

How Critical is Leading Through Strategic Change?

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Abstract: The current economic climate has begged the question of how leaders can steer their organisations through the needed strategic changes to adapt to these new challenges. However, this argument is questionable because it assumes the need for paradigmatic organisational change, it does not address the time aspect implementing such a change and it does not clearly define the relationship between leaders and the managers who deliver the change in practice. Examining these claims shows that this argument is reactive and insufficiently grounded in theory. Leadership theory tends to view leadership as a hierarchical position. Instead, based on empirical evidence, we show that leadership is relevant to all and is based on authentic action grounded in one of two worldviews (Theta or Lambda). Those with a Theta worldview seek social affiliation as an end goal whereas Lambdas seek personal challenge and differentiation. We follow by explaining how Theta and Lambda address change differently and how organisational strategy should reflect this leadership premise regardless of existing external conditions. We make a contribution to the strategic change and leadership literature. We posit that only by understanding ones own worldview can leadership be authentically and meaningfully exercised.

Keywords: Leadership, Theta/Lambda worldview, authenticity, teamwork, change, strategy

1. Introduction

The current economic climate has challenged leaders on how to steer their organisations through strategic changes required to adapt new market conditions. Realising and delivering shareholder value in mature markets is made possible through continues re-positioning of assets which in order to do so require change of organisational strategy. However, scholars question this argument for several reasons: first, it assumes that current leadership skills are insufficient for paradigmatic organisational change; second, it does not address the timetable of implementing such a change; and third, it does not clearly define the implication of strategic change and its connection with leadership.

Hence, we should first understand that each social change should cause an adaptation of skills. In addition, do we really understand the meaning of leadership? Using Mostovicz et al's (2009) theoretical framework and our empirical evidence, we show that leadership is relevant to all, and is based on authentic action grounded in one of two worldviews, Theta or Lambda. Thus in answering these questions, we will first review, using cognitive psychology, the reasons why people continually seek more and better skills (i.e. dealing with change). Then we will discuss the meaning of leadership (i.e. what is leadership?), followed by an explanation of 'how through adopting a Theta and Lambda value orientation change is addressed'. In conclusion, understanding the need for better skills, we will show how this knowledge is important to explaining leadership implications and how leaders can benefit from social change. Hence, we show that being constantly mindful is leading through strategic change is necessary and that only by understanding ones own worldview can authentic leadership be meaningfully exercised.

2. Dealing with change

Change has been a perennial theme in philosophy dating back to the ancient Greeks, and perhaps earlier. For example, some 2500 years ago, Heraclitus (1991), coined the maxim that "there is nothing permanent except change", holding that there is no permanent reality beyond that of change. Similarly, the ancient Chinese philosophers viewed reality as the dynamic interplay of two opposites, the *yin* and the *yang*. Their keen understanding of change is reflected in the term they use for "crisis", in Mandarin, "*wei-ji*", which is composed of the characters for "danger" ("*wei*") and "opportunity" ("*ji*"), (Ming-Jer Chen, 2002). In more modern time, change has become the byword of management since mid-1980s and is reflected in a myriad of business books with titles like *Mastering Change: The Key to Business Success* (Martel, 1986), *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change* (Argyris, 1993), *The Challenge of Organizational Change* (Kanter et al,

1992) and *The Dance of Change* (Senge, 1999) to mention, but a few. In fact a burgeoning academic and popular literature too numerous to mention here, swamps our bookshelves.

Hence, for the purpose of this article we focus on the seminal work of George Kelly (1955) who postulated that all people anticipate events in terms of the meanings and interpretations they place on them. These meanings and interpretations are called constructs and they reflect the unique way in which an individual construes his world. According to Kelly, the fundamental postulate of personal construct theory is that “a person’s [interpretive] processes are psychologically canalised by the ways in which he anticipates events” (Kelly, 1955:46). These constructs are subject to continual revision and replacement, and people avoid feeling victimized by circumstances by adopting alternative constructs, which are always available, to explain their conduct. Therefore, the change in a person’s behaviour needs to remain consistent within the changes in one’s chosen constructs (Howard and Kelly, 1954). Kelly calls this phenomenon ‘constructive alternativism’ (Kelly, 1955:15) and supports his basic postulate with eleven corollaries.

