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*Today*

much of the writing on leadership focuses on the individual leader – personal qualities, characteristics, skills, abilities, and knowledge. But very little work exists about the context of leadership or about the emerging world in which leaders live. This world, especially after September 11, reflects new economic and social realities as well as the perceptions, hopes, and expectations of a variety of interested constituents.

A sound understanding of this context is critical because it creates the demands leaders must meet and the environment wherein the leader lives and works. The context determines the core personal skills and competencies leaders need to work effectively, and the parameters for success and failure.

Three critical elements characterize leadership context. The first is the

growing number of voices, perspectives, and points-of-view. Today's leaders face significantly more diverse information than at any time in the past. The number of cultural communities has increased dramatically and with them, an increase in what people have to say. The diversity of knowledge and perspectives has become a common feature of daily leadership life. By all indicators, this growth in diverse perspectives will likely continue.

The second feature of today's leadership context has to do with mapping and direction. There are so few clear paths that show the way for leaders today. Few ground rules exist that leaders in the past have been able to use as guideposts, signs, or indicators. Added to this are the unforeseen consequences that result from any decision or action taken by a leader. The result is a very unclear and constantly



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shifting decision space. Today's leader cannot be certain that decision A will lead to intended result B without having unintended, but significant consequences X, Y, and Z.

The final characteristic has to do with expectations. Today's leader is expected to get it right and get it right fast. There are high expectations to deal effectively with the complexity of the circumstances and to develop sustainable success into the future. The demand is for a type of intelligence that deals with constantly emerging problems and opportunities. The demand is also to win against intelligent opponents and competitors. Leaders exist in a highly competitive environment alongside other leaders just like them. And our organizations tend to have little patience for poor corporate performance and lack of profitability.

In short, today's leader lives in a world of expectations. Employees want clear direction while simultaneously looking to leaders to be sensitive to their personal needs and aspirations. Stockholders expect leaders to create sustainable value and wealth for their investment dollars. Communities expect leaders to provide long-term benefits and resources to help make the community healthy and to influence growth and development of a good standard of living.

## Core Leadership Qualities

### Sense-Making

To deal effectively with the growing diversity of perspectives and bodies of knowledge, today's leader must create understanding and make sense out of all the perspectives and possibilities available on any issue, problem, or set of circumstances. Sense-making, for a leader, is as basic as walking and talking. The ability of a leader to condense, filter, combine, and organize multiple

viewpoints ranks as an essential feature of success. The willingness and ability to explore, embrace, and juggle different points of view underlies this ability. The leader's use of helpful models such as systems thinking and a variety of systems tools adds greatly to the leader's ability to make sense. Finally the leader must be able to articulate a picture and then communicate the picture in a way that the diverse communities can understand and follow.

### Taking Action

When faced with unclear pathways or absolutely no pathways, the leader needs to design action that is both intelligent and efficiently impactful. Leadership action needs to be informed by considering all possible outcomes including those that may be improbable and even impossible. The action needs to generate the right knowledge and it needs to manage effectively what is not known. This type of intelligent action recognizes both the knowledge and ignorance embedded in rules, guidelines, and policies.

### Being Active

This type of action is also founded on the leader's ability to learn quickly and to learn adaptively. Without a heightened sensitivity and diligence to feedback, a leader's actions contribute to a growing unreality and ignorance. Adaptive learning means that a leader knows when learning is necessary and how that learning will happen. This type of learning also requires courage – the courage to set paths in a land where few, if any, have travelled.

### Building Capacity

The final core competency addresses the demand for successful action. The leader needs to capacitate human systems. In other words, after the sense-making and path setting, the leader

needs to create the means for moving human systems in the desired directions. The leader must be able to attract resources and to hold the attention of others long enough to provide the sense-making and the paths for action. A leader must engage, empower, and enable others.

Today, leaders need to inject into human systems the infrastructure for constant learning, capacity building, and performance. By creating alliances, partnerships, value networks, and effective resource attraction and allocation methods, the leader builds a sustainable infrastructure for focus, growth, and value. Human systems benefit greatly from an ongoing dynamic balance between forces of change and forces of stability. Effective leaders watch this dynamic balance with the eyes of a hawk and act quickly when tension becomes too great or too little.

To overcome the increasing diversity of perspectives, the ambiguous paths for action, and the demands for successful action, today's leaders need to be effective sense-makers, designers of intelligent action, and builders and energizers of human systems.

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