



The End of Leadership

By Barbara Kellerman

Leadership BS

Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time

by Jeffrey Pfeffer

Over the past several years I have come to appreciate an additional aspect of the holiday season that in large measure was surfaced by this ABC blog. I found myself looking forward to reconnecting with friends, colleagues, alumni, and many others, something that was made even easier by the CIMBA Alumni and Friends Christmas party, which is now become an important institutional tradition. Taken together, they form a point in time in which we an obligation to take a moment and reflect upon where we have been and where we are going. For a variety of reasons, this year has been particularly interesting in that regard as we felt compelled to take the additional time and reflect upon our reflections. Not surprisingly, we realized that many of our key Alumni inquiries over the years have centered around their LIFE Experience: What is the CIMBA vision for both before and after LIFE development training going forward, a question that perhaps has an unintended double meaning given the season.

Speaking openly, we have been giving considerable thought and attention to that very question over the past several years and particularly over the past 18 months. First, we realized that to move effectively and efficiently in utilizing LIFE and its teachings, we needed to make a significant upgrade in our IT substructure. To both scale up and broaden our technology-use footprint, we needed to simplify the interface for both our trainers and our trainees. The new system will roll out and be inaugurated next month, with continuing improvements and enhancements ongoing throughout the spring and into early summer. It has meant renewing reviving old partnerships, reinvigorating existing partnerships, and perhaps most importantly establishing new ones.

Secondly, it meant engaging some of the very best thinking available to us to identify potential before and after LIFE programs consistent with what our data, experience, observations, feedback, and the experiences of others was revealing or suggesting. In this investigative process, we came to appreciate much of the work that we had done in peripheral areas and had not realized how much of the solution they presented. After our Tedx experience in May, we truly began to understand the relationship between System 1 Cognitive and Emotive Thinking Errors, which assisted in bringing some very important seemingly, disperse ingredients into a far more consistent whole. In large measure, the insights we derived served to bring together one of our most interesting and productive new after-LIFE programs, something we call LIFE Circles.

Thirdly, and quite surprising to many people, we began to develop and test our own Leadership Development Program. On the basis of what LIFE and its associated data have taught us, we began our journey by looking at research that was honest enough to point out the shortcomings, serious shortcomings, in what has become a nearly \$15 billion industry in the United States alone. In an effort to significantly shorten my explanation here, let me recommend two books that served to encourage us that we were heading down the right path: Prof. Jeffrey Pfeffer's Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at Time, and Prof. Barbara Kellermann's The End of Leadership. Both authors confirmed that the leadership development industry is unquestionably not meeting expectations. Consistent with our observations, and without more, many of those courses (and we would not limit "courses" only to those involving leadership) often unintentionally make matters worse; to *know* something does not by itself lead to being able to *do* something. Knowing which parts of the brain light up under varying circumstances does not lead to improved leadership behavior or, for that matter, to improved conflict management or negotiations or sales etc.

We have also observed, and both authors confirm, that far too many of these courses are assessed on the basis of whether or not the course participants enjoyed the content being presented – entertainment value is simply not a functional ingredient in the change equation. Judging a company's viability on the entertainment value of its marketing efforts as opposed to measuring actual sales is a fair analogy. The slight given to context in those content-based approaches to leadership training serves to further compound the potential damage being done. In this specific regard, for example, we frequently see honesty and authenticity listed as leadership characteristics or competencies that are fundamental to being effective. If your company is struggling and you are working to turn it around, do you really want to provide an honest public declaration of the situation and risk the loss of your best workers? In a conversation with a key employee and knowing that the human brain has a significant negativity bias and absolutely loathes ambiguity (and will thus tell a story to mentally make sense of what it perceives), do you want to authentically carry a distressful look on your face, the consequence of a difficulty in your personal life that is unrelated to your work life, and risk your "authenticity" being misinterpreted as your opinion of the employee? Or do you prefer to *act* – inauthentically – and deliver a more positive message? Clearly, situations or context matters.

In one specific regard those programs do one thing that is consistent with the teachings of neuroscience. The overwhelming majority will show you an inspirational video of some leader that generates oxytocin and falsely motivates a participant into believing that if they behave like that person, they will perform like that person. Or worse, what if it causes a participant to come to the conclusion that they could never possibly measure up to that (mystical) leader and they give up?

Conversely, there is one area they seem to get universally wrong: They largely ignore followership. Increasingly, at CIMBA we are increasingly drawn to the conclusion that effective followership may actually be the most important determinant of career success. As LIFE so clearly shows, it is very difficult to be an effective leader if you do not understand what it means to be an effective follower. Interestingly, we presented this

notion to the European head of a very important worldwide accounting company. After several days, he called back to inform us that he had talked to several of his colleagues who had attended various MBA programs in both Europe and the US. None of them could recall a discussion of followership and its development in the some 20+ courses that comprised their MBAs. We have so tipped the scales toward leadership development without any regard for the relationship that followership and leadership share, the industry has (perhaps) unwittingly caused to be created the very rationale for its ineffectiveness. How serious is this? Go to Google and search the term “leadership;” it will return 775,000,000 hits. Now put in and search for the term “followership;” Google will return 76,000 hits – less than 0.1 percent! Still, despite increasing evidence to the contrary, in far too many companies followership is an F-word; where in the world did such a key component part of personal development consistent with effective leadership develop such an enduring negative reputation?

