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Leadership and the Coding of Our Souls

"No two people are born exactly alike...there are innate differences which fit them for different occupations."—Plato

Several years ago one of this century's foremost scholars on leadership suggested that there is an unconscious conspiracy that prevents leaders from emerging in our society. "Circumstances conspire against them," Warren Bennis explains in his book, *Why Leaders Can't Lead*. "And so—without meaning to—do the American people."¹ As he developed his thesis, he pointed to an array of complexities that stand as obstacles to effective leadership. Notable among them was a commitment to the status quo, a preoccupation with individual rights, selfishness of the "Me Decade," an unwillingness to cooperate with neighbors, and feelings of helplessness among followers. "People float, but they don't dream," Bennis writes. "And people without a dream are less easily inspired by a leader's vision."²

Perhaps his indictment is true. Many leaders would agree that if it were not for such an unconscious conspiracy in our society, they could be more effective. On the other hand, I would suggest that if we would examine our methodologies as we attempt to understand the complexities of leadership, we would find them to be somewhat limited. Although Bennis' analysis describes rather accurately those obstacles with which leaders must contend, like most discussion regarding this topic today, it fails to address the philosophical underpinnings of leadership itself. It focuses on circumstance. As a result, it fails to address the nature of humans, and, accordingly, the unique talents of those who would lead. It fails to consider a most important reason as to why some leaders can't lead: *they simply don't have it in them*. Or, as researchers Shelly Kirkpatrick and Edwin Locke have observed, they don't have the *right stuff*.³ Such a proposition, how-

ever, is not contemporary in origin. Instead, it is rooted in the teachings of Plato, and it is upon his shoulders that we stand when we contend that leaders can't lead because they were not *born* to lead. Simply stated, leadership is not inherent within the codes of their souls.

Indeed, Plato would find our approaches toward understanding leadership to be rather amusing, for they do not address those philosophical considerations necessary for meaningful answers to our questions. They do not examine the nature of man. *Who should lead? What gives one the right to exact obedience from others?* These are the questions that Plato would ask, and until we answer them, he would argue, we will fail in our attempts to understand the nature of leadership. Certainly, Plato addressed such questions, but we cannot appreciate his answers without an understanding of his philosophy regarding the nature of man, without an understanding of what it means to be human.

Philosophically, Plato was an idealist. He taught that what we perceive through our senses are only shadows, finite imitations of the ideal, but not the ideal itself. Professor S. E. Frost, Jr. explains as follows:

For Plato, the world which we see, touch, and experience through our other senses is not real, but is a copy world. In it we find things changing, coming and going, and in great abundance. It is a world of many mistakes, deformities, evils. It exists and we experience it every day. But it is not real.

There is, however, a real world in which are to be found the true things of which all that we experience are mere copies. He called this the world of 'ideas.' Here is to be found the ideal tree of which all trees which we see are copies, the ideal house, and ideas of all other objects in the universe. These are perfect, do not change in any way, never fade or die, but remain forever.

The 'ideas' or 'forms' . . . were never created, but have existed from the very beginning in just the perfect state in which they will always exist. They are independent of all things, and are not influenced by the changes that take place in the world which we experience through our senses. These objects which we experience are reflections of these 'external patterns.'⁴

For Plato, the *ideal* is eternal; it is divine. And the *ideal* resides in each of us, imprisoned by our bodies. Such is the nature of man, and it is our human task to open ourselves to those transcendental ideas that lie within us. It is our task to seek unity between the natural and the supernatural, between the physical and the metaphysical.

