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## THE POWER OF “SMALL LEADERSHIP”

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### Stepping Away from Big Leadership

In the leadership literature, stories abound about individual heroism—leaders triumphing over the business-as-usual cultures of their organizations. Leadership scholarship has a parallel tendency to focus on traits or styles that place leadership solely “inside” the person. Not surprisingly, most of our cultural narratives about leadership moments tend to create a built-in bias applauding individual heroism. Yet by doing so, these reports often discount the interaction between leader and follower or under-tend to the “ripeness” of the moments that make effective leadership possible. Rather, they tell us, for example, that Jack Welch “barnstormed through GE shutting factories, paring payrolls, and hacking mercilessly at its lackluster old-line units” (Smart, 1996). Popular notions of leadership suggest that leaders possess distinctive personal capacities that have made them extraordinarily effective leaders.

We argue that, while these figures, and our ideas about their success, sustain our innate desire to venerate “leadership,” they often diminish the power and influence of alternative frames for learning about leadership. Stories of this kind can be discouraging as they suggest a “dare to be great” image of leadership that contradicts the actual experience of daily work. Leaders are unable to reconcile their cultural narratives about leadership with their own personal experiences of organizational reality. We believe that these narratives inhibit many leaders from

stepping fully and confidently into the stream of moments in which they can make significant differences. The ideal image is simply too far out of reach.

We wish to propose an alternative. In this article, we shift the focus away from heroic deeds to small, subtle leadership actions that can have big impact. These actions, which we call "small leadership moments," are characterized by two key features. The small leadership moment:

1. Leverages small efforts to create disproportionately large effect.
2. Enacts or symbolizes emerging new directions.

We liken this idea of small leadership to Karl Weick's (1984) well-known concept of "small wins," moments of seemingly modest action that alter the context in which subsequent organizational experience takes place. The architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller illustrated the significance of small leadership with his metaphorical discussion of how a "trim-tab" can steer the movement of a giant ocean liner.

"Think of the Queen Mary—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there's a tiny thing on the edge of the rudder which is called a trim-tab. It's a miniature rudder. Just moving that little trim-tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. It takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trim-tab. Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go. So I said, 'Call me Trimtab.'" (Farrell, 1972)

We can take as an example one of the more powerful historical illustrations of a small leadership moment, the disproportionately large effect of Rosa Parks' action in shaping the civil rights movement. Just weeks before the historic moment on that Montgomery bus, Parks was asked during an activist workshop what she would do upon returning home. She replied that she wouldn't do anything, that "Montgomery is the cradle of the Confederacy. The White people won't let Black people do anything. . . . Even if they did, I don't know whether we'd stick together or not" (Horton: *A Fighter for Rights*, 1990, p. D1). Yet shortly thereafter, Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man. The event not only brought the burgeoning civil rights movement into the national spotlight, it drew the young Martin Luther King, Jr. into the fight. Activist Myles Horton, who heard Parks' comments at the workshop, recalled ironically that in the subsequent bus boycott, Dr. King only reluctantly allowed the use of his church for a protest meeting, saying, "Just this one time." Parks' actions in the fluid and emergent context of the time triggered consequences so enormous that her moment lives on in our collective consciousness to this day.

So what comprises a small leadership moment? When does one occur, and how does it operate? Working from our experience in teaching and consulting to leaders, and at times being ourselves leaders and followers, we have found that the most powerful forms of small leadership tend to fall into three categories.

1. *Leadership “at the boundary.”* Small moments of leadership that significantly alter the interactions within and between groups.
2. *Leadership that goes “against the grain.”* Leadership that contravenes the prevailing winds in a way that changes their course.
3. *Leadership that “pulls rather than pushes.”* Moments that create a small vacuum that pulls in the energy of others.

At the close of this article we examine the threads that tie together these three categories. But first we want to investigate the unique subtlety and power that characterize effective moments in each of these categories. Notice in the following stories that we intentionally focus on actions, not actors. Although personality, character, and leadership styles are undeniably relevant, we look at these events from a perspective that emphasizes the contexts in which they take place. To demonstrate the wide applicability of small leadership, we have chosen leaders from many different walks of life.

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## Leadership at the Boundary

Human beings are, by their nature, tribal creatures. Most contemporary organizations are full of “tribes” busily going about their work, clashing, negotiating, and cooperating for the success of the wider enterprise. How leaders manage the boundaries and the space between these groups is essential to the vitality of any business (Alderfer, 1987; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992). For this reason, some of the most important small leadership behavior takes place in the context of boundary management, especially during times of change and uncertainty. Here even small actions “at the boundary” can have large effects.

