

## **Leaning into Letting Go - Leadership as a path on the spiritual journey**

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### **Introduction**

“We have a saying among clergy,” my spiritual director said to me. “Beware the congregation whose pastor does not tend to his or her soul.” He went on: “While I don’t know that this is true for business leaders, I can’t think why it wouldn’t be. Why wouldn’t it be true that ‘Beware the business whose top leader doesn’t tend to his or her soul?’ Maybe your job isn’t to ‘do stuff.’ Maybe your job is to create and hold space for others.”

We have a belief in western society that leaders are born, not developed. And if you define leadership narrowly enough there may be some truth to that. But leaders can be developed. In fact I’ll go further: they must be developed. And because leadership development is a journey of personal transformation, it may be best understood as a spiritual journey.

The global pandemic of 2020 has turned everything we know upside down. It has caused immense suffering and death around the world. It has isolated people, and made existing polarizations between groups even worse. Moreover, it has created global financial uncertainty, and brought racial tensions (especially in the US) to the forefront. All this is taking place against the backdrop of unprecedented global climate change and environmental crisis. Some have argued that the 2020 pandemic is dry run for how we will address these global problems.

These problems are too big to be solved by heroic individual effort, or by any single entity. We can’t wait for government to step in, and they won’t be solved by corporations, or churches, or volunteer organizations. All of these organizations - private, public, governmental, non-governmental - have a role to play. But they have to work differently inside their walls, and they have to work collaboratively across existing boundaries. Organizations have to bring out the best in their employees and stakeholders. They have to foster collaboration and shared problem solving, both within their walls, and with other organizations.

The leaders set the pace for the organization. Leaders who are doing their soul work will naturally have organizations that are more collaborative and impactful. Spiritual directors who

understand this dynamic may play a critical behind the scenes role to enable these new capacities.

In this article, we'll explore the nature of leadership and the role of spiritual direction in nurturing leaders who are better equipped to lead in a time of global challenges.

### **What is the nature of leadership?**

There is no shortage of good books on leadership. One of the most important is often overlooked: [Agile Leadership](#) (2007, Josey Bass). In it Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs share important fact-based research on the stages of leadership maturity.

The idea that people develop in stages was first theorized and proven in the arena of cognitive development by Jean Piaget in the 1930s. Since then, stage theory has been researched and documented in the arenas of moral development (Kohlberg), faith (Fowler), consciousness (Beck), and others.

A stage theory of leadership holds that leaders move through predictable stages of development. At each stage, they demonstrate predictable traits. They move to a new stage when they run into the limitations of their current stage. Each higher stage of leadership provides more flexibility - agility - for the leader to solve harder problems.

Leaders can stop development at any stage, and can be quite effective in the right situation. But if conditions change, they may need to shift to a new stage of performance. Once they achieve a new stage, they can still go back and use skills honed at earlier stages when a situation calls for them. Here is a summary of the stages:

Level	Description
Expert (about 55% of all leaders)	Assume others follow them because of their authority and expertise. Focus of tactical, incremental changes within their span of authority Don't engage much with stakeholders Supervise individuals one-on-one rather than build a team. In pivotal conversations they are either highly assertive or highly accommodative, and may flip back and forth between these extremes.

<p>Achiever (about 35% of all leaders)</p>	<p>Assume leadership is about motivating others to contribute to a larger aim.  Able to consider developments in the larger environment, and craft strategies to achieve intermediate objectives.  They create real teams.  In pivotal conversations they tend to be more assertive or more accommodative, but have more flexibility in moving between the two.</p>
<p>Catalyst (10% of all leaders)</p>	<p>Assume leadership is about creating an inspiring vision and empowering and developing others to make it a reality.   They lead change by focusing on strategic objectives, and developing a culture of participation, empowerment, collaboration, and straight talk.   Teams are high-performing teams that embody this culture and that can lead change together as one team.   In pivotal conversations, Catalysts are equally comfortable and adept at asserting their views and at inviting and seriously considering other views, thereby creating high trust and real dialog.</p>

