

The Deep Blue Sea

Rethinking the Source of Leadership

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Chapter One: Leadership Principles and Leadership Tasks

When her father called her into his office, Elena had a sinking feeling. Her father had not been well in recent years and talked of retiring. Earlier in the day he visited the doctor to get the results of some tests. The tone of his voice on the phone just now was somber. Elena braced herself. She didn't feel ready.

The employees of Zoffner Piano Company referred to Elena's father as Mr. Karl. It was a sign of both their respect for him and their feelings of closeness to him. He knew everything there was to know about making and selling pianos. He was the brains and the heart and the soul of the company. He was also a person who cared about everyone individually, who had countless times come to the rescue of an employee, had provided wise counsel and emotional support. Over the years he tried to instill all of this in Elena, but she knew her father couldn't teach her how to command the attention of everyone on the shop floor when she walked in, or how to help each employee feel important, or how to make the salespeople laugh about a bad quarterly report. These were things that Elena simply couldn't imagine herself doing. Her father was a natural leader, and she was not.

Karl Zoffner had founded Zoffner Piano in 1947 with less than a thousand dollars and a specific idea (what in later years would be called a vision): to build quality pianos that a working person could afford to buy for a son or daughter. For over fifty years he guided the company through good years and bad by making shrewd decisions about whom to hire, what materials and craftsmanship to use, what markets to go into, where to obtain goods and supplies, which technologies to acquire. Through those years he earned the loyalty and commitment of employees who thought of Zoffner Piano as their second (in some cases, first) family. These people would do anything for Mr. Karl. There were many stories, told and retold, about times when Karl and his employees worked shoulder to shoulder to keep a promise to a customer or to solve a problem with a supplier. When competitors threatened the business, Mr. Karl always found a way to reposition (today we might say reinvent) Zoffner Piano, maintain his original vision, and keep it profitable and growing.

Elena came into the business fresh from an MBA program at a leading university. She had not been sure about this decision, and she and her father and mother had spent many a sleepless night discussing her future. In the end she realized that the company was in her blood, even though she was uncertain about her ability to take over from her father. But he insisted that she would learn all she needed to know about the business from helping him run Zoffner Piano until the time came for retirement. Then she would be ready.

Karl turned out to be both right and wrong. Elena did learn more than she ever thought she could about the materials that go into a piano, where to get them, how to get the best prices, and about how a piano is made. She learned about casting iron and fashioning wood into piano cases. She learned about marketing the instruments, who buys pianos and why, how much people will pay for a piano for their child, and how much they will

pay for a concert instrument. She also began to form some ideas of her own about the company and how she would run it when her father turned it over to her. She looked to him for guidance about leadership, but Karl was not very helpful on that subject.

Elena would ask him, "How do you get people to pull together all the time?"

He would look a little put out and answer shortly, "I just pull from in front."

In fact, her father didn't believe a person could usefully study leadership. "A leader is someone who never thinks about being a leader," he once said. "You just are."

This worried Elena. She knew she was not a leader. And that was why she felt uneasy and unprepared walking into her father's office that day.

Leadership Principles

If we're lucky, we have known someone like Mr. Karl who just naturally commands attention and respect and who, maybe without ever thinking about it, pulls in the right direction and gets people to follow. Knowing such people can have a lasting effect. Besides providing a model or even a hero to emulate, such people may help convince us that this is the true nature of leadership and that other kinds of leadership we have encountered are only pale imitations offered by people without true leadership ability. As a result we conclude that what we need in this world is more people like Mr. Karl, and that one of the problems we are having in our lives is a lack of true leaders like him. Like Elena, we are often tempted to think that if we can't be a leader like Karl Zoffner, we are not really a leader at all. But how do we come to this conclusion? How do we know that Mr. Karl is the real thing?

Recognizing Thoughts, Words, and Actions as Leadership

In this book, the question of how we know leadership when we see it plays a central role. I propose that we know leadership when we see it because we share an organizing knowledge principle in common with other people. In other words, Mr. Karl's natural ability to command respect, and our admiration and appreciation of this kind of leadership, come from a way of thinking about leadership, a way of understanding when leadership is happening, that a group of people can share. It is a way of thinking and understanding that enables individuals and the group as a whole to recognize certain thoughts, words, and actions as being leadership.