We can start with a simple and often overlooked example of boundary management: the act of acknowledging who is and is not part of a team. The departure of an existing team member or the addition of a new one can often represent a crucial moment in a team’s development. Consider a critical incident with one of our own colleagues, Mal O’Connor. As the first non-founder invited to join our firm’s management committee several years ago, Mal’s new role signified a meaningful transition for the firm. Yet in the team’s first meeting with Mal in his new role, there was no recognition of this important moment. The president

casually reviewed the agenda, and after pausing to ask whether there were any additions to make, promptly launched into the first item on the agenda. Somewhat shocked by the omission, Mal pointedly interjected, "Yes, I have one additional agenda item: 'Welcome, Mal, to your first management committee meeting!'" This simple and humorous comment called the group's attention to what was then a meaningful inflection point in the maturation of the team. When attuned to the wider context or transitions taking place, leaders can productively use these moments to affirm important changes or to clarify the team's identity and purpose. Failing to acknowledge or take actions within these changing contexts, on the other hand, can be very counterproductive. Here, for example, withdrawing from the boundary created ambiguity. In the absence of action, both Mal and the group wondered how they should interpret the president's omission. Was this an implicit statement about Mal's new role or a reflection of the president's feelings about the changes happening at the firm? Ambiguity at the boundary not only creates awkward and uncomfortable situations; it can diminish the cohesiveness of the team. Thus we find that work at even simple boundaries is a significant responsibility for any leader.

Uncertainty or complexity at the boundary can generate enormous potential for small leadership moments. These moments are particularly common when groups of divergent interests or cultures come together. We had first-hand experience of one of those leadership moments at the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Along with a hundred other participants, one of the authors, his wife, and his brother-in-law observed the historical moment from one of House committee rooms in a congressional office building next to the Capital. Although the event was hosted by the Minnesota State Society, we quickly noticed that it was unclear whether entrance was by invitation only or open to the public. Although visitors might occasionally be asked whether they hailed from Minnesota, people wandered in freely and sat down or waited in line at the abundant buffet. There was certainly ambiguity at the boundary.

As the day progressed, the room filled to capacity and a palpable sense of nervous energy emerged. For during this time, it had become obvious that most of the people in the room were not Minnesotans, but folks coming in from the cold or looking for a seat. Most were African American.

This situation created a complicated unease throughout the room. Although we did not explicitly ask, we imagined what people might have been thinking and feeling. The Minnesotans might have had mixed feelings, wanting to be inclusive on the one hand but wishing on the other to create a special experience for fellow state residents. Self-consciously, they might have wondered whether it was even acceptable to assume that so many African Americans were *not* from Minnesota. The visitors might have felt similarly anxious, but posed much different questions. They

may have wondered, for example, “Are we welcome here?” or perhaps wanted to communicate, “We have every right to be here.” Although suppressed in the moment, this combination of complex feelings and uncertainty demanded an act of leadership in the room. Yet it would take still more pressure to produce that moment.

As we neared the swearing-in, several people feared that the integrity of the room was at risk. Someone noted that the microphones used during congressional hearings had been inappropriately turned on. Another individual pointed out that buffet food was carelessly spread across congressional desks. The murmurs began to create a sense of mild chaos. Meanwhile, no official leadership had addressed the situation, and the author’s brother-in-law, a staffer to the committee, was becoming increasingly nervous. The author suggested that, in the absence of any recognizable leadership, he should say something. And this is where the small leadership moment occurred. While the brother-in-law could have said a million things that heightened the sense of unease in the room, or unwittingly enacted any number of racial stereotypes available at the time, he calmly took the microphone and said the following:

“We want to welcome *all* of you to this historic moment. We have food available and plenty of room. However, I do want to remind us where we are. This is a major committee room where your congressmen and women do important work on behalf of the country—a historic room that we all should be careful to respect and honor while we are here. It is a great place to watch the inauguration. Thank you all for being here; please enjoy the moment.”