Let’s take a moment and explore this unfortunate assumption through a neuroscience prism. I am going to take you back to three books that serve to establish how seemingly naïve this assumption seems to be. All three have been the subject of past ABCs: Prof. Matthew Lieberman’s *Social: Why our Brains are Wired to Connect*; Prof. Robin Dunbar et. al’s [Thinking Big: How the Evolution of Social Life Shaped the Human Mind](#); and, most importantly, Van Vogt and Abuja’s [Naturally Selected: Why Some People Lead, Why Others Follow, and Why It Matters](#). Taken together, they stand for the proposition that the brain evolved specific circuits sensitive to social context. Our ancestors were first required to be accepted members of the group before they could be elevated to positions of leadership — what we refer to as the *Social Brain Theory of Leadership*. That is, you first understood the group’s social norms and, most importantly, you understood what it felt like to be part of that team and then, and only then, could you become eligible to be a leader. Where do we see the notion in the current literature?

- Spend greater attention to promoting people from within;
- Management-by-walking-around;
- Ensure that leaders understand what the frontline people actually do; and,
- Make sure that the people who are promoted have had exposure to the core of the organization’s activities at some point in their careers.

There is a resounding amount of organizational behavior literature that proffers and supports these notions but no author of which I am aware has tied it back to neuroscience and the brain, to the brain’s evolved socially sensitive circuits, or to anthropology’s social brain theories.

Let’s take a moment and recall those “evolved socially-sensitive circuits” we explore in LIFE: (1) social awareness; (2) self-awareness; (3) self-regulation; and, (4) threat and reward. In a functional relationship, particularly as it relates to leadership development, we see these as being “X” or independent variables in the equation. The “Y” or dependent variables are those attributes that comprise the typical leadership model. For example, Lead by Example, Engage and Cultivate, Build Cohesion, and Align your Team are typical ingredients in such a leadership model. Of course, the leadership course with

then have as its “content” purpose to tell you how you would go about bringing about those preferred “Y” results. They would likely instruct you to model the right behaviors, model team norms, provide feedback, or delegate effectively. However, the issue is not *what* to do but rather *how* to do it. Importantly, that “how” it is often encumbered by a lack of ability or a fear of the consequences of actually doing it — which brings us back to those very coachable “X” variables listed above. Except those involve change, change is difficult, change demands feedback, feedback demands measurement, and one of the things we do not see undertaken in any of those courses is any means for effective measurement as to whether their preachings meet development objectives. As you read this, keep in mind your LIFE Experience in all of the physiological and hormonal testing we did throughout that experience and you get a sense of where our new Leadership Development program is going to take you.

Let’s move to your *after-LIFE* experience. In not only reconnecting your social circuits to appreciate how it feels to be a member of a highly functional team, LIFE also shows you the power of vulnerability. Capturing and focusing that power was a principal goal in our development of what we now refer to as a LIFE Circle. A LIFE Circle is in essence an After Action Review (AAR) based on neuroscience and utilizing appropriate awareness technology. Leadership and organizational theorists have struggled to explain why AARs works but have never looked at it from a neuroscience perspective. Its origin is with the military and it has found several interesting applications in the private sector including, for example, Google’s so-called 3W’s. A Google search will bring up a variety of useful information provided by the US military. Both Prof. David Garvin, in his [Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work](#), and Peter Senge’s [The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization](#), discuss it favorably. Prof. Patrick M. Lencioni in his [Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#) uses an important aspect from its neuroscience underpinnings but does not understand that it comes from neuroscience. The remainder of the literature is scant and disjointed in larger measure because they could not explain it using traditional organizational behavior theory.

In essence, a LIFE Circle builds on the neuroscience premise that we are “wired to be social.” Through our senses, and particularly through our eyes and ears, we collect a wide variety of information and interpret it. For example, let’s go back to the authenticity example I used before. If you are communicating with a subordinate or colleague and you have a distressed look on your face, that information is taken into that person’s brain and interpreted. Because our brains are wired to be loath to ambiguity, his brain will go through a mental process to make mental sense of your expression by telling a story to explain it. That story will be based on some assumption — because we are wired to be negatively biased, that assumption will likely be that you believe he is not performing or is not effectively managing his responsibilities. In the brain, that assumption becomes a fact. The person will then be driven by his brain’s confirmation bias to collect information consistent with that assumption or what has now become a “brain fact.” To get a sense of this, consider how open you are to the positive aspects of a person with whom you are having a heated confrontation. On the basis of this process, the person’s behavior will begin to reflect this mental process going on in his brain. Importantly, far

more often than not the person will not inquire as to whether their assumption is valid. Compounding the situation, you will detect a change in their behavior and follow the same mental process. In the end, the relationship is damaged because both of you assumed, expected, anticipated, hoped, thought, and/or believed something that neither party took the time to confirm by asking simple questions.

Utilizing neuroscience principles, harnessing the power of vulnerability, and exposing typical social communication errors like that outlined above the LIFE Circle process serves to improve team communication and performance. We have observed significant performance improvement among people who have not experienced our LIFE program, with LIFE graduates more readily embracing and benefiting from the process because they see its consistency with their personal growth experience engendered by LIFE. Additionally, because of these inherent properties in LIFE Circles we are finding it to be particularly useful in bringing out tacit knowledge (the kind of knowledge that comes with experience and doing, and is very difficult to learn in the classroom). As such, our initial tests in sales and negotiation training utilizing it have been very promising. Coupled with appropriate awareness technology, we fully expect this powerful tool to become common in the workplace of the future.

So there you have the reflective ramblings that have so become a part of this beautiful and festive time of year. I encourage you to make the most of the free time that this joyous season provides to all of us. Take the time and reflect upon where you been and where you are going to assist you in making those New Year's resolutions part of your inherent CIMBA characteristic to make a difference in the lives of others in 2017 and beyond.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and the Happy New Year to you from all of us at CIMBA!