

Leader as Host, Host as Leader

Towards a new yet ancient metaphor

Mark McKergow PhD MBA

Director, sfwork - The Centre for Solutions Focus at Work
26 Christchurch Road, Cheltenham GL50 2PL, UK

08453 707145, mark@sfwork.com, www.sfwork.com, www.hostleadership.com

Published as McKergow, M. W. (2009). Leader as Host, Host as Leader: Towards a new yet ancient metaphor. *International Journal for Leadership in Public Services* Vol 5 No 1 pp 19-24

Introduction

The idea of leader as host came to me very suddenly on 16th February 2003, during a seminar by Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer. It seems to me that the metaphor of leader as host offers a view on leadership that is at once rooted in millennia of practice and at the same time is something new and timely.

Such metaphors are very important in my view – they offer a rich and broad set of ideas about leadership in a way which allows interpretation into many different real-life situations. Rather than a prescription, such metaphors offer us a way to engage with often difficult situations and quickly alter our thinking to come from another place. Building on the existing ideas of heroic and servant leadership, I hope you will find inspiration of a very practical kind in the metaphor and practice of the host.

Leader as hero

The idea of a leader as a heroic figure is deeply engrained in our society. Powerful men (usually), fast acting, all-knowing, saving the situation, turning things around, avoiding disaster. This is a caricature, but images like the Lone Ranger, Lee Iacocca (Chrysler) and Joan of Arc spring to mind. There are related archetypes in the leadership literature – the king and the warrior are two based on the work of Jung, the shepherd has ancient Biblical roots. In each case the leader can be relied upon in times of trouble to pull things through.

Harvard Business School leadership writer Sharon Daloz Parks sums up the situation very nicely:

“It has become almost a cliché among leadership theorists to disavow a heroic command-and-control model of leadership. But the heroic image of leadership that prevails in the conventional mind is more than a model. It is a deep and abiding myth.” (Parks 2005, p 201)

The survival of this myth in the public imagination is perhaps the most telling thing. It seems that we need some kind of person to resort to in difficult times. Yet with the postmodern world of ever-greater connectedness, multiple perspective and 'swamp issues' – issues which are messy, interconnected, not amenable to quickfire technical analysis – the commanding-and-controlling hero has never looked more out of place.

There are several shortcomings with the heroic leader myth, including:

1. *The hero leader is seen as all-knowing and the followers all-dependent;* the people cannot rescue themselves but rely on the appearance of the hero.
2. *The illusion of control* – by being all-knowing and strong and brave, the leader can avert disaster by their own efforts alone. The interdependent and complex world is not so amenable to this outlook.
3. *The homogeneous imagery of the followers* – kings have subjects, shepherds have flocks of sheep. This seems to suggest homogeneity among the masses. All the followers are the same and therefore can be thought of as one (rather than individuals).
4. *The willingness of the hero (warrior, king, even shepherd) to die in the act of saving the flock* - it is their duty to risk being destroyed or to destroy (actually or metaphorically).

Sharon Daloz Parks comments:

“...Growing numbers of people intuitively recognise that although these [heroic] metaphors have positive features within certain contexts, they are limited and even dangerous within the conditions of our everyday life.” (Parks 2005, p204)

Leader as Servant

There is clearly more to leadership than heroism. But what? One key countering idea is that of Servant-Leadership, proposed by Robert K Greenleaf in 1970 and taken up by many management thinkers (see for example Spears, 1995).

Inspired by the Herman Hesse novella *The Journey To The East*, Greenleaf arrived at the conclusion that great leaders must first serve others – and this fact is what shows their true greatness. The story concerns a group making a spiritual journey. They are accompanied by Leo, a servant who looks after the group, eases the way and cares for them. The journey goes well until Leo disappears, whereupon the party begins to fall apart – they cannot cope without him and the journey has to be abandoned. Many years later, the narrator finally stumbles across Leo and is taken to the religious order which originally sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo is in fact the head of order – its guiding spirit.

This idea is a brilliant counterblast to the hero-leader metaphor prevailing at the time. It has become influential in many fields and has been a catalyst for later thinking about spiritual practice and its connection and function in leadership (see for example Senge et al, 2005). It brings to the fore the leader's need to respond to their followers

and sustain the community, to steward it and hold it in trust for future generations. We might view it as on the same power spectrum as the hero, but at the other end.

