraphs may seem dense. Like I said, you may have to read a few things more than once to get everything I'm saying. It's not going to be intentionally obtuse, but there it is. It might be hard.

Second, it may be hard because it's frustrating to read. I'm going to call us all out on a lot of our BS, and goodness knows there's plenty of that to go around. The way most organizations do everything from hiring to on-ramping to annual reviews…it's just terrible. And we all know it. And it's time someone said some of this stuff out loud. You may end up feeling some relief when we get around to talking about alternatives, but you'll probably have to endure some frustration about your current reality reading through some of the descriptions contained here. I know I felt that frustration writing it.

Finally, it will be hard because once you've read it you're going to have to do something about it. Right now you can claim ignorance, but after you've waded through the descriptions and suggestions I make in the body of this book…well…there's no going back after that. You can't unsee what you're about to see, and you won't be able to forget it

once you've learned a better way. Reading this book is going to change you. I hope it'll make you better, stronger, braver. But you'll reach a point where:

You have to decide if you're willing to disrupt the status quo in order to create something better.

It's not going to be easy; it's going to be hard. But you can do this. I believe you can. And I believe you can make the changes I talk about.

And yet….

There will be one more thing that you'll have to do if you really want to make the most of the material in this book, and this may be the hardest thing of all. You're going to have to take this book personally.

Here's what I mean by that: You're going to read some of this and think to yourself, "Oh, I wish my boss could read this!" You're going to say, "You know who needs a copy of this book? Janice in HR. How could I anonymously slip her a copy of this? Janice must read this book!"

You must not do that. At least not at first. First you must take the material in this book personally. Act as if I'm writing this to you — not anyone else. This book is for you, not them. And here's why: you must begin by owning you're/your part of the problem.

Your boss may be a stealth incompetent. Janice may be the worst HR professional in the history of HR professionals. But you are a part of the problem, too, and you must own it. You must own that you're part of the problem, and you must own your part. As my friend John Alan Turner, a leadership coach in Atlanta, likes to say, "Until you own your part of the problem, you can't be part of the solution."

I hope and pray that this is not the kind of book that will leave you alone when you're done. The ideas in this book are going to stick with you and rattle around in your brain. You'll never go to a staff meeting or a 360 review without thinking about these ideas again.

So, let the reader beware:

Change is possible, but, if it's going to happen, it has to start with you.

INTRODUCTION TO 4TH DIMENSION LEADERSHIP

I just went to a website that sells books. You've probably heard of it. It's named after a river in South America. I typed in the word "Leadership" and got 252,222 results. There's no shortage of books on the topic.

So far, I've only scrolled down a few times, advanced a few pages, but already I've discovered hundreds of titles describing the characteristics of outstanding leaders. I've learned that great leaders are humble yet bold. They're hungry, but they always eat last. They hustle while taking their time. They know the laws of leadership, and they break all the rules.

It's dizzying really.

Many executives become enthralled with this or that compelling book on leadership and rush to implement the latest and greatest theories, replete with plenty of buzzwords, prompting front-line employees and mid-level managers to roll their eyes at yet another management flavor-of-the-month.

One senior consultant with a national firm shared what she called a "BS Bingo Card" — the BS stands for Best Seller…probably.

During "important" corporate meetings, she and her colleagues would sit, while executive leadership earnestly shared the latest company-wide strategies. Afterwards those executives retired to their mahogany offices, congratulating themselves on how intently their employees had focused and dutifully taken notes

in their genuine leatherette portfolios embossed in faux gold with the latest inspirational tagline. In the meantime, the middle managers retired to their conference room to compare their "BS Bingo Cards" to see who was able to mark the most BS buzzwords used during the presentation.

Maybe Dilbert really is a documentary.

You can tell you're in a climate of "Management by BS" when you find a lot of coffee mugs, sports bottles, pens, pencils, and posters emblazoned with pithy expressions culled from the best seller of choice. These will be gleefully distributed by well-intentioned executives who sound an awful lot like John Cleese on the old Monty Python TV show: "And now for something completely different."

They're not fooling anyone. Most of the people around them know this is anything but "something completely different". This is something completely the same, only more so. Middle managers especially understand that "Management by BS" is like the weather in New England. If you don't like it now, just wait a few minutes. It'll change.

Resistance to this kind of mercurial management is problematic because after a few rounds of it, middle management becomes resistant to all change — not just the flavors of the month. So, when an organization actually becomes serious about transforming itself, their initiatives most often get derailed by those in middle management. They've heard the boy cry wolf one too many times. They're numb to the argument that, "This time we really mean it." They've been through this whole song

and dance before. They were here before the latest fad, and they'll be here after it's gathering dust on the shelf.

