Host leadership: Addressing the dilemma of control

There have been many metaphors proposed to describe different types of leadership, the most fashionable including leader as hero, and leader as servant.

Mike Brent and Dr Mark McKergow propose a new alternative concept – the leader as host – and explore its implications and possibilities for leaders facing complex and shifting situations.
Introduction

The world facing leaders is increasing in its complexity with immense implications. Increasingly the problems and issues leaders face are of a different nature – they are what Keith Grint calls ‘Wicked’ problems – problems that do not admit of any simple answers. Things are continuously shifting and no move is influence-free – whatever we do will also change the situation. The American military, based on their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, have coined a term to explain this world: they call it a VUCA world – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

Dilemmas facing leaders

Another way of describing these issues is as dilemmas. There are no answers – only options. Some of the dilemmas that leaders are facing, according to research by Binney, Williams and Wilke are:

- Direction – Acknowledging limits while imagining a better future
- Timing – Waiting and seeing while accelerating progress
- Relationships – Getting close while maintaining distance
- Loyalties – Putting your own needs first while serving the organisation
- Control – Letting go while keeping control
- Self-belief – Showing vulnerability while being strong
- Understanding – Enquiring while knowing.

How in practice are leaders to confront and work with wicked problems and face up to these dilemmas? We propose that a new view of the leader, extending existing thinking, can help.

Why the Hero and Servant Leader metaphors don’t work

Two metaphors that have been prevalent in leadership theory are the leader as hero, and more recently the leader as servant. Let’s start with the hero.

- The leader as hero is deeply ingrained in society, has proved itself as a stubborn metaphor, and may be difficult to replace. Although it is now much maligned, and seen as increasingly irrelevant in a VUCA
world, it is, as Harvard Scholar Sharon Daloz Parks says: “A deep and abiding myth”. We sometimes need to feel in safe hands.

But if you have a heroic leader, where does that leave followers? As victims or as people waiting passively to be rescued by the hero? How can that work in such a complex world where we need employees to be responsible, pro-active and creative? We examined this aspect in our article No More Heroes.

• The idea of leader as servant was put forward some 40 years ago as a deliberate counterpoint to the hero metaphor. It has had some impact, particularly in pastoral settings where a sophisticated view of service prevails. Though attractive in many ways, it has its drawbacks. Although the concept means that the leader should be in service to the organisation, employees and stakeholders, the metaphor of leader as servant is not entirely appropriate or relevant to our society. It can also be off-putting to women and to ethnic minorities.

Host leadership: A new concept
We believe that the concept of ‘host’ leadership is a useful way of helping leaders to resolve these issues. The new metaphor of ‘leader as host’ offers a useful rethinking of both hero and servant leadership traditions (see Figure 1). By building on both these ideas, stressing flexibility and contextual intelligence and combining a whole paradigm with everyday nitty-gritty activities, it offers a powerful new way to conceptualise leadership behaviours.

Origins of leader as host
The concept occurred to Mark McKergow very suddenly in 2003 when overhearing the phrase ‘the host is both the first and the last’ (an old Arabic proverb) and he wrote a paper’ in 2009 expanding on this concept. Others have been thinking along similar lines.

It is a very rich metaphor. Being a host is a role of which we all have first-hand experience. Who has not been invited into someone’s home, or invited others? And the role lies at the heart of many cultural and spiritual traditions. It builds and expands on the ideas of servant leadership, while making quite clear the responsive and interactional nature of leadership in a complex and changing world.

The act of hosting – receiving or entertaining guests or strangers – is as old as mankind. Hosts sometimes have to act heroically; stepping forward, planning, inviting, introducing, providing. They also act in service – stepping back, encouraging, giving space, joining in. The host can be seen encompassing aspects of both metaphors and the movement between them.

Implications of host leadership
There are several implications of host leadership. A leader as host would be:

• Relational – hosting can only happen with others (‘guests’)
• Invitational – hosts tend to use ‘soft power’ and a welcoming hand, rather than coercion
• Creating meaning – providing a context for new interactions and sense-making to occur
• Thinking in phases – looking around the task and including preparation and reflection as integral activities
• Taking care – the host has a traditional primary role in safeguarding their guests
• Taking responsibility – and therefore being accountable for what happens, whether planned or not.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 1. The host operates at many positions on the hero-servant spectrum
Stepping forwards and backwards
As host leader you are dancing between stepping forwards (and acting in an heroic mode) and stepping backwards (serving and providing, leaving space open for others). To do this the host leader needs three skills as shown in Figure 2:

- **Awareness**: Of the spectrum of possibilities and how they connect with the organisation and its work
- **Flexibility**: To actually act and perform effectively in different places along the hero-servant spectrum
- **Timing**: The contextual intelligence to know when to act, when to move, when to stand back and when to change tack.

Stepping forwards:
**Defining expectations**
At the outset, it's your role as a leader to gather people together and set expectations. You will want to help everyone get clear about:

- What are your goals?
- What are you intending that each person is bringing to the table – skills, knowledge, etc?
- What is important to you about HOW things will proceed – expectations and boundaries?

Now that the framework is established, is it time to proceed? Not yet! You want to get the most out of people, so now is the time to step back a little.