(Kreft)

Joiner and Josephs’ research shows that Experts can be quite effective in stable environments where the pace of change is low and there is minimal need for engaging stakeholders. (Joiner and Josephs, p 9) Experts will struggle where the rate of change is high, or where there is profound interdependence between internal and external stakeholders. In those more challenging situations, leaders will need to perform at a higher stage. Achievers can be effective in environments with moderate change and interdependence. Catalysts are the most effective, and most resilient leaders in today’s environment of unprecedented change and interdependence. (Kreft)

Given the challenges facing our world today, we need more leaders operating at the Catalyst level. Expert leaders are bewildered by their inability to help in complex environments.

I know, because I’ve been there.

**A personal journey of transformation**

In my late 20s I joined a small software company. I was employee #5, and I loved all the challenges and opportunities to learn and grow. By the time the founder retired, I was in my late

30s and the obvious choice to succeed him as President and Chief Executive Officer. I didn't have the language at the time, but I embodied the Expert Leader. As the company had grown, I had held many positions, and I knew every aspect of the business.

Over time, as the world and our business changed, I tried to address every issue with my Expert approach. At the personal level, I felt incredible responsibility and stress, and that took a toll on my health and my relationships. I was frustrated and didn't know how to create what I wanted.

At one point I began setting aside time each month for reflecting about the business and my role in it. I wanted to explore the gap between what I wanted out of the business and my experience of reality. I started a new journal, in my first entry I wrote:

I dream of a company:

- Where each employee gives out of joy.
- Where work is fun and done very well.
- Where each person contributes beyond what they imagined possible.
- Where people collaborate and work independently – whatever is needed in any given situation.
- Where customers value and appreciate the work we do and the way we treat them.
- Where we are fantastically profitable.
- That provides a future for me and my employees.
- That is making the world a better place
- Where I enjoy being at, and can contribute my unique capabilities...

While I was in Expert mode, I could envision something else, but I had no idea how to get there. I think that is probably typical of how people experience growth in any arena of stage development: We see something might be different, but we don't know what or how to change.

Einstein's famous quote comes to mind: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

For me, and I think for most Experts, I thought the problem was "out there." My people weren't pulling their weight. They lacked motivation, creativity, drive... something. In reality, our world was far too complex and changing too fast for my expertise. I was a bottleneck that had to control everything. This suppressed creative engagement by competent adults. I wasn't the only one with low morale, but I didn't realize that I was the cause, not the victim.

Meanwhile, my faith was going through a deep dark night. It reawakened through contemplative practices and spiritual direction. Eventually that led me to training as a spiritual director. My personal and professional life was a barren landscape, broken up by tufts of green within my

inner life. In the midst of this, my spiritual director asked two questions that bewildered and intrigued me:

- In what ways can you turn your work into a spiritual practice? and
- How can you bring the gift of spiritual direction to your business?

He went on, “If all creation is groaning for wholeness and redemption, why would it apply just to people or churches? Doesn’t it also apply to human creations, like businesses?”

This idea was stunning. But I was stuck.

The shock that broke open the log jamb was a conversation at a business workshop. Picture me standing with my back to the wall, a tall blond woman who I barely know standing in front of me stabbing her forefinger into my chest saying:

“Look – nothing [stab] is going to change [stab] until you change. [stab] You say you want a different kind of organization, [stab] and I hope you do [stab] because your people deserve better. [stab] But if you want them to change [stab] you have to change [stab]. It all starts with you.” [stab]

I think we were actually sitting down, and I’m quite sure she never actually touched me, or even pointed with her forefinger. But it was a wake up call. She was speaking truth to me that no one else either saw or had the courage to speak.

This woman became my coach, and for the next 15 months I exposed every professional and (almost every) personal vulnerability. It was a liminal time and a time of surprises.

One of the first surprises was that this coach turned out to be an evangelical Christian with a deep tap root into the contemplative tradition. That sentence is a double oxymoron.