Unfortunately, accordingly to Plato, only a few have the inherent ability to distinguish between the *real* and the *ideal*, to see beyond

the shadows. Most of us are confused. We are blind to the *ideal*. We are held bondage by the shadows of imperfection within our world, and we need others to help release us from our imprisonment. We need others to direct us toward goodness, and truth, and beauty. And those who would do so are our leaders. They are our guardians. They are our *philosopher kings*. In his book, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Richard Taurus summarizes Plato's allegory of the cave to illustrate this bondage:

Human beings are like prisoners chained to the wall of a dark subterranean cave, where they can never turn around to see the light of a fire that is higher up at a distance behind them. When objects outside the cave pass in front of the light, the prisoners mistake as real what are merely shadows created on the wall. Only one who is freed from his chains and leaves the cave to enter into the world beyond can glimpse true reality, though when first exposed to the light he may be so overwhelmed by its dazzling luminosity as to be unable to recognize its actual character. Yet once he habituates himself to the light and comes to recognize the true causes of things, he would hold precious the clarity of his new understanding.⁵

Without question, those who have been freed from the shadows of the cave, that is, our leaders, are inherently different from those who remain in darkness. Although each of us shares the same essence, that is, humanness, Plato teaches that our individual souls are not the same.

First, some have souls coded toward the realm of the *appetitive*. Driven by their physical appetites, they base their lives on the pursuit of physical pleasure. They seek passion; they seek luxury; they measure success in terms of the accumulation of wealth and trinkets. The more *spirited* souls among us are warriors. They seek power, striving for victory, regardless of the battlefield. Finally, those with more *rational* souls delight in the acquisition of knowledge. They are not victims of lust and physical pleasure. Their goodness sets them apart from those who are self-serving, for they seek only wisdom and understanding. Theirs is the life of the mind, not encumbered by the impoverishment of material gain and power as they seek union with that which is eternal. Such, then, are the codes of our individual souls. According to Plato, providence gives each of us different talents and abilities. "No two people are born exactly alike," he writes. "There are innate differences which fit them for different occupations."⁶

From this premise Plato derives his understanding of the nature of our organizations as well as the inherent roles of our leaders. The

ideal society, he explains, should reflect the nature of its citizens. It should have the same three distinct components. The *appetitive* component would consist of craftsmen and artisans, those who seek the material rewards of life, those who seek pleasure, those whose lives are driven by passion rather than reason. The *spirited* component would be the defenders of our society, soldiers and warriors, the physically strong, those who would courageously protect us from our enemies. The *rational* component would include those committed to understanding and knowledge, those with vision of the higher good, those able to distinguish between shadow and light. These, Plato writes, are the guardians of our society. These are our *philosopher-kings*. These are our corporate managers, our political leaders, our religious prelates, our military generals. Leadership is their talent. It is deeply embedded within the code of their souls.

At the same time, Plato teaches that providence has appropriated talents to each of us in a manner most consistent with the needs of our society. It needs musicians. It needs shoemakers. It needs craftsmen. It needs physicians. Consequently, each of us must understand *who we are* in terms of the codes of our individual souls. If we have been assigned the soul of an engineer, for example, we should develop that talent to the greatest extent possible. In brief, Plato would agree with twentieth-century philosopher Joseph Campbell. Each of us must discover our individual *bliss*, our dominant talent, the code of our soul if we are to find meaning and happiness in our lives. Doing otherwise brings misery to ourselves. More important, doing otherwise brings imbalance and deprivation to the society in which we live.

Unlike many of our current approaches to education in the United States, however, young people in Plato's *Republic* were not left to their own devices to discover their unique abilities. Nor were their parents charged with such an important and critical responsibility. This activity was the ultimate responsibility of the philosopher-kings. All children were raised and educated by the guardians of the state until they reached adulthood. Only after a long evaluation process had been completed would the code of a child's soul be identified. Once identified, each would be directed toward those professions most appropriate to his individual talents. Equally important, each would develop her unique abilities for the rest of her life.

Certainly, Plato believed that only a few among us have been given the talent of leadership, and the corresponding responsibility

related to such talent is overwhelming. By any standard we might imagine, it is awesome. Those whose souls were identified to be coded for leadership, were isolated for intense preparation, primarily in philosophy, mathematics, music, and those intellectual disciplines that bring order to the mind. They were required to excel in their pursuit of goodness, not only for themselves, but for all within society. Virtue and selflessness were at the core of their training, for Plato viewed leaders much as he viewed physicians. Physicians were not to be trained to pursue self-serving needs. They were not to be concerned with material gain. Instead, they were taught to act only on behalf of the patient's good, and, in the *Republic*, the patient understood who, between the two of them, was the expert.

