

# Vitality's Back – A Dilemma Framework for Leaders

by Antony Williams

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In the mid-nineties, a group of colleagues, notably Chris McLoughlin, Sandra Fischer, Jane Sargeant and myself, working for a major consulting firm on a telecommunications executive leadership project, constructed a leadership framework based on five dimensions. These were vision, relationship, power, credibility and vitality. Along with each dimension we identified a key role and a related leadership dilemma. Two of these dimensions are explored in this article.

In the last eight years, I have continuously refined these dimensions and roles, and done quite a bit of work on writing them and adapting them to different audiences. At times during this period we despaired, and for three or four dark years we dropped the vitality dimension, and its accompanying role of 'lover of life' as being too hard to describe for potentially curmudgeonly business folk and bureaucrats.

Vitality/lover of life was resurrected in 2000, *deo gratias*, with now 'the right'

dilemma for it, though vitality will never be properly captured in one simple dilemma. In essence, the original five are back, tarted up a bit, and with the vitality/lover of life dilemma being redefined as being between "risking" and "protecting".

Like a suitcase that has been around the world many times, these roles have been tested in countless forums. Their audiences have been bright, easily bored punters, many of them grizzled veterans of training, and quite capable of leaping the wall and heading back to town from whatever 'executive retreat' venue we were in. The original telecommunications audience (thirteen five-day programs over two and a half years) were mostly feisty electronic engineers, accountancy and marketing types who were in the top 800 of an organisation of (then) 80,000. Other audiences have included senior taxation officers, health care managers, environmental managers, finance managers and print executives, logistics people, chemical engineers and university heads of department – including professors of philosophy, vet science, medicine,

education and psychiatry. To each of these audiences the dimensions have appealed, and no one, in eight years, has said, "This is crap", though I must admit my heart was in my mouth with the professor of philosophy. The judgement: "Despicable psychobabble" or "Jejune management cant" or at best, "Interesting, but logically impossible" were anticipated, but did not come. Phew! On re-reading the above, I guess I've been trying to make a case for the dimensions' credibility as robust across diverse and potentially unforgiving audiences.

After eight or more years of road testing, the dimensions and attendant roles seem intellectually complex enough to be interesting, and simple enough to be memorable when you're in a tight spot. They appeal at 'street level' - to leaders who only too well know the nitty gritty of organisational life. You might well want to escape them, but it's hard to get bored with them, because the dilemmas always get you, as do the dilemmas of life. Indeed, their appeal might well lie in their being 'life dilemmas' and not simply 'leadership dilemmas'.

### **Distributed Leadership**

Our notion of leadership is 'systemic', that is, that leadership is *distributed* throughout the organisation. A leader is not only the boss. This means that leadership can take place at any level and be exercised through any role. Leaders at any level go beyond their formal job requirements, responsibilities and roles. Leaders maintain, improve and even transcend existing systems. It's not just leadership at the top; it's leaders all the way down.

Scholtes (1998) suggests that:

- Leaders decide what needs to be done
- Managers decide how to do those things that leaders have decided must be done
- Administrators apply the methods designed by managers in pursuit of the purposes selected by leaders.

In real life, things are not quite so neat. The same person must sometimes act as a leader, a manager and an administrator. In the distributed leadership model presented above, a leader may be neither big "L" leader, manager nor administrator. The leader is the person who is actually leading at the time, whether or not they have the title of 'Boss'. (This fits nicely with Moreno's notion of leadership as the person who has the most spontaneity at the time).

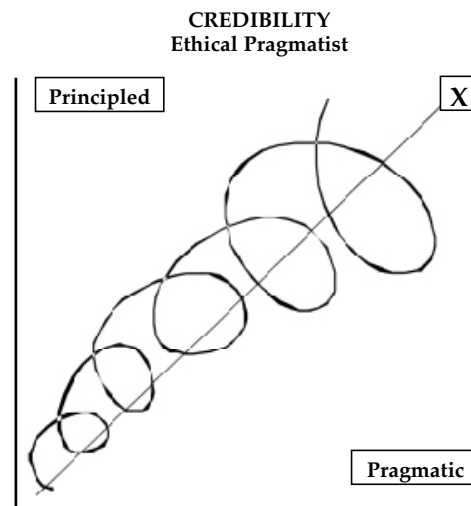
Distributed leadership, however, does not mean chaos. Different organisational roles - bands, levels and so on - are a reality. Leaders who occupy top management roles are responsible for 'breakthrough' and organisational design - the shape of 'tomorrow's organisation' as a whole. Leaders throughout the organisation may not have as much say in direction-setting for the whole organisation - this would become very confusing - but do have considerable influence in their division, branch, team or project. Even people below the level of team leader may initiate important liaisons with other businesses, and make significant breakthroughs in efficiency, data gathering, innovative methodologies, customer service initiatives, and liaison with other teams, projects and branches. Leaders at all levels manage 'up' and 'across' as well as 'down'.