This alters the usual way to approach the topic of leadership. Usually leadership is assumed to be something out there in the world that exists more or less independent of how we think about it. The way we think about it is mostly determined by the way leadership is. From this more usual point of view, we would think about Mr. Karl's leadership and understand it as being admirable and effective because it is admirable and effective. This view is perfectly usable most of the time. It raises the question of what it is about Mr. Karl's leadership that makes it admirable and effective. And that opens up a whole set of considerations as we try to describe and define what it is about Mr. Karl as a person and his approach to leadership that is admirable and effective and perhaps to work out how other people might emulate his approach to leadership.

This book takes the viewpoint that leadership is nothing at all—that even Mr. Karl's leadership doesn't really exist until we have some way of knowing it when we encounter it. If, when encountering certain thoughts, words, or actions, we don't in effect say "that's

leadership," then leadership simply isn't what is happening at the moment as far as we are concerned. So in the view being offered here, leadership is not something out there in the world that we come to know because it impresses itself on our minds, it is something we create with our minds by agreeing with other people that these thoughts, words, and actions-and not some others-will be known as leadership.

For example, say a young child falls and skins her knee. Her mother runs from the house, sweeps the child in her arms, and with hugs and kisses, comforts the child and takes her into the house to nurse her little wound. Is this an example of leadership? Take a moment to think about this before reading the next paragraph. Try to decide one way or the other.

What was your first response, before you took time to think it over? Did that first response change? What entered into your thinking on this question? How did you come to a conclusion about whether this is an example of leadership or not? If the story had been told to you in some completely different context, would the question of this act being leadership ever have entered your head? How did you deal with the fact that you were being asked to determine if this is an example of leadership or not?

The task I set before you was a way to get at how you may recognize leadership. For some of you, this may have been a rather irritating no-brainer. "Of course that's not leadership, and if this guy thinks it is, I may not read the rest of this book." (Please hang in, however.) Others may have thought it was not leadership at first, but upon reflection, certain aspects of the story, it seemed, might have touched on leadership: the mother is like a leader in that she has a goal in mind (comforting and caring for her child) and she leads the child toward that goal (takes her in her arms, takes her into the house). Or others might have thought it was only minimally like leadership because the mother is caring and concerned, and a leader should be caring and concerned; but otherwise it was not an example of leadership.

All of these ways of answering the question draw on some organizing principle that, in effect, admits certain ideas as being leadership (or possibly being leadership) and blocks other ideas as not being leadership. Thus, if you thought the mother was like a leader because she had a goal in mind and led the child toward that goal, then perhaps you know leadership when there is a person who leads others toward a goal. For you, this would be part of a principle for organizing knowledge of (recognition of) leadership. When you see a person leading others toward a goal, you may recognize that leadership is happening. On the other hand, thoughts, words, and actions that are not recognized as leadership simply cannot be leadership. Maybe nothing in the example seemed remotely close to being leadership. Then leadership was not happening in the story. Only thoughts, words, and actions that are recognized as leadership can constitute leadership.

From this point of view, leadership is not something independent of the way we think. Just the opposite: it is dependent on the way we organize what we take for granted as real and true. The presence or absence of leadership depends on the presence or absence of some knowledge principle that enables a person or a group or a community or organization to say, "That's leadership."

In other words, in this book, we will look at leadership in terms of what makes some thoughts, words, and actions meaningful as leadership to people. We will be concentrating on specific ways of knowing and understanding leadership that I believe people share in groups, communities, and organizations. To approach the question of how Mr. Karl manages to make the shop floor fall silent when he passes through, we will address the question of how the people on the shop floor (and Mr. Karl, and we) come to understand his very presence as an act of leadership. What are the patterns of ideas and

underlying assumptions that cause people to fall silent and that cause us to admire the way Mr. Karl makes people fall silent?