Accordingly, Plato teaches that leaders should provide vision and understanding for their followers. They must not be self-serving; they must not be driven by physical pleasure; they must not be motivated by wealth. Instead, they must be men and women of virtue. They must seek wisdom and understanding. They must always act on behalf of those whom providence has placed under their rule. "They must have the right sort of intelligence and ability," Plato writes, "they must look upon the commonwealth as their special concern—the sort of concern that is felt for something so closely bound up with oneself that its interests and fortunes, for good or ill, are held identical with one's own."⁷

It is important to note that his teaching regarding one's *right* to lead is not based on an accident of birth. The Divine Right of Kings held no sway with Plato, for to him, leadership is not hereditary. Although he acknowledges differences among humans, he does not suggest, for example, that the heirs of leaders should lead, nor that the children of laborers should be laborers. Instead, he believes that the souls of all should be examined as guardians identify those who are suited for leadership. Plato explains as follows:

[T]he god who fashioned you mixed gold in the composition of those among you who are fit to rule, so that they are of the most precious quality; and he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and brass in the farmers and craftsmen. Now, since you are all of one stock, although your children will generally be like their parents, sometimes a golden parent may have a silver child or a silver parent a golden one, and so on with other combinations. So the first and chief injunction laid by heaven upon the Ruler is that, among all the things of which they must show themselves good guardians, there is none that needs to be so carefully watched as the mixture of metals in the souls of children. If a child of their own is born with an alloy of iron or brass, they must, without the smallest pity, assign him the station proper to his nature and thrust him out among

the craftsmen or the farmers. If, on the contrary, these classes produce a child with gold or silver in his composition, they will promote him, according to his value, to be a Guardian or an Auxiliary. They will appeal to a prophecy that ruin will come upon the state when it passes into the keeping of a man of iron or brass.⁸

Regardless, Plato was not chauvinistic. Even though he acknowledges that women are physically weaker than men, he proposes that every occupation should be open to both.⁹ It does not matter whether one's soul is composed of gold or silver or iron or brass. Providence does not discriminate on the basis of gender. What does matter, however, is the proper identification and subsequent assignment of the soul. As Plato notes, ruin will come to the state (as well as the organization or the company) that assigns a soul of iron or brass to a leadership position.

In summary, Plato proposed that leadership requires a special talent, and only those few who possess such talent should be trained toward its proper utilization. Having rigorously developed this talent, the philosopher-kings, the guardians, should rule. Not only is it their right, it is their duty. Similarly, those whose souls have been marked for the *appetitive* and the *spirited* functions of life should develop the talents assigned them by providence. It is only when individuals fail to develop and apply their unique abilities that disharmony occurs, for in the divine scheme of things, nature has harmoniously distributed the talent necessary for a society to achieve its perfection. For one to deny his code and pursue a path for which he has not been coded is to commit an injustice against the balance of society. It is to prevent that society from achieving its perfection.¹⁰

Given this perspective of Plato's teachings regarding the nature of man and society, we can more readily appreciate his answers to our questions regarding leadership. *Who should lead?* For Plato the answer is simple. Those, and *only* those, whose souls have been coded to become leaders. As religious leaders often attribute their leadership role to the will of God, that is, *You have not chosen me, rather I have chosen you*, Plato would assert that one's leadership role has been determined by providence. The souls of the leaders seek justice; they understand the differences between light and shadow; they unselfishly seek good for all within their organizations. Not only *should* they lead, they *must* lead. It is their destiny to do so. And to allow those whose souls have not been coded to lead to assume leadership positions would be to condemn an organiza-

tion, a business, a state, to ruin and decay. Such, according to Plato, is the nature of things.

Thus, rather than concern himself with an array of external complexities that prevent leaders from being able to lead, Plato explores the meaning of leadership in terms of the codes of people's souls. Rather than concentrate on the external attributes of leadership, he attempts to wrestle with those haunting questions that have plagued humans throughout their history: *What is man? Who should lead? Why?* In terms often used by Stephen Covey, rather than look *outside-in* as he examines the nature of leadership, Plato looks *inside-out*. He doesn't analyze the behaviors of leaders; he seeks to understand their souls. "Who are you?" he would ask. "Why should I follow you?" The external contingencies that permeate our current approach to understanding leadership would have little meaning for him.

