

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society

March 2003

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When movers and shakers in the world declare that they feel powerless, it is time to take notice. In the past week, several people I consider teachers and leaders of the highest order have made precisely this declaration with reference to the war in Iraq. I did not argue with them. Yet as the murmur of their words settled in my mind, I began to sense that this moment in history calls for a richer response. It is not that the feeling of lacking efficacy is untrue. Instead, this feeling is but one of many truths – and, of these, the least likely to be helpful.

When we say that we lack power and criticize people we think have it, we are engaging in what Harvard researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey call the language of complaint. This language is pervasive in our organizations and families. Indeed, it is so common that we hardly notice it. It is particularly prominent when compared with declarations of what we truly care about, or the language of commitment.

What is wrong with a culture where it is more permissible to complain than to state our commitments? Nothing, other than (a) life becomes less fulfilling and (b) it's harder to get things done. This is why it is so painful to be part of conversations lamenting the war and the futility of our actions. It is also why we can't seem to find an alternative to them.

Yet there is an alternative, and it is something every one of us can discover. As Kegan and Lahey suggest in their book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*, an option available to anyone stuck in the language of complaint is to transform it into the language of commitment. This is not as hard as it sounds. For within every complaint lies the seeds of something we deeply care about. The energy we exert in complaining is just a misuse of the deeper energy contained in our commitments.

Consider, for example, the common complaint "Traffic was horrible." The only reason this situation bothers us is that we are committed to being on time. Or consider a person who laments that their boss never listens to them. The reason this matters is that they are committed to having an impact. In each case, both statements are true, yet whereas complaining diminishes our capacity to act, speaking our commitments elevates it.

How does this relate to our conversation about the war? When a friend describes her exasperation about the invasion of Iraq, I don't have to respond by sharing my own complaint or even nodding in agreement. Instead, I can say

something like, "This situation infuriates me, too, because I am committed to the principle of a just war, and this one does not qualify." The act of stating this commitment actually enlivens my body and strengthens my voice. It makes me more powerful.

A second option is to invite my friend to transform her language. I can say something like, "This has affected you deeply. I hear great emotion in your voice and imagine that what we're doing in Iraq violates something you are deeply committed to. I wonder what that is." Perhaps my friend will accept the invitation and state her commitment. Perhaps not. But at least I have created an opening.

There is a third option. This one involves not an immediate response to my friend, but a period of reflection that can occur hours or even days later. When I notice myself caught up in complaints about the war, I can interpret this as an opportunity to pause, step back, and meditate on what I am most deeply committed to in life. The remainder of this column is an example drawn from my own experience.

Waking Up the World

*My inside, listen to me, the greatest spirit,
the Teacher, is near,
wake up, wake up!*

*Run to his feet –
he is standing close to your head right now.*

You have slept for millions and millions of years.

*Why not wake up this morning?
- Kabir*

Almost thirty-three years on the planet, and I am still learning to wake up. Some days are easier than others. Sunlight through the window helps: each ray provides a reminder that nature supports us for free. So I leave the shades up at night. Yet nothing substitutes for a reason for being, an answer to the question: what makes getting out of bed preferable to staying in?

Four years ago I had an unusual dream. It resembled a life-long recurring dream, but with one crucial difference. In my recurring dream, I fly a thousand feet above the earth to escape a violent gang of criminals wielding daggers and intent on my destruction. Once floating in the air, I am free from harm. In the new version of the dream, I am flying, but for a different purpose. This time, I soar above the sea in search of pending danger, not only to myself, but also to my ship and the hundred sailors it holds. Scouting miles ahead, I discover a giant tidal wave heading with great force toward the ship. I speed back to alert

my comrades. “Our world is at grave risk,” I warn them, “but we may still have time to do something about it.”

At the time of this dream, I was immersed in two books forecasting the potential for global environmental collapse caused by human action. This was a topic to which I had previously given little thought. Because of this reading, as soon as I woke up, I knew what the dream meant. First, my life had a purpose, and it had something to do with alerting people and companies about their impact on the natural environment and its repercussions for future generations. Second, the time had come in my life to embody a new form of freedom: not freedom from (criminals, pain, inconvenience) but freedom to (serve, lead, contribute, heal).