However, the metaphor of leader as servant is also not without its shortcomings.

1. The richness of the metaphor is not obvious. In the 21st century most of us are long separated from the everyday idea of servants – we tend to think instinctively of something like a waiter. In history and literature the master/servant relationship is a rich and multi-dimensional one – think of Jeeves and Wooster, Leporello and Don Giovanni, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote and so on. However, this is not obvious to those who see the opposite of servant as Master and are therefore confused about accountability and authority. (These are of course carefully considered in the writings on servant leadership). For a good example of a narrow misunderstanding of servant leadership, see McCrimmon (<http://www.leadersdirect.com/servant.html>)

2. The image of servant is not a compelling one to those (for example women and ethnic minorities) who are traditionally cast in such a role – they would prefer a new image to move towards. Supporters of servant leadership make the point that detailed study can show new ways to view the role, but this is perhaps unlikely if the initial image does not appeal.

3. The leader as servant has similar hierarchical issues to the hero, but from the other end; many people view the servant as at the whim/mercy of the master. There are apparent difficulties with responsibility – if the master wants to go a certain way, how accountable is the servant. This tension is of course part of a full treatment in servant leadership and provides much richness, if the student can be persuaded to persevere. It is also interesting to note that in the Hesse story mentioned above, the group does not realise that their servant has been playing a leadership role until it is too late – which of course works well in terms of a parable but not so well in terms of a leadership practice.

Other leadership metaphors have been suggested and explored in recent years – including theatre director, musician, improviser (DePree, 1992) and artist (Parks 2005). These all have valuable elements. However, the search for an alternative compelling leadership metaphor continues. To be compelling, a metaphor might be instantly recognisable in a useful way in the same way as the hero (and so draw in the learner) whilst being a rich source of wisdom in complex, ever-changing and difficult times (like the servant).

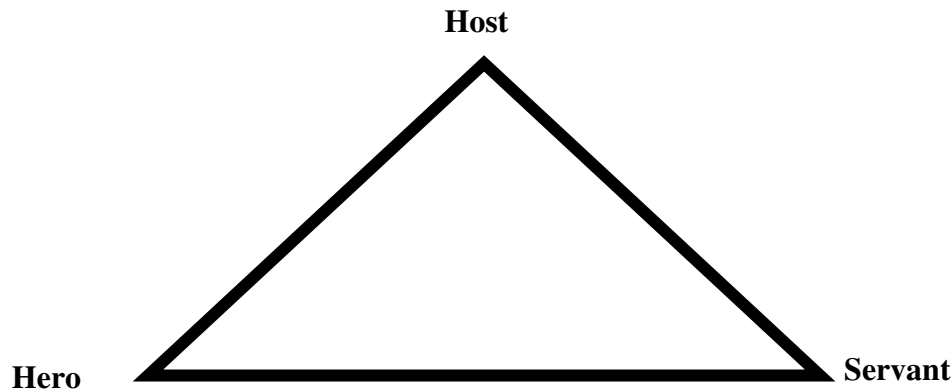
Leader as Host, Host as Leader

In this paper I propose a new, yet ancient, metaphor – the leader as host. I am somewhat surprised, to be honest, that it has not appeared before. However, research and discussions with leadership experts indicate so far that this is new, at least in this form. (There is a paper by Margaret Wheatley entitled From Hero to Host (Wheatley, 2001), but this appears to be a passing reference in an interview about servant-leadership.) As we will see, the host is an enduring role across many civilisations and cultures – yet its use as a leadership myth seems to be relatively unexplored. I propose that it is significantly different to the servant.

We can look at hero and servant as opposing ends of a spectrum of hierarchical leadership:



It seems to me that Host lies above this spectrum – it is a flexible and context-dependent role which sometimes necessitates hero behaviour, sometimes servant, and many inbetween possibilities. This new metaphor could be viewed as a Hegelian synthesis – it not only includes both of the others, but offers a new perspective with many creative possibilities.



We are all familiar with the act of hosting. Who has not given a dinner party, invited people for drinks, celebrated their birthday? We all know this role. And who has not attended a party as a guest, or stayed in someone's house for a weekend? So we all also know the counterpart to host: guest. These are both roles we know, and both come with norms and expectations.