## Five Dilemmas of Leadership

Leadership consists of a daily process of resolving dilemmas. The dilemma framework, adapted from the work of Hampden-Turner (1990), captures the complex nature of leadership: it acknowledges paradox, uncertainty and the messy nature of daily business realities. There are rarely sure answers. Collins and Porras (1998) talk of transcending the 'tyranny of the OR'; highly visionary companies liberate themselves by "the genius of the AND." This involves the ability to embrace both extremes of a number of factors at the same time, such as a purpose beyond profit AND the pragmatic pursuit of profit; a relatively fixed core ideology AND vigorous change and movement, and so on.

The dilemma framework suggests that a leader who is strong, say, in the dimension of vision is not necessarily more "visionary" than someone else, but that he or she has resolved the major dilemmas involved in managing the present AND the future. Being strong on something means having the role, and we have defined the role as a resolution rather than 'more' of something. In the two dimensions presented below – credibility and vitality – a leader is not more credible if they are 'more principled' than the next person, but if they have resolved the dilemma of principle and pragmatics. We usually depict the dilemmas as orthogonal – see the diagram below, and have the essential five dilemmas posted on the wall of the training room. We also have the big right angle (minus the squiggly bit) in masking tape on the floor, and ask participants to stand somewhere within the angle where they imagine they are on the given dilemma. The X in the diagram represents the ideal, where the dilemma is naturally (or by dint of hard work over many years) resolved. At the X,

the dilemma itself slips away. A sort of a Zen thing, perhaps.



So here we go. Below are two of the five dimensions, roles and accompanying major dilemmas. At the top of each table is the major dilemma inherent in the role. Through the table are opposed sub-dilemmas, many of which participants easily recognise with an "Oh no!" rather than an "Aha". For example, in the credibility dimension the minor dilemma of 'openly communicates the truth, good and bad' vs 'tactful' is presented. A leader has to do both, and the full resolution does not mean being 'a bit tactful' and 'a bit openly communicating the truth good and bad'. It means doing both fully.

I still haven't got all the sub-dilemmas right, and so the tables imperfectly present apparent oppositions. Give it another ten years, or so, and maybe we'll get there. In some of the narrative after the tables, you may recognise the notions of 'overdeveloped' and 'underdeveloped roles' as familiar language.

**Credibility: "Does it!"**

Role: ETHICAL PRAGMATIST

**Dilemma: How to be Principled AND Pragmatic**

PRINCIPLED	PRAGMATIC
Honest	Operationally responsible
Openly communicates the truth, good and bad	Tactful
Has a clear sense of direction	Adaptable
Acts on values when it is not easy to do so	Organisational savvy – 'streetwise'
Attempts to make a better world through the organisation	Understands the limitations of the organisation's role
Creates an institution that he or she can believe in	Creates an institution that survives
Keeps his/her promises	Promises only what can be delivered
Zealous about professional standards	Realistic about limits of what can be offered

**Ethical Pragmatist – the Ethical Dilemma Resolved**

Values drive us to action; we can't help having them. Clashes of values are inevitable, because life is finite. The work of the *ethical pragmatist* is to manage the clash of values. The essential dilemma is between the desire to create a better world (or at least not to create a worse one) on the one hand, and the necessity to work through numerous stakeholders, interest groups, political processes and financial constraints, on the other.

Typical values clashes in an organisation might be between standards and compassion; between personal and private life; between democracy/collegiality and 'getting things done.' Some say that having strong values allows one to compromise, because one

knows what one stands for. Is this so?