Leadership principles, as these ways of recognizing leadership will be called, are a shared achievement. They are created by people interacting with one another; they are not created in each individual person's mind alone. So there are not as many leadership principles as there are people. And since people interact in many different ways, it is likely that there is not just one master principle from which all other leadership principles are derived. The way of understanding and knowing leadership that brings about Mr. Karl's leadership is just one way to recognize leadership, and there are other ways of understanding and recognizing leadership that are not poor relations to this "real" kind of leadership, but are qualitatively different ways of knowing that leadership is happening. These other ways of understanding leadership bring about thoughts, words, and actions that some people (but not all people) recognize as leadership, but that don't look like Mr. Karl's leadership at all.

To summarize: in this book leadership will be approached as something that is brought into being by a shared knowledge principle that enables people to recognize (know) that leadership is happening. This approach will allow us to talk about leadership as something that can come into being or go out of being because of the presence or absence of some organizing knowledge principle. People share in these knowledge principles as ways of organizing reality about leadership. If they didn't, a group of people would never be able to make leadership happen. So there are not as many principles as people, but there is not just one either. What will be important here is just what such leadership principles are like, how they work or fail to work, what happens when the leadership principle that a group of people has been using becomes less useful to them, and how leadership principles change and evolve.

Later in this chapter I will go into a little more detail about three knowledge principles of leadership. (These are the main topics in later chapters.) But because this talk of principles can be confusing-and because approaching leadership in terms of knowledge principles is such a central idea in this book-it is important to distinguish the idea of leadership principles from two other ideas with which it could be confused, namely, leadership definitions and leadership styles.

Principles Distinguished from Definitions

A knowledge principle is a set of ideas, a set of rules, if you will, about the nature of reality and life that are taken for granted to be true. Right away, the difference between a knowledge principle and a definition becomes apparent, because most definitions of something as complex as leadership are by their nature subject to debate, doubt, and challenge. Knowledge principles, on the other hand, comprise sets of taken-for-granted truths, truths that are obvious to those who hold them.

For example, when we say something like, "I can't define beauty but I know it when I see it," we are basing our knowledge on some principle by which we recognize and understand beauty. We simply know beauty in this way, without conscious effort. We can recognize and understand beauty when we see it because we apply some knowledge principle of beauty, some set of rules about the nature of reality that implicitly tells us, "It's obvious that this is beautiful." (Of course, different people may use different knowledge principles and thus what is obviously beautiful would be different.) If we were to try to sit down and write a definition of beauty (not recommended) to say what beauty means, the sense of meaning would be afforded by whatever knowledge principle we use to organize what we take to be the reality of beauty. There would be some ideas

that we would take for granted as true without question, such as, for example, that natural things-flowers, waterfalls, birds-are beautiful. Thus we might say something like "things in nature are obviously beautiful" and this idea would be part of our beauty principle and would underlie all our thoughts, feelings, responses, and attitudes about beauty. We use knowledge principles all the time, whenever we take it for granted (it is obvious to us) that something is true: nature is beautiful, people are basically good (or bad, or self-interested), God is all powerful, murder is evil.

In the same way, there are leadership principles-principles that allow anyone to say, "I can't define leadership, but I know it when it happens." A leadership principle is thus deeper than a definition of leadership; it is the set of ideas, taken for granted as true, even obvious, that organize and describe the reality behind a definition. To say what leadership means, a definition must make use of some meaning-creating knowledge principle. For example, here is a definition of leadership from F. H. Allport's 1924 *Social Psychology*: "Leadership is personal social control" (cited in Bass, 1990, p. 12). This definition, like all definitions, is meaningful because it draws on ideas assumed to be true but not dealt with in the definition itself: that a person can exercise social control, that the distinction between what is personal and what is social is useful in leadership, that leadership happens when control happens. If the definition strikes you as being insightful and helps you understand leadership better, if it succeeds in saying what leadership means, it may be because you use the same or a very similar underlying principle for knowing that leadership is happening as the one the definition writer used. Because you share this principle with the writer, the definition helps you articulate something you knew but couldn't put precisely into words. The sharing is critical and makes the definition mean something to you. The definition helps you understand leadership better because it is based on a knowledge principle, a set of taken-for-granted truths, you and the writer share.