Host and guest are mutually co-defining; like yin and yang, you can't have one without the other, and when one changes then the other must change also. Indeed, the word hospitality comes from the Greek *hospes*, which means both host and guest. This duality also occurs in French (*hôte*) and Italian (*ospite*).

We might start to think of the roles of host and guests first in connection with a very concrete everyday example like a party.

1. In advance: the host decides to hold a party, what kind of party, where and when and makes plans. They then decide which guests to invite, and invite them. They procure food, drink and any entertainments to be laid on. They choose and prepare the space carefully. The host is here making active choices and plans, and in some ways is acting rather heroically by deciding what they want and laying the ground to make it happen.
2. On the night: now the host's role changes dramatically. They welcome the guests, give them refreshments, make introductions, see that everything is proceeding and, basically, ensure that their guests have a suitably good time. Note that this does NOT mean hogging the limelight or leading every conversation. It does mean taking care that everyone is attended to, making people aware of transitions (like moving from drinks to dinner), seeing that that no-one is left out and so on. They must respond to

their guests – no event like that can be choreographed entirely. In this way they are acting more like servants. However, they also join in fully (unlike servants).

Of course, the nature and degree of emergence is somehow connected to the host's plans – but only somehow. One never knows what might happen – be it a dropped jar of beetroot on a fine white shirt, the failure of the soufflé or even the arrival of unwelcome gate-crashers. The guests will tend to look first to the host, who may be required to quickly move in these cases from something like a serving position to a more heroic lead – or not – in protecting the boundaries of the party. It all depends on the kind of event which has transpired (which may or may not be as the host intended).

3. Afterwards – the host says goodbye to their guests and in all probability is left to do the cleaning up. Once again, they combine elements of heroism with elements of serving. This act of being 'the last' as well as 'the first' is characteristic of host leaders – for example the captain of a sinking ship must see that everyone else is safe before they themselves leave.

This is a concrete and everyday example – but I hope it has already provoked your thinking on leadership and how you practise it. As we go on to explore the rich history (hstory?) of the role we will find that it not only appears through every society, but that it forms a very deep and often spiritual connection between people. Extraordinarily there is no book, in print or not, which looks at the way the host tradition developed and how it works in different contexts. This is something I hope to remedy in due course.

The host is both the first and the last – Arabic proverb

Creating space – and being active in it

A key part of the role of host is to create a suitable space for the events to emerge and unfold. There seems to be a dichotomy here. Much of the new literature on leadership speaks of the creation of space as a key role, and the importance of allowing and nurturing emergence within the space. However, the host plays a vital role upfront in deciding on the space and how it is to be decorated, laid out and used. This is another example of the flexibility of the host role, one minute making brave and influential decisions and the next clearing up a spilled drink.

The idea of space as has been advanced by the idea of 'ba'. This Japanese term, originally proposed by philosopher Kitaro Nishida (see for example Nishida 1990, Nonaka and Nonno 1998), means 'a shared space for emerging relationships' or in more general terms a context where meaning may emerge.

We might therefore see the host role as inextricably linked not only with guests, but also with space. One cannot host without doing it somewhere (even if the space is online – and look at the success of those organisations like Facebook and Myspace which have offered a useful and flexible space to their guests). Setting up and managing the space (or choosing not to manage it) is a key role of a host, in my view.

Leadership guru Warren Bennis recounts an old story about Gladstone and Disraeli, the famous pair of 19th century British Prime Ministers:

If you had dinner with William Gladstone, you were left thinking “That Gladstone is the wittiest, the most intelligent, the most charming person around.” But when you had dinner with Benjamin Disraeli, you were left thinking, “I’m the wittiest, the most intelligent, the most charming person around!” Gladstone shone but Disraeli created an environment where others could shine. The latter is the more powerful form of leadership, an adventure in which the leader is privileged to find treasure within others and put it to good use. (Bennis in the introduction to Parks 2005 p xi-xii).

Disraeli was clearly the better host.