Although Plato's writings date back more than two centuries, it seems apparent that many contemporary leaders would readily identify with the teachings of Plato, for his thought has provided a strong foundation upon which we have developed many of our theories regarding leadership. The performance standards of Frederick Taylor, the bureaucracy of Max Weber, the efficiencies of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, and many of the managerial principles of Henri Fayol bear a strong resemblance to Plato's *Republic*. They center on specialization. Employees are not considered to be of equal ability. They are expected to comply joyfully with the directives of management, the guardians of industry. They should well understand who, between the two of them, is the expert. As Bernard Bass reminds us in his *Handbook of Leadership*, prior to the mid-twentieth century, most of us believed that individuals possess different degrees of intelligence, energy, and moral force, and in whatever direction the masses may be influenced to go, they are always led by the superior few.¹¹

Many continue to share that view. And rightly so. Regardless of the leader, whether it be Alexander the Great, or George Washington, or Lee Kuan Yew, or Golda Mier, or Martin Luther King, these superior few strongly influenced the direction of their followers. And it was no accident. In the words of Kirkpatrick and Locke, they had the *right stuff*. In the words of Plato, it was in the *code of their souls*.

Whether they share such views or not, however, few who lead our organizations would openly define themselves as philosopher-

kings. In a democracy it would be elitist for one to declare that he or she was *born* to lead. The behavioral sciences have, for the most part, leveled the playing field regarding our understanding of the distribution of talent among humans. The Bell Curve no longer applies. Speaking honestly, however, do not most managers believe that they are different from their employees? Would they not claim to be more talented and knowledgeable than their followers? Would they not suggest that it is this superior ability that gives them their right to lead? Would they not believe that their souls are made of gold, while the souls of their employees are made of silver and brass and iron? Would leaders not agree that their organizations would flounder and fail should power be mistakenly assigned to those whose souls have not been coded for leadership? Certainly, they would. And when they do, they are standing squarely on the shoulders of Plato.

Similarly, women should appreciate the teachings of Plato, for even though he was a European white male and, therefore, the target of scathing attack by the historical and literary revisionists of our societies, he was among the first within Western culture to recognize that leadership is not gender specific. Certainly, Aristotle did not. Nor did most other Greek and Roman philosophers. And although he acknowledged that women, for the most part, lack the physical strength of men, those whose focus is the inequities of male dominance would have little charge against Plato. His concern was with the essence of the soul rather than the reproductive organs of the body.

These are but a few examples as to how our leaders have been influenced by the writings of Plato. There are many others. Unfortunately, for the latter part of the twentieth century we have failed to recognize the important contributions that philosophy can make to our understanding of leadership. We have failed to draw distinctions among all those who have provided us the philosophical foundations of leadership in Western culture. Instead, our bookshelves are lined with behavioral observations that tend to obfuscate rather than enlighten. We can describe leadership, but we lack an understanding of what it is.

Thus, it seems appropriate to redirect our focus and depart from our preoccupation with behaviors and contingencies and unconscious conspiracies. If we are to understand leadership, we must

shift our attention away from empirical observations that explain what *leaders do* and begin examining once more those philosophical propositions that tell us *what leaders are*. For then, and only then, will we be able to penetrate the mystery of this most elusive topic. What better place to begin than by reviewing once more *The Republic* of Plato?

Notes

1. Warren Bennis, *Why Leaders Can't Lead* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989), xi.
2. Ibid., xiii.
3. Shelly A. Kirkpatrick and Edwin A. Locke, "Leadership: Do Traits Matter?" *Academy of Management Executive*, 5 (1991) 58.
4. S. E. Frost, Jr., *Teachings of the Great Philosophers* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), 10.
5. Richard Taurus, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 41-42.
6. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. F. M. Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 56.
7. Ibid., 104.
8. Ibid., 106-107
9. Ibid., 153.
10. Ibid., 141.
11. Bernard M. Bass, *Bass & Stodgill's Handbook of Leadership*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1990.)