In Kouzes and Posner's (1993) massive study conducted over a decade, 15,000 managers voted 'honest' as the most important leadership quality. They called their book of this research *Credibility*. "No matter where we have conducted our studies - regardless of country, geographical region, or type of organisation - the most important leadership attribute since we began our research in 1981 has always been honesty."

Kouzes and Posner's definition is not an individual one. They say a leader has organisational credibility when he or she "does what s/he says *we* will do". That is, a leader keeps not only individual promises, but delivers on a promise made on behalf of the group.

Credible leaders openly discuss bad news and difficult issues. The academic leader who has resolved the credibility dilemma is highly ethical yet able to exercise his or her political judgement. 'Credible' does not mean credulous - a credible leader knows how the world works; he or she is able to keep secrets, realise both pedagogical and commercial advantage, discern when they are being lied to and give strong feedback when it is required.

A credible institution, one "Built to last" (Collins and Porras, 1998) is "rooted in a timeless set of core values, that exists for a purpose beyond just making money, and that stands the test of time by virtue of the ability to continually renew itself from within." They were writing of business corporations; their words also fit well with academic institutions. What is a credible institution like from the point of view of staff? Staff actually do note what organisational leaders say about their values and observe the interplay between avowed intent and practice, and between financial and non-financial objectives. They translate those perceptions about values into beliefs about how the organisation really works - about the unspoken rules that apply to career development, promotion, decision-making, conflict resolution, resource allocation, risk sharing, contracts, dismissals, performance management, mentoring and coaching. They ask: "What are the real rules that determine who gets what in this organisation?"

Alignment between a leader's statements and behaviours is the key to collegiate commitment. It is often what is undermined most in a change initiative when conflicts arise and communication breaks down. Moreover, it is the dimension along which a leader's credibility, once lost, is most difficult to recover. A problem of leadership, therefore, is *what* to promise.

### **Overdeveloped Principle at the Expense of Pragmatism**

Leaders who have overdeveloped principle at the expense of pragmatism may be 'honesty zealots' trying to track down minute over-expenditure or robbing, paralysing their staff through scrupulousness or adherence to unattainable standards. Their conscience may make them transfer their harsh demands on themselves to their colleagues and subordinates.

Organisational idealism – rigid adherence to traditional 'academic values' – may be overdeveloped to the extent that they excessively attempt to 'save the world' through their organisation.

Over-principled leaders may be naively open, answering any question simply because it is asked, and without regard to political fallout. Or they may be extremely secretive, their troubled ethics throwing the organisation into spasm by making *everything* confidential. Losing spontaneity, their organisation itself can become lifeless, with worried head and tortured heart.

### **Overdeveloped Pragmatism at the Expense of Principle**

Overdeveloped pragmatic leaders, like their overdeveloped 'principle' counterparts, tend to base their decisions on simplistic contrasts: one can be morally worthy *or* politically expedient, but not both. Anyone's attempts at grappling with the tension between the two is greeted with cynical laughter. Moral people are naive children; only pragmatic people deal with the 'real world'.

**Vitality: "Relishes the Process"**

Role: LOVER OF LIFE

**Dilemma:** How to risk self and others AND Protect self and others

RISKS SELF AND OTHERS	PROTECTS SELF AND OTHERS
Honest	Operationally responsible
Decisive - trusts self and intuition	Consults - seeks others' opinions before making decisions
Loves challenge, steep learning curves	Knows limits of self and staff, and when to stop
Fully extends self at work	Nurtures health
Resolves issues where private life and family interferes with work	Resolves issues where work interferes with family and private life
Has an unwavering will (Collins)	Is personally humble (Collins)
Daring	Protects core values
Instinctively identifies with quality and 'best practice'	Carefully follows published procedures that are benchmarked as best practice
Relishes competition	Allows for the diffidence and fear of others

Leaders who promise too much, or who promise because the words sound nice, create expectations in their people that are liable to go beyond the reality delivered. The institutionally violated mission and values statement framed on the walls or in the lifts become the focus of rage or cynicism.

Such leaders are given to political expediency and unprincipled opportunism. For them, ethical practice comes only from 'rules'; it is not integrated into the personality, and therefore the work. Their favoured change processes falter and die.

**Lover of Life - The Vitality Dilemma Resolved**

The *vitality* dimension relates to the life force,

the life struggle, relish of competition, and challenge. Vital leaders have a zest for life and work at the same time as protecting themselves and their people from crazy risk-taking, burnout, and life imbalance. Vitality does not equate with effervescence or brilliant personality, far less with long lunches and drinking bouts. Vital leaders rely principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate.

