

*"My research has convinced me that self-differentiation is the trait that underlies the ability to successfully use many of the tools and techniques of OD as well as the skills of leadership."*

# Self-Differentiation: The Missing Ingredient in Leadership

*By Gervase Bushe*

SOME LEADERS HAVE great ideas, yet somehow are cold and disconnected. There are others who are too close and dependent on their employees. Then there are the ones who connect with the people who work for them, yet also maintain their perspective and individuality. In my practice, I have seen all three approaches to leading and they reflect deep seated dilemmas we face as human beings.

During the past decade I have been studying leadership in post-bureaucratic organizations, organizations that do not rely on command and control structures to get things done but, instead, rely on collaboration and team work from all employees. I have come to the conclusion that there is a "trait" or "characteristic" that underlies the kind of leadership required of them. In this article I will describe what it is, why it's so

important and how to help our clients have more of it.

## CASE HISTORY OF ROB

Rob is, I think, typical of so many leaders trying to create change in their organizations. When I entered the picture Rob had been the CEO of a professional, knowledge-based organization for about ten years and was strongly identified with it by people inside and outside the company. The organization was facing significant strategic, market and operational issues. Rob decided that the com-

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*Portions of this article are abridged from the book Clear Leadership: How Outstanding Leaders Make Themselves Understood, Cut Through the Mush, and Help Everyone Get Real at Work. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black, 2001.*

pany needed to make a major adjustment to its strategy. This meant that some parts of the organization, which had been central under the old strategy, would now have a different role.

Rob made pronouncements about the changes and tried to explain the logic behind them, but also experienced a feeling of anxiety created in others by his new vision in ways that made him uncomfortable. I watched him have a lot of difficulty listening openly to the fears and concerns of people in the organization. As I got to know him I learned that when people described problems they were having he felt he was responsible for taking away their fear. In addition, so many of these fears and concerns seemed unreasonable to him that he was able to dismiss them, "It's just "resistance to change", he said, "People will get over it once they see that the changes are good for everyone". He became more and more distant and difficult to communicate with. He had less and less time for meetings. He was away more.

He was difficult to reach. He even stopped returning phone calls to his Vice-Presidents.

Out of this vacuum of information those heavily involved with the changes became increasingly anxious. Mario, the lead manager of the department most affected, reasoned that the lack of contact with Rob meant he was in imminent danger of losing his job so he placed more pressure on himself to perform. The less he understood what Rob wanted, the more anxious he became; the more he tried to please, the less competent he appeared. Mario's

actions puzzled Rob who believed that Mario had been a great asset to the company but as Mario's performance declined, he began to resign himself to the possibility that Mario would have to go.

The people who worked for Mario felt even more unsure about the changes. They were aware of Mario's anxiety and had little information so they fantasized about what was going on. Naturally, these were not pretty stories. They thought Mario and Rob were getting ready to downsize their department and lay people off. Actually, Rob

thought that they were a highly skilled group and did not want to lose any of them but none of that was communicated because to Rob it seemed self evident, especially because the company was having problems with other companies raiding their top personnel. Morale was sinking and this was having an effect on the rest of the organization who were increasingly unclear about the real nature of the now ambiguous changes. Rumors were rampant.

When people broached the topic of the meaning of the changes for the department Rob would act annoyed and reply in a brisk way. This was a manifestation of his unconscious anxiety as he feared that if he allowed them, they would try to talk him out of the change and that he would have a hard time standing firm. They, of course, only heard his annoyance and, already fearing for their jobs, would stop any questioning for fear of his anger. At the point where I was hired to do some "executive development", the best people in the department, unbeknownst to Rob, were polishing their resumes and getting ready to leave. Rob knew there was some discomfort but he assumed Mario was communicating the actual nature of the changes and that people would quickly get comfortable with them. Everyone had a fantasy about what was going on and everyone was, in some way, wrong.

Rob had a clear vision which he believed in and was passionately pursuing. His vision was probably right too. But obviously, there were big problems with Rob's leadership that were getting in the way of the execution of his vision and were likely to leave the company in worse shape than before the vision came to him.