Of course, the problem is not with best-selling books (says the guy who just wrote a book he hopes becomes a best-seller). Exceptional leaders are readers, always learning, always looking for ways to improve themselves and their organizations. Best-selling books on the topics of leadership and management can be effective tools. Instead, the problem comes when we try to implement the ideas in bestsellers by focusing on programs instead of culture. In our pursuit of a silver bullet program we can unveil with fireworks and fanfare, something that will magically transform the entire organization before the clock strikes midnight - we ignore the indispensable importance of creating an aligned value system and imprinting the cultural DNA on both current and coming generations of leaders.

Authentic and sustainable transformation isn't achieved overnight through dramatic new programs and initiatives; Authentic and sustainable transformation happens through the creation of a leadership culture that intentionally and effectively develops not just current leaders, but the next generation of leaders as well. And the generation after that. And the generation after that.

Leadership development must be long-term in scope, perspective, and strategy.

OWCH Organizations

Taking the long-view on anything requires a certain kind of intense and disciplined focus on what's happening right now. This means an organization committed to long-term leadership development pays attention to recruiting, assessing, and developing leaders who are aligned with the desired organizational culture and values. Leaders like these will nurture and protect your culture. Indeed, this is the most fundamental responsibility of any leader: maintaining a sustainable leadership pipeline of candidates who are aligned with and capable of protecting and nurturing the culture while managing constantly changing realities.

By contrast, a change-resistant organization will cling stubbornly to the Old World way of doing things. Old World, Change Hesitant (OWCH) organizations are notoriously "now" oriented when it comes to leadership development. Consequently, they unintentionally foster a culture of mediocrity, blindly sowing the seeds of future decline, even as they execute effectively on current day-to-day tactical operations. In fact, their current effectiveness is often what lulls them into thinking that because things are going well today they will continue to go well in the future.

OWCH organizations tend to offer a variety of classes on leadership and management. The content of these classes may be quite good. However, they tend to be disconnected from one another and from organizational values and culture. Furthermore, these classes are menu-driven. Employees are left to choose training classes which interest them. Occasionally, a supervisor may send them to a particular class for remedial

purposes, but the roster of classes remains haphazard and poorly focused. Even with the best of intentions, classes like these will miss the mark on the leadership competencies each individual and the collective team actually need to succeed. Not only will this fail to imprint cultural values, it will actually undermine the development of a coherent organizational culture. The messaging is incoherent and fractional.

It's like being given the pieces of a puzzle without being able to see the picture you're supposed to assemble. Oh, and you're only given one or two puzzle pieces at a time.

In the absence of a culturally-inspired, values-driven, step-by-step approach to preparing future leaders, a significant number of those who are promoted lack the requisite leadership competencies which should have been developed at an earlier level. They've taken a handful of classes, but there was no sequence, no understanding of the basic building blocks of competent leadership. And in OWCH organizations, the higher an individual climbs on the corporate ladder, the more resistant he or she becomes to "being trained".

This is a recipe for institutionalized, organizational mediocrity.

OWCH organizations tend to promote someone who is good at their current job. But they fail to train them in the skills they will need to be good at their new job — which usually involves greater degrees of leadership competency. As a result, they often rise to one level of responsibility beyond their leadership ability, and there they stagnate, clogging up the leadership pipeline and costing the organization momentum.

In contrast to the well-known Peter Principle, which states that employees only stop being promoted once they have risen to the level of their incompetence, these managers may be technically capable. They're just one level beyond their leadership competency. It's not like they're terrible. Certainly not bad enough to fire. But they're not good enough to thrive as leaders either, so they end up as long-term "stealth incompetents".

Stealth incompetents are operationally functional but unintentionally nurture a culture of mediocrity due to an inability to lead.

The next generation of leaders is already in the workplace. Many of them have a different set of values, a different understanding of authority, and a different approach to work life than the current senior executives. Developing a leadership pipeline is particularly critical as today's 20-somethings begin to climb the corporate ladder. The OWCH model of "training leaders by osmosis" simply won't work anymore. It's a brave New World!

Come to think of it, it never worked that well in the Old World.

4th Dimension Leadership

4th Dimension Leadership creates a culture that recognizes the importance of leadership at every level of the organization, and intentionally develops future leaders at all levels -- from the moment they enter the organization. Every employee is a leader to be developed. Sure, their context is different. The specific leadership competencies may vary from position to position. There are differing levels of responsibility and other situationally-specific factors to consider. But everyone is a leader, and every leader can be developed further.

This is an important distinction to make: leadership competency cannot be "taught" in a traditional sense; but it can be developed. A sequential, step-by-step process can be created wherein certain, fundamental, building blocks are set in place and built upon the more a leader is developed.

4th Dimension Leadership is an organic model focused on developing leaders who will nurture and protect a values-driven culture.

A VUCA World Demands Radical Leadership

The US Army War College coined the acronym VUCA to describe the new world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. This is the world leaders must be equipped to manage. Thriving in a VUCA world demands a radical style of leadership that constantly innovates while nimbly leading and rapidly adapting. All of this must take place within a collaborative environment of trust that values and nurtures healthy relationships so the entire team can keep pace.