The impact was subtle and immediate. Heads nodded in approval, most notably from African Americans in the room. The nervous feeling subsided and people got around to the business of preparing for the swearing-in. But why? Consider first the choice of words: “all,” “us,” and “we.” Each of these acknowledged the collective purpose of the event. These words placed the participants in a shared context. Offering food emphasized relatedness and inclusiveness. And by reminding the group of the significance of their surroundings, he placed the event in perspective while setting clear expectations for respecting the space around them. These words filled a leadership void by answering unspoken, but nonetheless salient, questions. As we will discuss at the close of the article, leadership moments such as these derive much of their power from the fact that they enact larger narratives as well. One cannot help but feel, for example, some parallel between a black president’s entrance to the White House and the anxious questions of acceptance or rejection implicitly stimulated in the committee room.

While small leadership at the boundary can deeply affect participants, so can avoiding work at the boundary. “Negative” leadership often comes from the fear

of setting limits. For example, one of the authors was consulting to a prestigious international law firm that had just merged offices. The merger had created some anxiety and uncertainty—would the newly merged groups of partners be equals? Would the power shift? In a small leadership moment near the beginning of a retreat of partners and associates, the CEO walked around to each of the new partners in full view of the group, put her hand on each person's shoulder, and said a few public words about the person's new role at the firm. By making these introductions, the CEO had ushered the new partners across the boundary. Her act said effectively, "They are now with us."

Shortly afterward, however, we asked the CEO and her top team to come to the center of the room to discuss the work of the two days and their own intentions as a leadership team going forward. A member of her top team asked the CEO to invite a young and up-and-coming partner into the conversation. Although known to be provocative, the junior partner had accumulated some influence in the firm and it would have made sense to hear his voice in a partners' meeting. However, he was not a member of the top team. Wary of confrontation, the CEO reluctantly agreed to loosen the team boundary and include the junior partner in the discussion. The results were disastrous. The junior partner made veiled attacks on the CEO in a setting in which she could not publicly defend herself. His presence undermined the role and authority of the top team, both among its members but also to the wider firm observing the event. The incident reminded us that inclusion is sometimes the right choice, but in other cases, as here, leaders must marshal the strength to draw a boundary that sets a limit and says "no."

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## Leadership That Goes Against the Grain

A small leadership moment can also take the form of an intervention that restores balance or creates space for needed work to happen. In our experience, these moments often occur when leaders go against the pressure to continue dysfunctional patterns in their organization or refuse to take the path of least resistance. These actions may not be glamorous, but can be modestly heroic—especially when a leader chooses to confront dysfunctional but prevailing routines (think of Rosa Parks' defiance of the status quo). Such moments happen every day to ensure that productive work occurs. Take the physician who says to a dying patient, "I think we both know what's going on here." Rather than dancing around the facts for fear of causing hurt or embarrassment, the physician takes up his role to tell the truth clearly so that he and the patient can address it together. The patient feels relieved, and the physician is better able to serve the patient.

Of course, leaders must accept some level of risk when going against established patterns—just as they do when stepping up to the boundary. We were working with a top team of an elite college whose dean was a brilliant professor but hesitant and non-confrontational. He frequently expressed his ambivalence about being on the team by finding reasons to leave the room during discussion. This behavior frustrated his colleagues, who desired the dean's participation and counsel. But, as is often the case in academic leadership settings, they did not confront him directly. In fact, as if to retaliate, they became accustomed to making small jokes at his expense, a response as unproductive as the dean's own behavior. When we began our work with them, the pattern in the group had gone unchallenged for some period of time.

This was soon to change. In a retreat setting, in the middle of the afternoon, the dean opened a bag of chips while a colleague presented her working group's ideas about the new strategy for the college. The sounds of the bag and the crunchy chips were clearly audible and disruptive. But given the group's pattern of non-confrontation, nobody around the table was going to say anything about the dean's blatant behavior. And then, quite spontaneously, one of the authors (acting in a consultant capacity) walked over and took the chips away from the dean. A colleague saw the event as "a curious moment, akin to the interaction between a school teacher and an eighth-grader; the student realizes why the teacher has snatched the chips, and his right to snatch the chips, but is still surprised it happened." The consultant casually remarked to the group that the chips were noisy and distracting, and then the group continued with its work. Later that day, several members privately thanked the consultant for his intervention. As time went on, the dean took up a more productive role in the group and the team seemed to communicate greater respect for his authority.