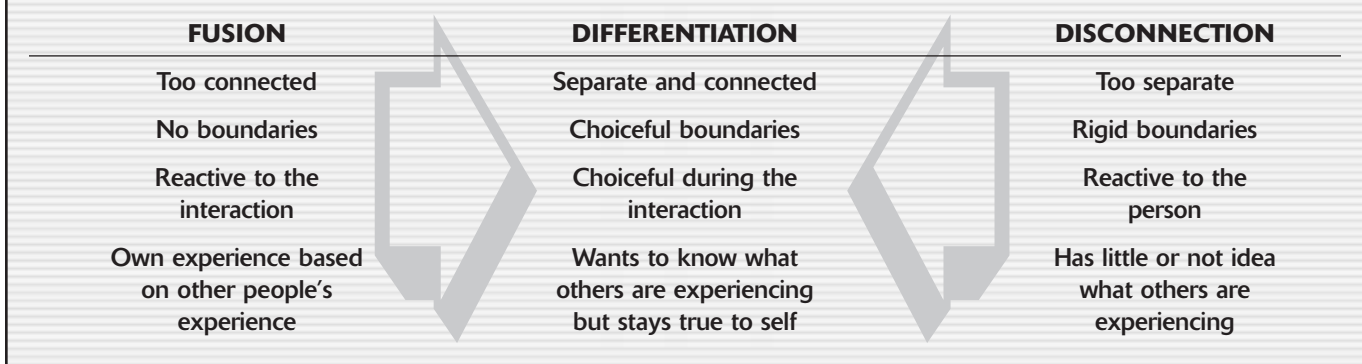
It's easy to say that Rob needed to "communicate" better, but that just obscures the underlying problem. Rob was a competent communicator — he could describe his vision very clearly to anyone who would listen. He thought he had done so many times — so many in fact that he was getting very frustrated by the time I entered the story.

## THE BELONGING-INDIVIDUALITY PARADOX

There is a dilemma that we face as human beings. We want two things that seem to be mutu-

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**Figure 1: DIFFERENTIATION: THE BASIS OF SUPERIOR LEADERSHIP**



ally exclusive. On the one hand we value our individuality, our ability to be self-defined, to find and walk our own path. On the other hand we value belonging, having others who care about us both for the intimacy and for the sense of community. Looked at from the flip side, we fear the isolation and loneliness that too much separation from others could bring, but at the same time we fear demands for conformity and feeling stifled by others' expectations that can come from close relationships. This contradiction, the paradox of individuality versus belonging, has been described as a core component of the unproductive behavior found in organizations.

As you view *Figure 1*, think of a continuum of interpersonal behavior. At one extreme is too much "closeness" – where I lose myself in others. I don't have any sense of my own boundaries, my emotions and desires are just reactions to what others say and do. This is a state of "**fusion**". At the other extreme is too much separation, where I have no awareness of others. I have no sense of what others think, feel or want and no curiosity or caring about them. My actions take only my own needs into account, not those of others. This is a state of "**disconnection**".

My research and consulting practice have led me to believe that effective leadership requires people who can balance these extremes in a place that Murray Bowen called **self-differentiation**. When leaders are differentiated they are both separate from and connected to their followers. They have clear boundaries about their own thoughts and feelings separate from those of others. At the same time they are curious about others and care about what is going on in them. They are able to

stay in connection with followers while not losing themselves. Leaders who are able to be self-differentiated can be clear about performance expectations and stay true to their vision while listening to and seeking to understand the fears and objections of the people who will have to carry out that vision. They are willing to listen until they understand and can demonstrate that understanding, but not have their agenda "emotionally hijacked" by others. Because of this they do not get anxious when other people express their fears and questions. They welcome it.

#### **FUSION – DEMANDING OTHERS MANAGE MY ANXIETY**

People are in fused relationship when their thoughts and feelings are in reaction to other people's thoughts and feelings. How they feel depends on what others say or do. The more fused a leader is with her followers, the more her awareness and experience is determined by those followers. An example is Rhonda. She is fused with her staff and when one gets upset Rhonda gets anxious, more tentative in her actions and looks for ways to calm the employee. At that moment, the employee's needs seem to take priority over her own but really what is happening, whether Rhonda is aware of it or not, is that she wants to get rid of her anxiety and feel better.

When a manager is fused with her employees she gives them messages, implicit or explicit, about how they should behave for her to feel OK. In the example above Rhonda didn't want her staff members to appear upset because then she felt anxious.

Notice that it doesn't matter what the staff member is upset about. Perceiving someone who is upset, Rhonda's anxiety quickly follows. She doesn't want to feel her own anxiety so she demands that others express only certain thoughts and feelings and not others. Consequently, the leader no longer knows what is going on in her followers or what impact she is having on them.

If Rhonda wasn't fused with her subordinates, when one got upset she would notice it but not react to it. Her experience in that moment would not be determined by the other person. She would not take on responsibility for the employee's feelings – as though she had the power to create other people's experience. How people make sense of what they see and hear is a profoundly individual thing. Through our perceptions we each create our own experience. You do not control how I experience anything and I cannot control how you experience anything. But if I'm fused, I believe that you are responsible for my feelings and that I am responsible for yours. So I will try to ensure that you feel things I can tolerate. One way to do this is to let you know what things are OK to experience and express and what things you better keep to yourself. The other thing I can do is to try to change myself so that you will have a different, nicer or better experience. Either approach creates ineffective leadership, but the latter means that there really is no leadership at all.