Advantages of the host metaphor

1. *It’s an everyday image* – one we all instinctively understand and relate to from both sides – as host and as guest. Everyone has been in both these roles at some point – yet it is rich, versatile and capable of very deep spiritual interpretation in a way coherent with the mundane understanding.
2. *Host and Guest are co-defining* – it doesn’t make sense to think of a host without some kind of guest, whereas one could be a hero without anyone to rescue, or a servant waiting for someone to serve.
3. *Hosting is an activity, rather than a defining characteristic of a person* – so one hosts sometimes, and sometimes one is a guest. These two positions can change very quickly indeed, as for example the biblical story of the woman with the alabaster jar anointing Jesus shows. (A woman approaches Jesus and anoints his feet with expensive oil. Those present scold her, saying that the money could have been used to serve the poor. Jesus interrupts them, saying that the woman has honoured him – they will always have the poor, but will not always have him. This can be seen as the leader (Jesus) becoming the guest for a moment, and so revealing an important truth about this relationship). This ‘interactional view’ is a key underpinning of my own work in Solutions Focus (see for example Jackson & McKergow 2007, McKergow & Clarke 2007) and offers an alternative view to the psychological ‘person-as-bag-of-traits paradigm.
4. *Hosting gives a definite feel of some responsibility for the success of the event* – though there are outside forces at play too. The host has some authority – but they give it to themselves and earn/maintain it by doing the role well. Planning and improvising, control/certainty and freedom/emergence/uncertainty all play a part in an easily understood way.
5. *The role of host can involve behaving as total hero or absolute servant* – depending on the context – or as many inbetween possibilities too.

Elements of host leadership

My initial thinking about hosting leads me to propose four balances for a host. These are aspects of hosting which go together, and which the host must find the right point of balance in their role.

Defining the event **AND** **Responding to what happens**

(Principle of Response-ability)

The host has a role in setting things up and moving things along – but they must always stay alert for the serendipitous, the unexpected, the fortunate and the unfortunate.

Engage and provide **AND** **Join in along with everyone else**

(Principle of Co-participation)

It is no surprise that hosts engage their guests and provide for them. But do they always join in too? It would be very strange to go to a dinner party and have the host eat in the kitchen! Spend some time observing from the balcony, but also get onto the dance floor (in the metaphor of Ronald Heifitz, 1994) The process of engaging can take many forms, from the cheery greeting to a spiritual state of openness and love (for example as given in the Rule of St Benedict, founder of the Benedictine Order and a key early Christian advocate of the importance of hospitality, see for example Hay, 2006)

Protect boundaries **AND** **Encourage new connections**

(Principle of Gate-opener)

When the party is threatened by unwelcome gatecrashers, the host is expected to lead the response. However, they must also encourage new connections, both within and across boundaries. This, like the other balances, is somewhat paradoxical and requires judgement.

Be the first **AND** **Be the last**

(Principle of Alpha and Omega)

Welcome the first guest, step forward (in the face of danger), lead the movement (towards dinner perhaps), and also step back (to be served last) or to be the last off the sinking ship.

“Hospitality is about the crossing of thresholds, the re-imagining of boundaries and the negotiation of space.” Mary David Walgenbach OSB, Sisters of Saint Benedict of Madison Wisconsin

I also propose that good hosts know the balance of **front stage** and **back-stage** work. This metaphor, which I heard from Simon Walker of the Leadership Trust (Walker

2005), sums up the way in which we are called upon at times to act in front of others (front stage) and also reflect, work on our own development, seek counsel from confidants etc (back stage). Some authors write of this as outer and inner work – I prefer the metaphor of front and back stage.

Leaders who host

I have been asked to give examples of host leaders in the real world. I think it might be more interesting to look at hosting as an interactional, social and contextual activity rather than a label to be applied to a single individual. I am reluctant to identify the host without also looking at the guests! So, a couple of examples of what I suggest are good hosting.

The Dalai Lama was faced with a difficult situation in March 2008. The exiled spiritual leader of Tibet was faced with riots and disturbance in his homeland, against the Chinese authorities. Asked what he would do in a BBC interview, he was very clear.