Kelly’s (1944: 68) range corollary further assumes that personal constructs are finitely defined and not relevant to all events in a person’s life; a construct is limited to a particular range of convenience (Kelly, 1955:137). However, in many cases, people tend to be hostile to a change of their past constructs even when events force them to construe otherwise (Festinger, 1957). Brehm (1966) affirms that psychological reactance occurs when one’s autonomy is impinged, when one has multiple choices about how to act and then the threat of one or more of these available choices become invalid. Hence, facing a change that is out of the range of convenience or incompatible with one’s existing construct system would eventually lead to anxiety and threat. Kelly (1955: 533) defines hostility as “the continued effort to extort validational evidence in favour of a type of social prediction which has already been recognised as a failure.” Using construct theory terminology, Bannister and Mair (1968) argue that hostility occurs when one cannot accept invalidation of one’s expectations because it implies a shift in the construct system, which in turn involves many changes that would foretell chaos. Finally, Varble and Landfield (1969) present evidence for Kelly’s (1955) hypothesis that core constructs, which have greater significance for a person’s psychological life and death, are more resistant to change than peripheral constructs. While social change implies reconstruing the current construct system, people prefer to seek solutions that will least modify that system. For that reason, people would prefer to enlarge their construct system by looking for a richer blend of skills instead of examining critically their existent arsenal. However, while re-examining the current construct system would be more fruitful, it seems useless to try to convince logically to act against our emotions. What, therefore, can we do to counter social change?

3. What is leadership?

Instead of looking for more skills that would eventually answer logically to social change, leadership is an emotional drive for unchanged stability. As such, a leader would not be hostile to eventual changes that occur constantly and would naturally adapt his construct system to external changes. However, to establish these claims we should first explain our position on leadership. Scholars tend to hold two mutually exclusive views about leadership: one school of thought holds that a leader is born (Grint, 2000; Nietzsche, 1969) and that the qualities of a leader are subconscious (Lowen, 1975), whilst the other posits that humans need to work hard to develop these qualities and become leaders (Henrikson, 2006; Kakabadse and Myers, 1996; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). Nevertheless, both approaches try to define who *is* a leader.

As such, both approaches recognise that leadership is temporary and each change defines leadership differently. This view can be found by scholars who claim that theories that were considered correct in the past have become invalid over time (Kalogeras, 2005; Pascale, 1990). Moreover, scholars perceive leadership socially as a hierarchical position. Nevertheless, we argue that leadership is psychologically defined and is based on the way one personally act. It is at the leader’s discretion how to act according to the circumstance’s the individual faces. On the basis that discretionary action is likely to be determined by contextual considerations, then the determinants of such considerations are likely to be strategy, on the one hand and psychology on the other, (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999).

Leadership is about making choices (Kouzes and Posner, 2003). Choice is a binary action that divides options into two sets, the desired and the undesired ones, according to a higher principle or value (Rawls, 1999). Thus, a choice implies that while both options are equally valid, one will choose

according to a higher principle. Mostovicz (2008) posits that the way people choose is a reflection of their worldview or the way they go about discovering their “ideal self” (Hinkle, 1965). People approach this discovery in one of two ways: by the need for achievement (the Lambda worldview) or by the need for affiliation (the Theta worldview).