Managers who try to ensure that they are liked by everyone generally don't accomplish all that much. I've found that people initially love managers who create no anxiety for them, managers who will make few demands and search for consensus on all issues. Over time, however, they get impatient with the lack of clarity and action from such managers. Outstanding teams and organizations require leaders who have a vision of the team or organization at its best and are willing to push hard to accomplish it. This sometimes means stepping on toes, maybe even a drag-em-out knock down fight. The best leaders I've seen are not people who constantly fret about ensuring everyone agrees with them. Not at all. They just want to know exactly where people stand and why so that they understand the situation and aren't causing unnecessary problems. A leader needs to be able to hear the misery he is causing

people as he forces them to adopt a new and better technology and not lose his vision because of it. Leaders can't be fused with the people they lead or they will cave into other people's emotions or avoid hearing altogether. In order to be "hard nosed" leaders some people therefore go to the opposite extreme – disconnection. Let's turn to look at that.

### **DISCONNECTION – A DIFFERENT KIND OF REACTIVITY**

Disconnection comes from choosing extreme individuality without any connection to others. Instead of fuzzy boundaries the person who acts disconnected has boundaries that are too rigid, not allowing anything to pass in or out. Disconnection is a state where I have little sense of you. When fused, I don't know where you end and I begin. When disconnected, I don't notice that I don't know much about you. I'm aware of you as an object, a role, or a means to an end but I have no curiosity about what goes on inside of you. I don't wonder what your experience is or, if I do, my sense-making is totally driven by internal stimuli. I don't much care what effect I am having on you but not because I've decided to not care. A disconnected response is as unconscious as a fused one. When a leader is disconnected it doesn't even occur to him to pay attention to what effect he is having on others. He might even be embarrassed by his lack of curiosity if someone points it out to him. This is a crucial difference. When I'm fully aware that I am closing myself off from you and can choose a different response if I want, then that is not "disconnection" in the way I mean it. Similarly, if I choose to care about the impact I am having on you and change my behavior, fully aware of what I am doing, that is not fused behavior either. In these two examples I am making a conscious choice, aware of what I am doing; a self differentiated style. But a fused or disconnected response to another person is a "reactive" response. We don't think about it, we just do it. In a sense, we are out of control – the fusion or disconnection controls us.

A disconnected response is just as reactive as a fused response, but in the opposite direction. A

disconnected response, however, tends to be reactive to the whole person while a fused response is more often reactive to the specific behavior. This means that if I am disconnected from you, I tend to do things to avoid being emotionally effected by you. The leader who is disconnected from his colleagues doesn't make demands on others to act in ways that make him feel OK. Instead, he enters and exits situations to control his anxiety. He avoids situations, interactions and people that might cause him to not feel OK.

Disconnection appears to be quite prevalent among senior managers in organizations and looks different from fusion in that the person is not likely to be emotionally hijacked, and is not demanding that people express only certain kinds of experience. Rather, the disconnected manager shows little interest in her subordinates' experience. She gives the appearance that other people's experience is irrelevant to the business at hand. She tends to show no curiosity about the impact of her ideas or actions. She doesn't inquire into other people's thoughts, feelings and wants.

There is another kind of disconnected interaction that leader's can have that looks different. This is where they solicit information about other people's experience but provide no information about their own experience. The new manager who talks to everyone, solicits their opinions and views, says little about his own, and then suddenly announces a set of changes can be operating in a very disconnected way. If he is managing his anxiety about what others might think, feel and want concerning his plans by having no openness to being reasonably influenced, he's being disconnected. The situation he avoids having is a discussion about his own experience – his thoughts, feelings, observations and wants. It never occurs to him to ask others what they think, feel, and observe about his experience.

A leader who often interacts disconnected from his subordinates can make explicit attempts to separate "the business at hand" from people's experience. The problem is that his subordinates' experience determines how they make meaning out of the "business at hand". They are inseparable. Leaders who say things like "feelings are irrelevant to the decision" are just acting on the basis of their fear or anxieties. Most people would acknowledge

that feelings are strong determinants of how people work together. The disconnecting person is afraid of connecting, so he talks as if it is not legitimate.

In western organizations disconnection tends to look more "professional" than fusion. I have even found some people equate disconnection with "professionalism", contending that a professional manager keeps a distance and doesn't allow him or herself to care about employees. This might work, even be effective, in bureaucratic work systems but it is deadly in empowered organizations, where cooperation and partnership are required. There is already a tendency by subordinates to keep authorities in the dark about the effect they are having and about the stories people are making up about them. When the authorities are operating out of a disconnected state, the combination ensures that they will have little chance to give the kind of leadership outstanding organizations require. Disconnection is a kind of "professionalism" that organizations cannot afford.