Such moments of "going against" do not have to involve confrontation to be effective. During a state corrections department's leadership development session, a group of cynical wardens was standing around on a break, looking at a wall clock that was still unchanged from daylight savings six weeks earlier. They complained that the clock was indicative of larger problems within the organization, contrasting it with the "dare to be great" change lessons of the session. Then one of the wardens quietly pulled a chair over to the wall, stood on it, and fixed the clock. At first glance, such an act might seem meaningless and insignificant. Yet it actually took substantial courage in that moment to go against the group. And it had an impact. The action derived its power from the contrast it created between complaining about a problem and doing something about it. As a result, the event encouraged a subtle but important shift in the group members' thinking about how they should handle problems.

Sometimes a small leadership moment is years in the making. A colleague of ours recently told us about a juvenile residential treatment center where he was consulting. The distinct value of this organization was its integration of academics, therapeutic treatment, and residential housing. Yet the unique value of this system could not be fully realized because the three divisions were at war with one another. The director of the residential program, the largest division, had effectively begun to hold the other directors and the organization hostage by repeatedly overstepping her role and protecting her staff at all costs. The executive director might have intervened, but he had gradually ceded power to her as he focused his energies outward, working with the community to generate financial resources for the organization. The remaining department leads were unwilling to confront their colleague. This was occurring in an organization that had no culture of accountability. Indeed, they went several years without letting any staff go, even though there were known performance problems.

Such a situation is ripe for a leadership moment. It was only after a significant amount of work with our colleague and an expression of support from the top team that the executive director was able to confront the residential director. Eventually, after thoughtful discussion, he decided to let her go. Contrary to what the top team feared, none of the former director's staff left the organization. Indeed, many staff were relieved that the situation had changed. As time passed, the practical and symbolic implications of the executive director's decision were revealed: he had restored authority to its proper place and made it possible for the top team to do the integrative work needed for the success of the program. The executive director's action, firing such a powerful person, also sent a strong message that accountability was absolutely necessary in order for the organization to provide care for children. It should be noted that most of these children came themselves from fragmented environments of misplaced authority and little accountability. One might interpret the director's behavior as going against established patterns not only within the top team but also throughout the wider organizational culture and the life histories of its clients.

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## Leadership That Pulls Rather Than Pushes

In other successful moments, a leader will "create pull" for a needed change with a small and simple act, rather than pushing the change. Creating pull frequently requires a leader to step out of his or her role. Our colleague, Debbie Bing (2006), has written about leadership so large that it "crowds out" the space needed for a group to do good work and to develop its members' own strengths. This kind of leadership often encourages dependency. Leadership that pulls has the opposite



effect. The absence of large leadership can create a vacuum where new patterns of behavior emerge.

Take for example a consulting case involving a partners' meeting at a professional services firm. The partners were struggling with the firm's strategy and their president's interactions with his colleagues. At a key "stuck point" in the meeting, the consultant spontaneously invited the president to take a walk with him and let the group work without them. As soon as they had left the room, the remaining participants exploded into conversations that had previously been suppressed. The president's excessively forceful leadership had inhibited the work of the partners and his unexpected absence pulled others to step up and collaborate in ways that would not have been possible around the president. Because the partners' thoughts could be comfortably expressed out in the open, a stalemate had been broken. The contemplation inspired by the consultant's spontaneous act (and the president's agreement to leave the meeting) catalyzed developmental change in the organization. Not long after the event, the president stepped down. A thoughtful leadership transition ensued when another partner with a more collaborative outlook was put in the role.

The power of deliberate absence often creates such "trim-tab" moments. Historians, for example, noted that President John F. Kennedy's decision *not* to be present in strategic deliberations during the Cuban missile crisis created the necessary conditions that allowed his team to overcome the initial impulse to retaliate. Kennedy's absence thus generated more strategic options, which eventually led to a more creative solution to the crisis (May & Zelikow, 1997).

If a leader cannot use absence to create pull, silence is a particularly useful tactic. We find that a leader's rush to speak, to have an answer for everything, is often an attempt—frequently encouraged by other participants—to discharge tension rather than be thoughtful or reflective about a complicated situation. For example, we have noticed that a one-sided conversation driven by a leader can obliterate a potentially meaningful leadership moment. To avoid wasting such an opportunity, a leader may actively pull for a group's thinking, deliberately interrupting any expected one-sidedness. The nominal group technique has long been used for this purpose: the leader poses a focal question, and each member begins by silently generating ideas before openly discussing them. The process creates space for divergent viewpoints before moving the group toward consensus. We have often seen this technique produce small leadership moments, most powerfully in situations in which the leader is seen as championing an idea or proposal. By taking the reverse position and asking how such a course of action might actually fail, the leader creates pull for deeper thinking. Everyone is required to think individually about the issue, regardless of his or her formal or informal positions on the team. Such questions disengage "group think" (Janis, 1972) by asking

each member to think both “for” and “against” the issue. Stimulating productive differences is therefore an important way to create a situation in which new thinking might emerge. General Motors chief Alfred P. Sloan entered leadership lore when he employed this tactic in a spontaneous moment. “Gentlemen, I take it that we are all in complete agreement on the decision here,” he declared during a meeting one day. “Then I propose that we postpone further discussion to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about” (Surowiecki, 2004). We can only imagine the surprise and the thoughtful dialogue that must have ensued.