“As early as 1987, in this very room, a British journalist asked me ‘If things become out of control, violence, what do you do?’. Immediately I told him that, if things became out of control, my only option is to completely resign. Now, it’s the same position.” (Dalai Lama on BBC News, <http://tinyurl.com/4vjtxc>, 2008)

This is a strong example of host leadership. The host threatens to resign if his people (his guests) continue the violence. He does not accept their behaviour, nor does he accept the role of being their saving hero. He decides what he wants (non violence) and calls on his people to act responsibly. Instead of telling them what to do, he offers them a choice.

Closer to home, the SOLWorld organisation which shares and builds Solutions Focus practice in organisations (www.solworld.org) works on a hosting principle. There is no Chair, members, officers, committee or bank account. There is, however, a steering group, which anyone can join. Events only happen if someone is prepared to host them, and there is no obligation on anyone to host something against their will. Anyone can offer to host an event under the SOLWorld banner, with the support of the steering group.

The hosts invite participation, risk their own resources and decide what to do with any profit. The results include 8 international conferences, three summer schools, North American and Japanese events, free online listserv and community – with no conventional heroic leader or leadership structure. You can read more about the way SOLWorld operates at <http://www.solworld.org/index.cfm?id=141>.

I am sure that there are many examples of good hosting in leadership. There are also many examples of poor hosting and how this can negatively affect progress. Just in passing, have you heard about the Chief Executive who had a special lift from the car park to his office suite so that he could avoid having to talk to the workforce? I won’t embarrass this person by naming him here. But think about this in hosting terms – what kind of host would try to do this, and what would his guests think?

Conclusion... for now

The metaphor of leaders as host combines a powerfully simple idea with which we are all familiar with a rich tradition and many fascinating connections. Please try it out, explore it, use it, and let me and other readers know your experiences. I think there is more to come from this particular idea. Please email me at mark@sfwork.com or call 08453 707145 (in the UK) or +44 1242 511441 (outside the UK).

References

Max DePree, *Leadership Jazz*, New York: Dell Publishing (1992)

Robert K Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, New York: Paulist Press (1977)

Robert K Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, Robert K Greenleaf Center (1991)

Leslie A Hay, *Hospitality: The heart of spiritual direction*, New York: Morehouse Publishing (2006)

Ronald A Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (1994)

Herman Hesse, *The Journey To The East*, New York: The Noonday Press (1992)

Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow, *The Solutions Focus: Making coaching and change SIMPLE*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing (2002, 2nd revised edition 2007)

Mark McKergow and Jenny Clarke, *Solutions Focus Working: 80 real-life lessons for successful organisational change*, Solutions Books (2007)

Kitaro Nishida, "An inquiry into the Good", translated by M Abe and C Ives (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (1990)

Ikujiro Nonaka and Noboru Konno, The concept of "Ba": Building foundation for Knowledge Creation. *California Management Review* Vol 40, No.3 Spring 1998

Henri JM Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd (1976)

Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A bold approach for a complex world*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press (2005)

Larry C Spears (ed), *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K Greenleaf's theory of servant-leadership influenced today's top management thinkers*, New York: John Wiley and Sons (1995)

Peter Senge, C Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society*, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing (2005)

Simon Walker, *Subversive Leadership*, Oxford: *leadershipcommunity* (2005)

Margaret Wheatley, From Hero to Host, interview with Larry Spears and Roger Noble of Greenleaf, <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/herotohost.html> (2001)

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Matthias Varga von Kibéd for sparking my interest in this strand, and to many people including Jenny Clarke, Anton Stellamans, Doug Hennessy, Denise Wright, Paul Scheele, Steve Onyett and Martin Rutte for helpful discussions.

About the author

Dr Mark McKergow is co-director of **sfwork** – The Centre for Solutions Focus at Work. He is an international consultant, speaker and author. He has written and edited three books and dozens of articles. Mark was instrumental in the founding of the SolWorld (Solutions in Organisations Linkup) conference series, is a Board member of the SF consultants body SFCT and edits the academic journal InterAction. He works regularly in the USA and Asia as well as all over Europe, and is a member of the Transformational Leadership Council. Contact him at mark@sfwork.com.