Stepping back:
**Creating space for interaction**
Once everyone is clear about your ideas, you are keen to give them a chance. This doesn’t mean being inactive – on the contrary, you will want to be alert and responsive. You can:

- Ask some questions to draw out people's expertise
- Encourage discussion
- Step back and watch.

There might be a slow start... but hang in there. Give people a chance – you gathered them together, and if you want to get the most out of them, you owe them a chance to get involved. It can be hard to open up a space for others to interact, and feel like losing control. But you are not losing control – on the contrary, you are still there, listening and engaged. And when the time comes, you can step forwards again and nudge things back on track.

Leadership is like a dance between these two – stepping forward with your own position, then stepping back to allow engagement and creative interaction. When to do it? As a general rule, do one, then the other. If you want more involvement, step back more often, and wait to see what happens. If things are getting too far off track, check that people are clear about what is expected and that you have a common understanding of what is wanted. You will develop a sense of how this works in your own organisation.
Applying host leadership: control versus letting go

How can host leadership usefully help in some of the dilemmas we mention above and help leaders to achieve better results in a more sustainable way? In this article we look at a dilemma which particularly resonates with leaders in VUCA environments – control versus letting go.

Control versus letting go

At one end of the spectrum there is dominating, being in control, having all the answers – and at the other end, relinquishing control, letting go, not having the answers and allowing others to come up with ideas, involving people in decisions which may have huge impact. If you are at the control end there are certain advantages and disadvantages, but if you are too much in control then you are not delegating, not involving others. Morale and commitment may suffer. But perhaps you feel that it’s your job as a leader to be in control and to have all the answers?

On the other hand if you involve people too much, give too much power away, perhaps you would then feel that you are not leading? Others might ask what you are doing as a leader, if you are not coming up with the answers. Indeed one of the many remarks we get from managers when we are leading coaching seminars is that their team expects them to lead from the front and give advice and help, not ask them what they think!

How a host leader would approach this issue

The host puts in a lot of work up front. They figure out what they are aiming for, make preparations, invite people to join in. Even at this stage they may be aiming to step back a little and involve others in the planning phases. They introduce people, make sure they have what they need... and THEN they step back, let things develop, while keeping an eye on what’s going on. A host leader is always aware of their choices – to step forwards and nudge things along, or to make an active choice NOT to step forward right now but to see what emerges. Of course, there is no ‘zero option’ here. The host cannot not influence the situation – even ‘doing nothing’ is an active choice. Hosts show a very high level of awareness – even when they are engaged in the minutiae of a detailed conversation with someone, they still have an overall feel for the big picture, how things are going, what might be coming next.

So, let’s look at a typical meeting. If the leader just showed up and asked people what they thought, then the employees would be very justified in their dissatisfaction. That’s stepping back without having stepped forward. If the leader dominates proceedings, then that’s clearly poor hosting. A good host leader will have a knack of stepping in when necessary, but not before. Sometimes managers don’t even have the awareness that these are two options. Let’s see what happens when people spend all their time either stepping forwards or stepping back, without balancing their attention.

Dictator versus abdicator

We sometimes come across ‘dictators’ – people who spend all their time laying down the law about what is to be done and how. They appear to have no time for anyone else’s ideas or input. The ironic thing is that they are usually very committed to the success of their business – so much so that they are totally focused on doing things their way, in the mistaken belief that they, and only they, have the right answers. Dictators can get success in the short run, but struggle to engage other people in a sustainable way. They tend to attract followers who like being told what to do – which is great for the short run but not a creative proposition for growing the enterprise.
On the other hand, we find the occasional ‘abdicator’ manager too – someone who spends too much time stepping back and disengaging. This may be because they really don’t care, but it is often because they think they have delegated something – and then don’t check in, ask how things are going, or keep an eye out from a distance. In other words they pretend to delegate but in actual fact they are dumping stuff on people.

So, a host leader would be both taking control and letting go – by mixing their actions in response to emerging events while keeping a wide awareness of both what’s happening, how helpful it is, how to use their preparations for best effect and what else might happen NOW in the moment to move things along.

Hosting at any level in the organisation

Nor is the role of host restricted to just those at the top of an organisation. Any team leader or manager might look at themselves as a host and get new perspectives. Furthermore, anyone in a customer-facing role (be they internal or external customers) can think in hosting terms about how they relate to, and work with, their partners.

Conclusion

We have attempted to illustrate the implications of the metaphor of leader as host, with particular reference to the dilemma of control. This new paradigm can be applied to the other dilemmas too – try it for yourself.

In conclusion, we leave you for now with the phrase which started this whole idea:

The host is both the first and the last

The host is the one who gets things ready, and is also the one who is last to leave. There are clear echoes of leadership tradition here, from the statesman stretching out a hand of welcome to the captain being last to leave the ship. Think of yourself as a host – and see how your options and awareness change.
The Host Leadership community is at www.hostleadership.com where you can contribute ideas and experiences, read blogs and engage with others about this exciting new way to look at leadership.

References

8. Wheatley, M and Frieze, D (2011) From Hero to Host, Resurgence 264 14-17