The first oxymoron is Evangelical Christian Executive Coach. I don’t know the statistics, but my experience of the executive coaching world is that it is, for the most part, decidedly not affiliated with organized religion, and especially evangelical Christianity.

But just as big a surprise was the discovery that this extroverted evangelical Christian was steeped in contemplation. In recent years I’ve learned that this prejudice of mine was entirely unearned, but at the time I believed that the words evangelical and contemplative are not used in the same sentence except to describe difference. I was surprised to find that my new coach not only knew what spiritual direction was, she valued it. She encouraged me to bring the lens of spiritual direction into every encounter I had in my business.

## **Practices that made a difference**

One of the most powerful practices was a simple discipline of giving myself five to ten minutes before a meeting to ground myself for whatever was coming up. Why was that?

At the start of my coaching journey, I believed that my purpose was to get things done. Remember, I was an Expert leader. I believed that if I just worked hard enough, and did the right things, everything would turn out right. I set (or thought I set) the pace and the standards and the agenda for almost everything that happened in the business. I held tight to everything, beginning with my ToDo list.

How this translated into daily life was that I was always juggling several projects and initiatives, and simultaneously flogging everyone to keep up to my standards and expectations. Consequently I ran from project to meeting to meeting to project all day long, with no breathing room between activities, and little sense of purpose beyond my own (often self-imposed) deadlines and crises.

For my staff, it meant watching my every move to make sure they didn't "get stuck cross-wise" with me. That had a huge stifling effect on creativity and initiative. Why stick your neck out when it might get cut off?

Putting down my pen, saving the file I was working on 10 or 15 minutes early, and walking into the conference room to sit in silence until the start of the meeting was revolutionary. The practice of silence, of reflection, gave me time to transition and prepare myself for whatever was going on. It gave me time to put on the lens of the spiritual director, and begin thinking differently about the situation and, more importantly, the people I was meeting.

All this was powered by a conscious decision to begin letting go, to hold processes and expectations and methods looser – less tightly. Sure, results mattered, but in holding on too everything with such a tight grip no one else could find a place to grab. Once I began to let go of how something got done, paradoxically, the results actually improved. It was hard to admit, but I began to realize that maybe I really didn't know the best and only way to succeed.

My coach encouraged me to establish some kind of ritual or practice to help me walk into meetings grounded and ready to let go. Serendipitously, the weekend after we had this conversation I saw a display of greeting cards at my local health food store. There was a set of reproductions of watercolors by a Catholic Sister. One of them caught my eye, and when I turned it over it bore the title "Leaning into letting go."

I carried that card with me everywhere I went for many months. I stuffed it with notes to myself, mantras, some wisdom texts. Before most meetings I pulled it out in those few minutes of silence to help ground myself in this more contemplative space.

As I began letting go of over-doing – that is taking too much responsibility as the expert in everything about the business – I had to find different ways to spend my time. If I didn't, I'd get restless and stick my nose in someone else's job.

My coach said to me, "I find myself wishing you'd get out of the office more. Take off early. Get away and take care of yourself."

When I resisted, she asked, "How much damage can you do by staying around?"

Ouch.

The truth was I could do quite a bit of damage.

That was also about the time my spiritual director made the observation at the top of this article: 'Beware the organization whose leader doesn't tend to his or her soul.'

This was shocking: the key to leaning into letting go was soul work. Spiritual practices – silence, journaling, reflective reading, shadow work – all led to greater self awareness or mindfulness. I began to realize that I could do more for the business by being away from the office and tending to my own soul than I could by flogging away at all our 'problems.'

I began cultivating a healthy respect for my capacity for perfectionism and over-control. I came to understand that perfectionism in the hands of a control freak is a tool of shame, not a motivator.

Over time I developed a number of strategies for dealing with this shadow in myself.