If, on the other hand, the definition seems wrong in some way to you, if you respond with "Yes, but-," it may be because you use a different knowledge principle from the one used by the definition writer. You and the writer differ on what you each take to be the reality of leadership. Maybe this definition strikes you as being too narrow; or maybe it seems to describe an outmoded idea of leadership; or maybe it seems to describe power, not leadership. Focusing on the idea of knowledge principles helps us see how these reactions to the definition arise less in an argument over whether it defines leadership effectively and more over differences in taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. That particular definition is a good definition of leadership (it says what the reality of leadership is to you) if, when you see "personal social control" happening in your life, you say "this is leadership." If you don't say that when you see "personal social control" happening, it's not a good definition (it fails to describe what you know the reality of leadership to be).

Here's another definition of leadership, one I think is based on a knowledge principle different from that underlying the definition in the last paragraph: "[Leadership is] a relation between leader and led in which the leader influences more than he is influenced." (This one is from a 1952 article by H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, "A Sociological Note on Leadership," cited in Bass, 1990, p. 13.) This definition does not even refer to the same ideas as the first. There is no mention of control and no underlying assumption that leadership is personal. Instead, a different way of knowing is being applied: that leadership is interpersonal, a relationship; mutual but unequal influence is what is happening when leadership happens. Assuming that readers of this definition share some of these ways of knowing with the writer of the definition, the definition will make sense to them. In other words, a definition says what leadership means because it makes its assertion within a context of a shared knowledge principle, a sense of what is

obviously true that is shared between the definition giver and the definition consumer.

Principles Distinguished from Styles

So the principles I will present here are not definitions of leadership, although they are the basis of definitions of leadership. They are whole ways of knowing that leadership is happening. This still leaves a question: How is a leadership principle different from a leadership style? It might seem that because differing principles can be expected to bring about differing ways of thinking about leadership, and because differing ways of thinking about leadership could be expected to bring about differing ways of enacting leadership, and given that such differences constitute what we mean by differing leadership styles, it could be argued that a principle and a style are nearly the same. But there is a critical and useful difference between the two. A leadership style is usually thought of as an approach to leadership that a leader (or a follower) chooses to take. A leader chooses to be task-oriented or relationship-focused, or a leader chooses to decide alone or allow followers to participate in a decision. The leader is understood to choose a style depending on the situation, the task, the maturity of the followers, and other considerations. In other words, the idea of style refers to something that a leader can put on or take off, that a leader has control over.

A leadership principle is a different idea. Because a principle is what is required for the leader (and followers!) to recognize that leadership is happening, it is not something you choose to use or not use from one situation to another. Assuming that the leader and the followers want leadership to happen, they are more or less stuck (at least for the present) with whatever leadership principle will allow them to recognize certain thoughts, words, and actions as leadership. This principle will disallow recognition of certain other thoughts, words, and actions as leadership. Without a leadership principle, the people would be unable to recognize any words or actions as leadership—they would be unable to distinguish between what was and was not leadership.

A multitude of differing enactments, approaches, and consciously chosen styles can be understood as leadership from the meaning afforded by a single leadership principle. Likewise, a multitude of enactments, approaches, and styles will not be recognized as leadership, even some that arise from some other leadership principle. Leaders who change their leadership style such that their thoughts, words, and actions are still recognized as leadership are likely still making sense of leadership from the same leadership principle as before. The style has changed, but the principle stays the same. Unlike a leadership style, a leadership principle is changed only slowly and with difficulty, because people don't easily part with a way of making sense of something as important as leadership. As we will discuss later in this book, when a person or a group of people changes their leadership principle, we will view this as the basis for leadership development.

So a leadership principle is deeper than a definition, and is also deeper than a leadership style. A single principle could be used to create definitions of leadership different enough for people to argue over, because people who take the same underlying ideas to be true can still argue over how those taken-for-granted truths apply in life situations. Likewise, a single leadership principle could be the basis for many differing leadership styles. A leadership principle is what gives meaning to definitions and styles in the sense that a principle is required for people to recognize and understand that leadership is what is happening.