Each worldview has its unique characteristics. While the Thetas’ motivation is socially oriented and they look to affiliate with their society of choice (Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon, 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2004), the Lambdas are individually motivated (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Consequently, their respective behaviour follows the fundamental modalities of human existence (Bakan, 1966). Thetas’ behaviour is toward communion and focused on other people and relationships while Lambdas’ behaviour is toward agency and focused on the self and autonomy. The different approaches seek different benefits. Thetas try to build respect within their society of choice while Lambdas look for personal freedom (Mostovicz, 2008). While scholars argue that leaders should exhibit the personal quality of authenticity (e.g., Goleman, 1998; Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977), Thetas and Lambdas differ in the way they relate to authenticity. While Thetas are concerned with truthfulness and denounce fakes (Ciulla, 2004; Nanus, 1995; Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Solomon, 2004), Lambdas “are genuine and authentic, not a replica of someone else” (George et al., 2007:129) and perceive authenticity as uniqueness, with negative views of a “me too” practice (Bennis, 2004; Deci and Ryan, 2000; George et al., 2007; Ryan and Brown, 2003).

Finally, the worldviews have different ideas about a true goal. According to Kaplan (1990), one relates to truth either as an objective or as a set of rules. If one relates to truth as an objective, the goal is to unite with it, as the Thetas perceive. If, on the other hand, one relates to truth as a principle, as the Lambdas endorse, truth then creates a set of challenges or guidelines which we must uphold. The difference in perception of truth also explains why people embrace different opinions about how leaders transform (Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999). To a Theta, a true leader attains his objective or is able to act subconsciously (Lowen, 1975). Naturally, he is a born leader (Grint, 2000; Nietzsche, 1969). A Lambda, however, is a genuine leader who meticulously follows a proper set of guidelines (Henrikson, 2006; Kakabadse and Myers, 1996; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999).

These two approaches clash fundamentally because the drive for achievement ends in separating oneself from others (or making oneself unique), while its counterpart seeks to affiliate oneself with others and work in unison. Consequently, this tension can lead to personal bias or a distortion of the paradox within leadership (Mostovicz et al, 2009). A Theta type tends to choose the alternative course of action whereby he dilutes the stakes by substituting a relative truthfulness for the ultimate truth or creates a lack of contrast by removing a strongly desired choice. On the other hand, in the Lambda type, the learning paradox can cause one to lose his own personality and to seek collectivism or even fanaticism in extreme cases whereby one disrespects others’ interpretation of truth or argues that it is invalid (McGregor et al., 1998; see Frankl, 1986, p.xxvi for a similar idea). Table 1 below outlines several of the characteristics which define these two worldviews and how they approach their practice of leadership.

Table 1: Leadership characteristics of Theta (Θ) and Lambda (Λ) worldviews

	Theta (Θ)	Lambda (Λ)
Motivation/reason	Socially oriented	Personally oriented
Goal	Seeking unity and certainty	Seeking challenge and creation
Behaviour	Communion	Agency
Benefit	Building respect	Searching personal freedom
Leadership Principle	Authenticity = truthfulness	Authenticity = genuineness
Inclination	Toward comparison	Toward contrast
Perception of truth	As an objective	As a set of rules
Transformation of a leader	A leader is born. Qualities are subconscious.	A leader is developed consciously.

Source: (Mostovicz et al, 2009)

Incorporating both approaches is paradoxical because this requires one to relate to the other despite being intrinsically motivated in an opposite way (Mostovicz et al, 2009). This paradox creates an ethical problem because it implies that the leader is supposed to view a clashing code of conduct as both a proper and a good conduct, yet also as unethical. Moreover, it questions how one can perceive two opposing conducts as equally ethical.

Hence, leadership consists of three levels (Table 2). The lower level consists of the many tactics or actions (Amir and Ariely, 2007) that are based on the Theta/Lambda principles. As such, these actions are logical, rational, conscious, measurable and replicable, and their guiding discipline is economics. Strategy is a matter of interpretation and often involves the making of choices (Porter, 1996), which are themselves paradoxical (Mostovicz, et al , 2008). This is the level of practical leadership that scholars characterise as emotional, unconscious, irrational and immeasurable and whose guiding discipline is psychology. However, leaders properly perform at this level only when the psychology is embedded in true purpose and its leading discipline is of metaphysics. While man cannot perceive truth, he is able to progress toward it. Nevertheless, he has to progress naturally and faithfully according to his worldview, whether Theta or Lambda.