Describing this as "*radical*" captures the constructive tension of the word "*radical*" itself. In Latin, the word radicalis meant the roots, or foundational thoughts. In modern vernacular, the word has come to imply something extreme, something out on the leading edge. Radical leadership is appropriate, then, for those who wish to lead in a VUCA world, as it requires constant innovation and rapid change within a collaborative environment of trust that values and nurtures healthy relationships.

Leadership in our world must be both rooted and adaptable – a radical approach.

Servant Leadership – *a Radical Leadership Philosophy*

Perhaps the most radical shift in leadership philosophy over the last half century has been the rise of Robert Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership. Looking at the problems of leading in a VUCA world through the lens of servant leadership, we begin to see the tension of being both rooted and adaptable as a symbiotic relationship between two extremes. This allows the tension to become both critical and constructive.

Think about a guitar. Actually, think about the strings on a guitar. There are two extreme points to which the string is attached. As the string is held in tension between the two extremes, it becomes useful for making beautiful music. If the string gives in to one of the two extremes, it becomes useless. Music is only possible with tension.

It is the same with leadership in a VUCA world. If a leader values relationships too highly, change and innovation become restricted. No music. If, on the other hand, the leader values change and innovation too highly, relationships are damaged. Again…no music. It's allowing there to be tension between trusting relationships and innovating change — this allows for the critical and constructive tension one needs to make music.

A culture of high trust and healthy relationships is the foundation that allows an innovative leader to be daring.

A culture that values relationships while routinely adapting in order to remain on the leading edge of a constantly changing world is more likely to produce both high performance (great product) and emotional satisfaction (great process) for the team. Both extremes actually need one another in order to thrive.

The 12 characteristics of Servant Leaders beautifully balances the constructive tension of radical leadership.

LISTENING

EMPATHY

HEALING

NURTURING THE SPIRIT

BUILDING COMMUNITY

AWARENESS

FORESIGHT

CONCEPTUALIZATION

PERSUASION

CALLING

STEWARDSHIP

COMMITMENT TO THE GROWTH OF PEOPLE

Notice how the first five (*Listening, Empathy, Healing, Nurturing the Spirit, and Building Community*) are overtly focused on healthy and trusting relationships. There's our first tension point: the roots of healthy relationships.

Now notice how the next six (*Awareness, Foresight, Conceptualization, Persuasion, Calling, and Stewardship*) are overtly focused on leading change into the future. Here's our second tension point: an organization adaptable enough to stay at the leading edge.

One note: Stewardship isn't usually associated with change management. However, a commitment to stewardship must involve a commitment to a sustainable future. Decisions that look fiscally conservative to a "right now" organization are often fiscally irresponsible when viewed through a long-term lens. Seeking instant financial gratification while sacrificing the future is terrible stewardship.

Greenleaf's final characteristic of servant leaders is Commitment to the Growth of People. This is how a leader makes the culture authentic, by being devoted to growing people as leaders at every level. That kind of commitment is what enables your people to walk the talk of all 12 characteristics.

Of course, every organization wants to create a culture in which every team member is constantly growing and learning. But a desire without a plan is just a wish. If you really want to create a culture like that, you'll have to spend time creating a deliberate leadership development plan and strategically-aligned systems.

You could, of course, try to find one in any of those books we talked about at the beginning of this one. But you'll be hard-pressed to find a volume providing practical guidance on how to develop an authentic and sustainable servant leadership culture — which is why I wrote this one.

Everything you'll read here has been carefully considered and field-tested over the course of a decade. What I learned is we've been looking at the problem from the wrong perspective. So, rather than focus on a description of an exceptional leader, or a description of a well-led organization, I'm taking a far more utilitarian approach. I want to give you a reliable, nuts-and-bolts strategy for shaping your leadership culture.

4th Dimension Leadership is a practical process for growing people into authentic servant leaders.

I know that what I'm talking about is radical. In fact, I know this so well I'm just going to lean into it. This whole process can be summarized as RADICAL: Recruit, Assess, and Develop Innovative, Collaborative, and Authentic Leaders.

If you're ready to get radical, read on.
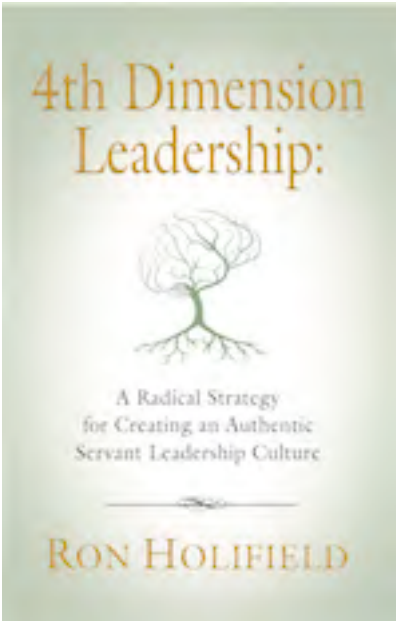
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