Effective leadership requires a person to make decisions, and often those decisions are in the face of a good deal of uncertainty. The more uncertainty that surrounds a decision, the more the call for leadership. *Lovers of life* do consult, but they also know when to trust themselves. The Victorian Public Service manager John Patterson once sent

out a celebrated memo that commenced: "I meet, therefore I am not". They avoid this form of death. They trust themselves and risk themselves AND are open to input from others. At some stage of the consultation process, they 'just do it'. Where others become mired in complexity and doubt, they appear to be personally free to take ownership of problems and find the quickest route for resolving them.

David Murray, CEO of the Commonwealth Bank, says (2002) he tries to carve out time each week just to think. "I like to have three days a week in which I have half a day to myself for my own thinking and initiating things that are important to the organisation," he says. He is driven by a passion for strategy and beating his competitors. He relies strongly on his own judgment: "When I go against my instincts and am persuaded to do something by someone else, nine times out of ten it goes wrong. ... Experience helps you to be instinctual. Leaders have got to do their own thing."

For the *lover of life*, life and work are grounded in a natural sense of connection and purposeful direction. Work is joyful; challenge and struggle are part of being alive. *Lover of life* leaders 'clean up' interpersonal issues as they go along, abhorring sulking, petty feuds, silly organisational rhetoric, bombast, and stingy dragging bureaucracy. They know themselves and their own limitations, and have resolved major conflicts in their lives at least sufficiently to inspire and sustain others. They are characterised by spontaneity, an 'inner' sense of best practice based on good judgement. They risk AND preserve. They resolve the dilemma of trusting themselves, yet questioning their own assumptions. They can doubt AND act.

A *lover of life* is also well aware of the dark side, and can be healthily sceptical. Paradoxically, most organisations suppress contention: managers cannot stand to be confronted because they assume they should be 'in charge'. Lovers of Life do not especially seek conflict, but nevertheless understand that it is part of life. The *lover of life* knows that destruction, conflict, death and renewal is part of the life cycle, as it is of the business cycle. An organisation characterised by *lover of life* leaders feels lively. The 'smell of the place' is fresh and vital.

*Lovers of life* work hard but are not bowed down by overwork. They manage time, and are confident enough to withdraw from unviable and low-priority activities. They apply rigorous business tests to proposals, existing structures, and even their own ideas.

### **Overdeveloped Risk at the Expense of Consultation and Protection**

Over developed risking of self and others can result in burn-out, hostile and irritable interactions, eroded relationship quality, and organisational mania. Overdeveloped 'risk' leaders may become childishly intolerant of any bureaucracy or inevitable slow process. They may be pigheaded, whimsical and feckless, or personally or organisationally narcissistic. They tend to place extreme trust in 'intuition' to the exclusion of research or listening to commonsense. They may make decisions and change direction over-rapidly - 'shooting from the hip'. These leaders may think of themselves as 'decisive' because they make many decisions in a short time, even if these decisions contradict each other.

Confusing vitality with extroversion, a pseudo-*lover of life* may over-value activity and busy work, and eschew listening and

reflection. Their people may experience decreased job satisfaction, productivity, organisational commitment and tenure. Because work and family life is grossly out of balance, they and their people may have to deal with guilt and anxiety about neglecting their partners' and their children's' needs.

### **Overdeveloped Protection at the Expense of Vigour and Action**

Overdeveloped protection may reflect leaders' inability to trust themselves or their own intuition. Such leaders agonise, paralysed by intense fear and doubt. They tend to feel over-responsible. They fear competition for themselves and their staff, and falter at opposition or hardship.

They are easily trapped in complexity, feeling they must act, but not knowing what to do, or which way to jump. They may believe that if they collect enough information they will be able to make a rational and effective decision; but the information never seems to be quite enough.

They might be permanent 'victims', denying responsibility, and 'passing the buck'. They might consistently appeal to superiors to make or justify decisions.

They fear challenge and competition, and shrink from conflict. Their workplace becomes sterile and lifeless. Their overprotected employees may have reduced career commitment and manifest uncertainty by increased absences, tardiness and staff turnover.

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