## **DIFFERENTIATION – RESOLVING THE PARADOX**

Self-differentiation is finding a place where belonging and individuality are not mutually exclusive, where a leader is both separate from his followers and connected to them at the same time. Differentiation is about having clear boundaries, about knowing the difference between your experience and other people's experience. Differentiation is about knowing the difference between the data you have and the stories you make up with it. Differentiation is about acknowledging that your experience will always be separate from mine, and acting on your desire for belonging without demanding that my internal state be a certain way. Differentiation is about being true to yourself and true to the relationship you have with others. It is about putting equal emphasis on "my" needs and "our" needs, whether "our" is two people, a group or an organization. Differentiation means being totally aware of what your truth really is – knowing what your thoughts and feelings are and what is really motivating your actions. Obviously this is a lot easier said than done. As one of my friends says, differentiation is a razor wire balancing act

that you never get completely right. It is a commitment to living a certain way, with as much failure as success.

There are at least five elements to what I call acts of differentiated leadership:

- When a leader is acting in a differentiated way, she knows, first of all, what her experience is. She is aware of the choices she has and the choices she is making. Awareness is the basis of differentiation and without it differentiation may be impossible to achieve.
- A leader is acting in a differentiated way when he is clear about his scope of authority, what decisions he has made and expects to be implemented and what decisions he is making and seeks other's input. He is clear in his own mind in what areas he does and doesn't want other people's input and how much authority he is willing to delegate to others. He acts in a differentiated way when he makes his position about this clear to others.
- A leader acts in a differentiated way when she openly seeks to understand the experience others are having. She notices when she is making up stories to fill in the gaps of her knowledge and asks questions to get more accurate information. She wants to know the impact she is having on others not necessarily to change her mind but so she will know what is really going on. She acts in a differentiated way when others get the message that she really wants to know the truth of their experience and can listen dispassionately and openly to them.
- A leader is acting in a differentiated way when he is describing his experience to others simply and descriptively. This is NOT the same as "being open", where you tell people whatever is on your mind. It is where you describe what your current experience is, fully aware that it is only one experience and no more valid or invalid than anyone else's experience.
- A leader is acting in a differentiated way when she is clear about the basis of her actions and can describe these to others. Her actions are not motivated primarily by anxiety or other reactive emotions. She allows herself to be informed by emotion, to understand the message the feeling is sending her, but not to be overwhelmed or controlled by emotion or unconscious moti-

ations.

Learning to be differentiated is a life long journey. It is a life path, "a way of being". Some people decide that they want it all, they want to be self-defined, true to their own needs and wants and yet also be in close, partnership relationships with others that support the growth and self-definition of both people. These people, whether they call it this or not, have chosen differentiation as the way they want to be. Almost everyone is able to be differentiated in some interactions. The less emotional baggage we have toward someone the easier it is to be differentiated with them. And all of us have relationships where we have a great deal of trouble being differentiated. The most difficult are with our family of origin. As we develop ourselves we are able to be differentiated in more and more of our relationships but this requires conscious work and the strong intention to be differentiated in our relations with others.

Let's return to Rob, the story we began with. For Rob to be able to exercise the kind of leadership his organization needed from him, he had to recognize his disconnection, that he was avoiding people because interaction made him feel bad. In our work together Rob ultimately had to face his fusion and how his deep caring for the people who worked in the organization caused him anxiety in the face of their discomfort. As the senior management team worked to uncover all the stories and experiences swirling through the organization Rob saw that his disconnection was causing more discomfort to the people he valued than the change in strategy he was pursuing. As Rob came to understand the logic of self-differentiation, of being separate and connected at the same time, he began a process of learning how to stay firm with his principles, values and vision and not take on responsibility for the experiences people created from that. At the same time he realized he needed to hear what fantasies were being created so he could influence them, make them more realistic, stop wildly inaccurate speculations and ensure that key people knew they were, in his perception, key people. This was not easy, but it was essential and as he recognized how essential it was, he found the inner strength to not let his anxiety stop him from listening. And things changed a great deal. And Rob became the kind of leader that people

want to follow.

My research has convinced me that self-differentiation is the trait that underlies the ability to successfully use many of the tools and techniques of OD as well as the skills of leadership. It is the music required to turn the words into a song. Without it, leaders cannot create an organizational climate where people talk honestly about the work. Instead, leaders are left in the dark, unaware of the impact of their actions and unable to create a climate where people talk honestly about the work they do together. As OD consultants we can help to create organizations that are more effective and saner by educating people about fusion and disconnection, coaching people in how to be more differentiated and helping leaders and their teams develop more differentiated forms of interaction. Of course, this requires that we choose differentiation as our life path too. ■