Table 2: The three components of leadership theory

Theory question	How?	What?	Why?
Organisational component	Tactics	Strategy	Leadership
Leading discipline	Economics	Psychology	Metaphysics
Type of Action	Logical, measurable and replicable. Conscious	Emotional, a matter of choice. Subconscious	Meta-action

Source: (Mostovicz et al, 2009)

In summary, leadership calls for being authentic to one's worldview. Therefore, regardless of external changes, a leader should always check his worldview and should seek that his actions follow it and are not biased because of social pressure. In other words, a true leader is subjective (Kaplan, 1991); on the one hand, a leader is not influenced by external triggers and on the other hand, a leader is fully aware of his/her worldview and how he/she expresses it through one's actions.

Researching preference change (i.e. "slot change"), Hinkle (1965) discovered that in modifying a construct, one should be aware of its superordinate and subordinate implications. Hinkle (1965), following Newman (1956), suggests that changing a subordinate implication may be possible if one first stabilizes the superordinate constructs (or vice versa), a tactic used in many interpersonal strategies (Bannister and Mair, 1968). In line with the threat hypothesis (Lemcke, 1959), a change or a constructional reorganisation can take place only from a position of relative stability. Hence, since the leader's core beliefs do not change, they offer the necessary relative stability to deal with new external challenges.

Since strategy is about choice that is embedded in the leader's worldview, "strategic change" is an oxymoron. After all, having a clear strategy means following one's own worldview that never changes. People naturally fear and become anxious when social change transpires. Therefore, it is useless to try to diffuse these justified fears. "Strategic changes" are not really strategic but, nevertheless, people mistakenly perceive them as fundamental changes that call for a revision of our construct system. Understanding the meaning of leadership can enable us to relate to our deep beliefs and use them as an anchor that offers the necessary stability to examine external events without fear, knowing that regardless of the social setting, there is no reason for us to change our core beliefs. What we perceive as a fundamental change is nothing more than a more complex tactical event.

This understanding demonstrates that leadership is relevant to all and is not the domain of the selected few. Theta and Lambda worldviews tell us that it is not enough to solve a problem or to change course of action. In order to face challenges, one must be aware of how to tackle them. Each worldview sees challenges differently and what is problematic to one is an opportunity for the other. Hence, we will provide some guidelines for addressing changes, whether minor or fundamental, according to the Theta and Lambda worldviews.

4. How Theta and Lambda address change

Since each change differ in detail, it is impossible to outline the details of how to tackle those changes. Nevertheless, analysing both published literature (Bennis, 2004; Ciulla, 2004; Deci and Ryan, 2000; George et al., 2007; Nanus, 1995; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Pyszcynski, Greenberg and Solomon, 2004; Ryan and Brown, 2003) and our data based on 50 semi-structured interviews with top executives and board members of major multi-national companies by using Mostovicz, et al's (2009) analytical framework and Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative approach, we found that each follows his worldview when addressing issues of social or external change, namely, Lambda or Theta. All interviews were conducted during 2008 which were recorded, transcribed and then analysed independently by contributing in accordance with Mostovicz et al (2009) sorting approach into Theta and Lambda categories. Afterwards independent coding and data sorting was reconciled between researchers.

Our analysis reveals, that since any change hampers stability and security in the eyes of Theta leaders, their first goal is to establish their own secured zone by surrounding themselves with trusted people. They are not looking necessarily to have bright stars who can come with brilliant ideas since they have to first create a proper social atmosphere around them that would help them act according to their worldview. Theta leaders are very concerned with what their peers (i.e. other executives around them) think since they rely on a consensus to plot their way ahead. Since being a Theta leader implies that one should be a better player within ones' society, such a person will be able to offer a range of solutions to new problems that arise from change. Nevertheless, for a Theta leader, each team member complements each other and the way ahead is a joint decision. Thetas believe that a good leader builds his recognition and good reputation among his social peers.