Three Principles for Recognizing Leadership

I have at this point painted myself into a kind of corner. Having proposed the idea of knowledge principles of leadership, I face the task of articulating, spelling out, such principles. The catch-22 in doing this should be obvious after all this discussion of knowledge principles. Whatever articulation of knowledge principles I choose must in itself come from some knowledge principle. Like everyone, I have to take something for granted as true. And what is this knowledge that I myself must take for granted as obviously true? It is the third of the three leadership principles that I will articulate. I cannot see through what I take to be the obvious truths of that principle, and all of my articulation of the first and second principles is based on what I take for granted as being true in the third principle. In this sense, the destination of the whole book is the third principle, and everything else in the book is asserted from the perspective of the understanding of leadership afforded by this third principle.

Having said that, I propose to plunge right in, as if naming and articulating leadership principles were useful and productive. The names I propose for the three leadership principles are personal dominance (first principle), interpersonal influence (second principle), and relational dialogue (the third, and for me, the embedding principle). The following sections will introduce these principles in their basic form. The rest of the book is devoted to a more detailed exploration of the meaning and usefulness of each principle.

Personal Dominance

Mr. Karl's and his employees' way of recognizing and understanding leadership illustrates an enactment of the first principle: personal dominance. Personal dominance is a way of understanding leadership as the personal quality or characteristic of a certain kind of person called a leader. The particular thoughts, words, and actions of this kind of person can vary along many dimensions without affecting the person's status as a leader because leadership is assumed to come from within, from an inner quality or characteristic, not from this or that behavior. Leadership from this perspective is whatever the (true) leader does: leaders create leadership by expressing an inner quality toward followers.

This principle takes the following truths for granted:

- Leadership is something a person possesses.
- Leadership is an expression of this personally possessed quality or characteristic.
- Leaders lead because followers are convinced of the truth of their leadership.

Dominance does not necessarily mean the same as domination (although it may). Dominance refers to the idea that the leader is the source of leadership and the followers are the receivers of leadership. I propose that this is historically the oldest and conceptually the most basic leadership principle.

Interpersonal Influence

The second leadership principle, interpersonal influence, is a way of understanding that leadership happens when a group of people agree and disagree, ally and contend, concur and argue, plan and negotiate until someone emerges as the most influential person and thus claims the role of leader.

Because this is a different leadership principle from the first principle, I propose that this

is a whole different way of creating the meaning of leadership. It is not simply a different approach to leadership that is, say, less power-oriented and less instrumental than the first principle. It is a qualitatively different way to recognize that leadership is happening. The emergence of a leader from a process of negotiation differs from personal dominance because from the perspective of the second principle a person becomes a leader by achieving influence, whereas in the first principle a person is the leader by possessing the quality or characteristic of leadership. In the first principle, leadership is in the leader; in the second principle, leadership is in the greater influence created by the process of negotiation. In the first principle, influence is one of many tools the leader possesses as an aspect of personal leadership. In the second principle, influence must be achieved, and in its achievement, one takes on leadership.

This principle takes the following truths for granted:

- Leadership is a role occupied by the most influential person.
- People possess or can acquire certain qualities and characteristics that enable them to be effective in such a role.
- Leadership involves followers actively in the process of negotiating influence.
- Leaders lead by influencing followers more than followers influence them.

I propose that this second principle comes into being because of certain limitations of the first principle, and that historically it arose in human life later than the first principle and as a response to these limitations.

Relational Dialogue

The third leadership principle, relational dialogue, is a way of understanding that leadership happens when people who acknowledge shared work use dialogue and collaborative learning to create contexts in which that work can be accomplished across the dividing lines of differing perspectives, values, beliefs, cultures, and more generally what I will refer to as differing worldviews. Again, this is yet another qualitatively different way to recognize that leadership is happening.

This principle takes the following truths for granted:

- Leadership is the property of a social system.
- Individual people do not possess leadership; leadership happens when people participate in collaborative forms of thought and action.
- If there is an individual leader, the actions that person takes are an aspect of participation in the process of leadership.

This third principle may strike the ear strangely. It is less familiar than the first two principles, I propose, because it has just begun to emerge and is not yet fully formed. It is emerging, however, in response to certain limitations in the second principle that are calling this third principle forth, and people in communities and organizations are already beginning to make sense of leadership in this way.

With the idea of leadership principles in mind, and remembering that we will be visiting each of the three principles later in detail, let's return to the story of Elena Zoffner, her father, and the Zoffner Piano Company.