One strategy I leaned into was confession and vulnerability. I found trusted colleagues to share how I was working to reduce my tendency for perfectionism and over-control. (In every case, they were aware of this capacity, they were delighted I was working on it, and were happy to help.) We could discuss the details of particular situations (often in the thorny issues of personnel and individual performance) and they would give me candid feedback. My colleagues became a sounding board for alternative solutions. It was a safe space to develop perspective.

Another strategy was to turn on my curiosity. When I was locked into perfectionism and over-control, I was stuck in a dualistic world view of right and wrong. Genuine curiosity about the

situation is the mother of good questions, and good questions almost inevitably lead to a better resolution.

And a sense of humor really helped. Speaking from personal experience, perfectionist control freaks don't have a lot of fun. Being relaxed about the method and the outcome opens space for creativity and humor. Those go hand in hand, and set an environment where new and surprising solutions can emerge.

Now I usually recognize when I'm sliding into perfectionism and over-control as it happens. I'm not always successful in extracting myself, but I'm much quicker to apologize for stepping on other people's toes.

With my staff, it took some time to build trust. If a system suppresses creativity and engagement long enough, people will either leave or put up with it because they feel they have no choice.

Eventually this work impacted the way we organized the company, and the way we made decisions. Inspired by Frederic Laloux's *Reinventing Organizations*, we began deploying a sociocratic governance process that used a consent (not consensus) based circle process for decision making. (Villines and Buck, p. 78) The circles were arranged in a hierarchy, with clear boundaries of responsibility, and links between circles for feedback up and down the hierarchy. This model fostered greater engagement and collaboration, responsibility and accountability. It ensured that all voices were heard and that conflict was valued and resolved in service of the mission. As a result, decisions were faster and better, and with greater commitment from all stakeholders.

### **The role of spiritual direction**

Maybe I'm thicker-headed than most people, but I found I needed multiple allies and guides at various times on my journey. These included therapists, coaches, and spiritual directors. For me, my spiritual director has been the most consistent presence.

I think this is because I saw my journey of leadership transformation as a spiritual journey. My spiritual director became the keel that helped me navigate uncertain waters. The other allies provided expert assistance that my spiritual director could not give.

Another way to think of it is this: the move from Expert to Achiever to Catalyst is a journey of transcending ego and coming to a deeper connection to true self. That is what makes it a spiritual journey. And it is why my spiritual director was well equipped to help me on that journey.

There's more: the language of stages or levels of leadership is not without risk for the spiritual seeker. Jim Finley, the contemplative teacher, tells a story dating to his years as a Novice in spiritual direction with Thomas Merton. Finley had been studying Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*. He told Merton, "I think I'm probably in the fourth or fifth castle." He said Merton immediately responded, "It's none of your business what castle you're in." (Finley)

The meaning I take from that story is that any time we try to parse our progress on the spiritual journey, our ego steps in: "Look what I've accomplished! I'm getting pretty good at transcending my self." The action is God's action, not ours.

The coaching world knows from the data that developing leaders need meditative, centering practices. Most individuals operating above the Expert level have some kind of regular centering practice. (Joiner and Josephs, p 220) How much stronger can that practice be if it is nurtured by spiritual direction? The point is not to leverage spirituality in service of performance, but to ground our actions in the Mystery that we call God. Mystery is calling us to greater healing and wholeness, and that can translate into how leaders lead, and how organizations function.

## **Conclusion**

The world faces enormous challenges. To address these challenges, we need organizations that work creatively and collaboratively both within and across organizational boundaries. These organizations will be led by individuals and teams who bring out the best among all stakeholders. Whether they know it or not, these leaders are on a spiritual journey. Spiritual directors, because they understand the spiritual journey, have an important role to play in enabling these leaders and their organizations to solve these enormous challenges.

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Possible Callouts:

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### **Biographical Information**

Evan Miller is a spiritual director and retired business leader. Evan is especially interested in the intersections of spirituality, leadership, and organizational governance. His mission is to help leaders grow spiritually, and bring their whole, maturing selves to their leadership role.

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