In building their team, Thetas tend to seek mutual respect and understanding by encouraging colleagues to speak out and come with ideas. Looking for consensus, Thetas view directional leadership as wrong; they do not dictate, but rather, blend influences and opinions that enable them to reach a consensus. Nevertheless, since Thetas are concerned with the possible weaknesses of their team, they have to follow their natural inclination, taking a step back and examining critically and objectively the team's performance so they can recommend improvements. Acting against one's natural inclination is manifested in what Thetas seek to acquire. Since Thetas are naturally social, they seek to improve their intellectual abilities.

Thetas look for an improvement of their past experience. They tend to be conservative and risk averse, building on the continuation and development, and enrichment of their secured past with fresh ideas. Thus, since they believe that their past experience can predict what might happen, reviewing that past is important for them as they seek ways to minimise necessary changes. However, solutions are usually novel and are not part of the past knowledge portfolio.

To Thetas, the perception of truth is an objective or a goal. Therefore, they seek a clear and explicit structure that would explain this goal, follow a well defined plan to achieve it and ensure that everything is done properly, appropriately and continuously, thus improving in a well defined direction. Ideally, they would be happy when everything is going absolutely fine but when facing a change, Thetas believe in one true solution. Failure to reach the solution shows that they were not focused on target. Thetas use the best solution or goal approach, which is social in nature as an anchor or a vision that helps them face changes. However, the belief that only one best solution exists means that a Theta uses logic based on his intellectual abilities. Thus, he trains and convinces his team to also embrace the "one best solution" approach. Finally, Thetas believe that a leader is born; driven by emotions, his social skills are natural and subconscious.

On the other hand, Lambdas address the same issues in an opposite way. Lambdas embrace change since it implies a fresh and a new challenge. For them, risk aversion is evading responsibility. Acting in a predicted environment is dull and boring so a change injects life into the social setting. Following their Lambda worldview, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe how Japanese leaders have learned to welcome change and when it does not happen socially, they create it by looking for fluctuation and creative chaos. Fluctuation is different from complete disorder and scholars define it as an order whose patterns are difficult to predict at the beginning (Gleick, 1987). Fluctuation creates a breakdown of routine habits and cognitive framework that enables examining basic attitudes toward the world and it demands that we turn our attention to dialogue as a means of social interaction as to

create new concepts. We naturally create chaos when we face real crisis and the approach we currently take cannot find an adequate solution. In chaos, we do not define a problem to reach a solution; instead, we focus on the structure or the solution process. Nevertheless, the organisation should “reflect in action” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) succinct description of dealing with chaos may help us understand how Lambdas act. In the individualistic worldview of a Lambda, the meaning of teamwork is different than that of a Theta. A Lambda is happy to listen to different perspectives that would address the challenge from other angles. A Lambda leader might not adopt any of the ideas raised by the team, but by respecting them, he will be able to reshape and fine-tune his own perspective. Thus, he bases team selection not on an emotional basis, but on the ability of each to intellectually challenge and fertilise the leader’s imagination. When building a team, a Lambda is concerned with the team’s strength which will produce the best challenge. Such an approach might identify the champion of the day when addressing a challenge since the team actually competes on who can better face the challenge. The full responsibility lies on the leader’s shoulders who must act genuinely and clearly according to his worldview. Since the entire organisation would follow his dictum, a Lambda should be aware that such hierarchical behaviour might block his team from expressing fully their thoughts. Therefore, while against his natural inclination, a Lambda should see his team members as equals and interact socially with them.