About six months later, I read *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* by Ken Wilber. This 800-page masterpiece shook my assumptions to the core. The heart of the book is a walk through human evolution seen from the perspective of not only biology, but also the development of the human mind and spirit. Each stage of evolution, Wilber writes, brings both new possibilities (e.g. advanced farming techniques and modern technology) and new horrors (e.g. slavery and the Holocaust). The task of humankind now is to embrace the new forms of science and economy without dissociating their evolutionary antecedents: our bodies and the biosphere. By the end of the book, I was convinced that preserving and restoring the natural environment – keeping the planet safe for humans and other living beings – could not happen without personal transformation. Furthermore, I saw that personal transformation comes about not through reading and trying to form new beliefs (my strategy at the time) but through integral practices: daily routines intended to develop our bodies, minds, and spirit and cultivate our connections to others and nature.

The day after finishing *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, I purchased a book Wilber recommended called *The Life We Are Given*. This wonderful creation of Mike Murphy and George Leonard gave me a way to put Wilber’s theories into practice. I began a program they call “integral transformative practice” that centers on a daily 40-minute regimen of yoga, tai chi, deep relaxation and silent meditation. Fortunately, I began this practice immediately and did not have a chance to tell myself that I was a good Midwestern boy who did not engage in weird stuff like yoga and meditation. In a sense, the practice became part of me before I had a chance to push it away.

Of course, I did struggle, particularly for the first two months. Each morning when I awoke, my body wanted to follow its usual routine of shower/dress/breakfast. It abhorred the notion of moving in strange ways for 30 minutes and then sitting totally still for 10 minutes. And to repeat the same thing I had done the previous morning struck me as the height of idiocy. Yet inside me a voice bellowed, “If you want to make a difference in the world, nothing is more important than these 40 minutes. Nothing is more important.” So, to my great

surprise, I managed to do this practice an average of six times a week for the next nine months.

Before the year had ended, I moved from Michigan to San Francisco and signed up for a course in integral coaching offered by a company called New Ventures West (where I now work full-time). The course, grounded in Wilber's theory yet infinitely more practical, took the Murphy and Leonard regimen a step further. In addition to supporting me in my own development, it helped me build competence in developing others. I learned to listen deeply for how others interpret their experiences and where they hold these interpretations in their language and bodies. I discovered the value of offering them new language and designing practices to integrate this language into their bodies and everyday lives. And, perhaps most importantly, I began to get in touch with my own unique form of suffering – and that of others.

For a while after finishing the course, I thought that this was what mattered most to me: relieving individuals' suffering. And, in some sense, it is. Yet I know from my dream and the deep stirrings within me that coaching individual people, however powerfully, is only part of my deepest life commitment. As important as it is to guide others to competence and fulfillment in their organizations, it also matters *which* people and *which* organizations.

At this point, I could easily fall back into the language of complaint, describing how what I intend to have happen has not yet happened. But that would be rather silly, don't you think? Not to mention ineffective. Instead, it is time to do what I have yet to do in such a forum: go public with my commitments. Thus:

I am committed to offering top notch coaching to leading edge heretics, people who, in the words of Art Kleiner, "see a truth that goes against the conventional wisdom of their organization and remain loyal both to the truth and to the organization." The truth I am committed to supporting is the possibility of harnessing the power of business, government and non-governmental organizations to restore the biosphere. Not to create a utopia (as if that were possible) but to help flawed human beings experience less suffering in their own lives and leave a planet that is inhabitable by future generations.

I am committed to personally supporting renewable energy, clean technology, and industrial processes that convert waste into food.

I am committed to writing this column and sharing it with people who find value in it.

I am committed to honoring my friends and family with the love and respect they deserve.

I am committed to simultaneously creating a home and serving as a voice for strangers.

I am committed to feeling sad when I am sad, angry when I am angry, and joyful when I am experiencing joy.

I am committed to performing acts whose impact will become apparent only after I die.

I am committed to making statements like these during ordinary conversation.

Last but not least, I am committed to writing poems, beginning here:

*I am your coach
And you are mine
For we both sleep
Through the shouts and the heartache*

*Who will rise first
To shake the other
Into Now?*

*Who will cry
“Open your eyes”?*

Open your eyes!

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