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## Closing: The Underlying Structure of Small Leadership

The argument for small leadership does not suggest that vision, emotional appeal, and charisma do not matter. But good leaders couple their grand gestures about vision with measures to ensure that others can carry the vision out. Richard Hackman (2002), one of the leading scholars on teams, calls this “functional leadership” because its purpose is to intervene in ways that allow the team or the organization to do productive work. The point of leadership, he says, is to create “enabling conditions” that make the team effective. By clarifying a boundary, restoring authority to the right role, bridging the boundary between two groups, or creating pull, the small leadership moment brings things into proper order. The reverse, of course, is also true. In negative leadership moments, the leader has typically colluded with or amplified the dysfunctional propensities in the system. In these moments, the leader has forfeited his personal agency and, with it, the necessary freedom to intervene.

We believe that small leadership most often occurs when a leader feels a call to action during the flow of events. The leader often finds him- or herself at the leading edge of the moment, working not as a great motivator but as the pivot upon which the system begins to shift course. These moments often transpire spontaneously when leaders experience an implicit, rather than explicit, sense of knowing what to do, or they realize what they are doing as they do it. The psychoanalyst Daniel Stern sees these small, emergent moments as linked to what the Greeks called *kairos*, “a propitious moment of something coming into being . . . the meeting of unrelated and independent elements at a point in time causing the emergence of special moments” (2004, p. xv).

Such moments are auspiciously ripe for real change because larger dynamics tend to play out in the microcosm of the moment—what the poet William Blake (1802) referred to as “a world in a grain of sand.” For example, one might argue

that it was not by accident that the congressional committee room presented participants with a situation that so closely exemplified the experiences often felt between blacks and whites in the United States. The confluence of events created an opening, a potential inflection point where participants could either behave according to the old ways of the past or attempt something different. Such moments lie at the nexus of the past and the future, where everyone recognizes, however vaguely, that something new is emerging. Even in the smallest leadership moments, a perceptible shift is experienced. When the consultant took the potato chips from the dean, everyone in that room knew that something, however small, had changed. The group's future was suddenly reframed, subtly but significantly. Sometimes, at their most transformational, these nodal events can change the course of a life or lives. Leadership is often what tips the balance.

So how do leaders make small leadership moments possible? Although many small leadership acts are spontaneous, in the flow of the everyday life, we believe one can prepare for them. Certainly, Rosa Parks had prepared for her moment—she was an active member of an emerging civil rights group. But her action was not planned. She sat toward the back of the bus when she first boarded. Only in a moment when her fatigue and her courage intersected did she refuse to move back as more whites boarded. It was that converging of forces that triggered the Montgomery bus boycott.

Leaders can best prepare by learning how to “listen in.” The preeminent literary critic and Shakespearian scholar Harold Bloom was asked by the *Harvard Business Review* why executives ought to read great literature (Coutu, 2001). His reason was that by reading tragedies and comedies about the fates of men and women, executives might be able to reflect on their own stories, as if—acting within plays of their own life narratives—they might “overhear” both themselves and the larger stories in which they are characters. We believe that by reading themselves in this way leaders can improve their intuition for what is next. Good leaders have the courage to ask the question: What calls? This ability requires, as Weick has suggested, that leaders engage in constant sense-making in which they “stay in touch with context” (Weick, 2001, p. 94). To “stay in touch with context” means that a leader's own struggle to find meaning should stimulate good leadership by helping “people collectively make sense of what they are facing.” (p. 97). When leaders can learn to develop a deep sense of curiosity and have the desire to examine the context of the moment, their anticipation and openness to the possibilities of what's next stimulate the confidence to act, not heroically as individuals, but in connection with their groups or their departments or their companies or their nations. We believe this is when real leadership is taking place. It is the leader's humble curiosity and forward-leaning anticipation of the future that is most conducive to the power of a small leadership moment.

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