Japanese managers learned how to deal with this problem. Japan is a hierarchical individualistic society where a leader would take a personal responsibility that might even cost him his life (Nitobe, 1969). With such a high cost and to avoid harsh consequences, Japanese learned to spread responsibility on a larger team. Nevertheless, acting as a team is in direct contrast to hierarchy. Therefore, when acting in a team, Japanese shed away all hierarchy to provide each with the necessary autonomy to express his ideas in the most honest way (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

When people impose change it is chaotic by nature; it is often difficult to figure out the challenge and, what change we should undertake, if at all. Hence, a Lambda excels when challenge grows in an unusual way, which requires an unexpected solution. Leadership for a Lambda requires that the leader would be able to successfully challenge his creative and knowledgeable team. Tapping into the creative juices of these people enables the leader to sharpen his own way ahead.

Since change means newness, we should consider past experience carefully. Instead of looking for similarity, a Lambda looks for contrast- what was missing in the existing knowledge that caused him to see the new change as a challenge. Being new, a Lambda does not look for a structured solution, but for a clear direction to head. A Lambda might sense how the solution might look, but nevertheless, cannot express it explicitly. Therefore, a Lambda might use metaphors (which Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995:66) define as “a way of perceiving or intuitively understanding one thing by imaging another thing symbolically”) or analogies. Since metaphors benefit from images that seem unrelated at first sight (Morgan, 1980), a Lambda tends to read beyond his immediate challenge boundaries as to invade them and strives to offer fresh perspectives. Driven by instinct, a Lambda argues that his solution is good, and acknowledges that other options exist. Therefore, he is able to impose his choice and attitude because of his strong personality and not because of his better logic. A Lambda does not look for understanding, but for trust and enthusiasm of his peers. In achieving a goal, a Lambda proudly pronounces, “I did it my way.”

Since the perception of truth for a Lambda is a set of rules, a Lambda is not looking for a defined goal and his purpose is to define a set of rules that would move him in the right direction (Neisser, 1976). In his eyes, breaching them is a failure. Acting in action, a Lambda constantly changes his plan as he progresses. Therefore, he tries to decipher the change and understand why the existing rules no longer work. Hence, the individual Lambda does not reflect on future vision but on his own past experience that defines a box to think outside of it so he would be able to reach a genuine change. A Lambda leader continuously and consciously develops. He seeks challenges, analyses them and learns a new lesson. However, a good solution usually reveals that the newness that the change brought was only a disguised old problem.

5. Concluding remarks

Since strategy means following one's worldview, facing a change, a leader should re-examine his worldview, stick to it and understand how to address the challenge according to his worldview. Consequently, changes are effectively tactical only and we use existing leadership skills and abilities and address them. While we should encourage a Theta to tackle a more complex and deep social change, we should warn a Lambda not to view a minor change light-heartedly. However, regardless of the seriousness of the challenge, when one follows clearly his own worldview, he will succeed.

Any change brings fear and anxiety, which Thetas and Lambdas face differently. While Thetas fear that their social surrounding might crumble, Lambdas might consider the change too chaotic and, at first sight, cannot determine where to start. Therefore, teamwork is essential, although Thetas and Lambdas require different teams to help them face the change. While the Theta team's role is to create a helpful, supportive social environment to diffuse fear, a Lambda team's aim is to tackle the challenge from various angles, to develop as many approaches as possible as to start a creative process that will eventually move the organisation forward.

Leadership requires that one will act authentically. This has a different meaning to a Theta or a Lambda. While a Theta seeks truthfulness, the Lambda strives to act genuinely. Each should know clearly what to look for, what is important to him and how to solve the problem he is facing. Changes come and go and once we solve one problem another will arise. Hence, before looking for new skills it is worth assessing whether we need them in first place. However, since leadership is not a mere philosophy but a guideline for action (Mostovicz et al, 2009), each change presents a new challenge that will help us learn how to tackle these problems. This should ease the fear and anxiety that change brings, thus providing a smoother solution. Yes, leading through strategic change is necessary, but it is only by understanding ones own worldview that authentic leadership can be meaningfully exercised. Whilst our study shows importance of knowing ones worldview in order to reduce meaningful change, further research is necessary as well as empirical testing of our proposition that leaders with clear awareness of their world view, whether Lambda or Theta, are more capable to leading through strategic change.

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