Initial reactions to ‘Leader as Host, Host as Leader’:

"The complexity and diversity of leadership theory reflects the world we live in today. But complex and diverse isn't necessarily good. Many of the challenges we face today are because we have lost the sense of elegant simplicity in the lives we can lead as human beings. In "Leader as Host, Host as Leader" Mark McKergow has done us all a great favour in reminding us that good leaders are human beings first, and leaders second. His revival of ancient wisdom is timely, as is the emerging dialogue around virtue and character in public life. For leaders in the public sector, this concept is the perfect antidote to the mechanistic and stifling rigor mortis of bureaucracy. I cannot recall ever being asked by a host to complete a Health and Safety Risk Assessment before entering their home. The concept of Leader as Host, Host as Leader provides us with a simple relational model of leadership that has evolved and withstood the test of millenia. Good leaders as hosts invite followers. They care for their needs. They are personally humble and self-disciplined, putting the needs of others before their own. But they are also courageous and resilient if things go wrong and they will confront and address the often brutal realities that gate-crash our lives. I commend Mark's paper unreservedly and thank him for his valuable insight."

Professor Roger Steare BA FRSA FREC

Visiting Professor of Organizational Ethics, Cass Business School, City University, London

I welcome and am excited by Mark McKergow's thought-provoking article on host leadership for a variety of reasons.

My experience is that, although many people are relieved to hear about the shortcomings of the heroic leadership models, they often struggle with understanding the notion of leadership as servanthood, particularly if it is the first occasion on which they have encountered the metaphor. It is extremely useful that this article articulates some of the tensions that exist, and offers a new, related metaphor (leader as host) to explore such a critical phenomenon as leadership. I am especially pleased

that the author refers to the discomfort that might be particularly acute for women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds, who (with a few exceptions) have conspicuously been excluded from most previous studies of leadership, and some would argue, from full participation in society.

The relationship described between hero, host, and servant offers, as Mark McKergow states, ‘a new perspective with many creative possibilities’, and expands the exquisite commentaries of Margaret Wheatley, which celebrate the essential humanity of leadership in looking for the good in others and having an ‘unshakable faith’ in people, by drawing our attention to leadership as the creation of spaces and opportunities when people come together.

I would hope that our own empirical research on engaging leadership – which, in essence, gave voice to people about their experiences of receiving leadership, identified overriding themes of openness and connectedness, and emphasized the desire for partnership and co-ownership of human aspiration and effort – contributes another aspect of the richness of the new kaleidoscope of leadership thinking.

In summary, Mark McKergow presents a different, exciting perspective for those of us seeking meaning in a world of colossal complexity and unbounded possibilities.

Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe
Chief Executive, Real World Group

This is a very interesting alternative leadership concept and fits in well with developing ideas regarding the need for leadership qualities throughout an organisation. It is a great concept that will stimulate much thought. It would be interesting to apply the metaphor to some recent leadership examples in practice, such as national government initiatives, large corporations such as British Airways, Rolls Royce and Tesco, as well as smaller entities; and also in a military context. Each could be quite revealing, and thought provoking. It would also be interesting to consider the metaphor with respect to the more traditional leadership styles necessary to manage accountability and responsibility. In addition it would also be worth thinking about how you would use the metaphor to stimulate a whole new framework for considering risks and rewards. I wonder also how one might explore the sustainability of leadership using the metaphor, and what happens in times of crisis and disasters and where there is a sudden loss of host. Will the guests be equipped and know what to do next, and how would you seek out a new host? Which begs the question – are hosts born or made?

Frederick Psyk

Director, FSP Solutions and Non-Executive Director on the board of the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust, UK

“As a Faculty member at Ashridge teaching managers and executives from all around the world, I am confronted with many metaphors for leadership. I’ve never been very happy with the Hero metaphor nor the Servant one, although many managers definitely cling to belief in the Hero! Mark’s idea of the Host as a metaphor brings several advantages over other ones. As a teacher and facilitator I want metaphors to help managers explore aspects of their own management and leadership, I want it to be useful as a practical tool both in the classroom and in their organisations. This

metaphor gives me many options - for example, the idea of invitation implied in the metaphor. This can lead to conversations around whom the leader invites , who is included and who isn't, and especially around how the leader invites... As a tool for reflection and exploring the meaning of leadership, I think this is a very worthwhile and useful metaphor.”

Mike Brent

Client and Programme Director. Ashridge Business School

For the latest developments on Host Leadership visit www.hostleadership.com

