
LEADERSHIP AND THEORY: A PRACTITIONER'S REFLECTION

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A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Each year the administrative cabinet of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (the president, dean, and vice presidents for business affairs, institutional advancement and student affairs) together with the president's and the dean's assistants participates in an off-site planning retreat. A lion's share of the retreat this year dealt with developing a planning map for the budgetary process.

Based on the experience we gained in the prior year, our first to work together, we decided that the cabinet as a deliberative body should exert more supervisory control over the budgetary planning process, not only in relation to the department heads that report to each member of the cabinet but also in relation to the business office. Thus, we wanted to make sure that the "planning map" would reflect a realistic timeline and an appropriate rhythm between cabinet deliberations, the work that department heads perform in the assembling of their respective budgets, and the efforts of the business office to appropriate funds consistent with the budget.

The cabinet also expressed a strong preference for zero-based budgeting. Experience had shown that it is very difficult to phase out unnecessary programs unless the budget is built each year from the ground up. A zero-based budget process forced department heads to make a case for each program, based on the program's contribution to the seminary's emerging strategic long-term plan, and to reflect more intentionally on program goals that might have changed during the year to meet new challenges.

The discussions around the budget seemed to have been settled and we were preparing to move on to another topic

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when the vice president for business affairs reminded the group that the new software program we have purchased will make it possible for us now to do a two-year budget projection. This technological capability will allow us to accumulate funds in the first year of a two year budget cycle that can be combined with funds and spent in the second year of that cycle. This means, in effect, that a department can “save” funds for future allocations, carrying over these funds from one budget year to another. It also has the effect, in essence, of encouraging thrift among department heads. Funds can accrue from one year to another, potentially extending or expanding programs.

The vice president for institutional advancement raised the concern that this capability might undermine the two values for which we had argued earlier: exertion for more supervisory control on the part of the cabinet and the zero-based budgeting process. If department heads have enough control over their program budgets that they are able to be this “thrifty,” they have control enough to change the budget outcomes. And if funds can be “saved” in one year to accumulate in the second year, a genuine zero-based budgeting process is possible only in year one of the planning cycle. Both concerns were heard by the other members of the cabinet with a grave nodding of heads.

Suddenly something occurred to me, an almost heretical thought that derived not from management or leadership theory but from political philosophy. I said something to the effect of the following: “In this situation we are dealing with incommensurable values. We are dealing with values that are in conflict, values that cannot be organized into a hierarchy of goods, but that must be held in tension. The value of centralized control over the budget (supervisory control at the cabinet level) conflicts with localized departmental control. Both are real goods, and *the institution is stronger if this tension is not resolved*. Certainly the tension must be managed. I would also argue that it must be articulated. But the conflicting values contribute more to the institution’s health than either of the two values would if they were not both present.” I observed that the same could be said of the zero-based budget process. The preference for this process is grounded in a set of real organizational goods. But the problem presented by

the new technological capacity also carries in its wake a number of goods, including the possibility for inculcating habits of long-term planning and thrift among department heads.

I described this idea very briefly to my cabinet colleagues. The conversation took up this theme, resulting in a consequent lowering of anxiety among us (competitive tensions between values are not to be avoided at all costs; they need to be contextualized and managed) and a corresponding creativity (realizing that the existence of such tension is good for the institution, and we might want to discover and disclose other tensions of this sort that contribute to the seminary's organizational health).

A few days after the retreat, something else occurred to me. Theory plays more than a heuristic role in leadership (as important as that is), providing viable models for organizational leadership that can be explored intellectually. Theory also plays a role in the development and extension of leadership. Inasmuch as theory changes our perception of a reality, it also shapes that reality, and allows leaders to move forward into new understandings of the organization. This can best be understood by demonstrating the alternative.

INSUFFICIENTLY THEORIZED UNDERSTANDINGS

A few years ago, in the midst of interviews for an opening on our faculty, one of our professors made the following observation about one of the candidates. He said that while she seemed to have a fairly good knowledge of some aspects of her discipline, whenever she was asked questions about her perspective on feminism she could only speak anecdotally. My colleague observed that the candidate's understanding of feminism was "insufficiently theorized." I asked him what he meant. He said that she only spoke of her own individual experience as a woman scholar or as a woman in ministry. She demonstrated little or no knowledge of the literature, no real familiarity (beyond a superficial and popular level) of the various theoretical perspectives on feminism, particularly from a theological perspective, and no understanding of the history of the conversations that raged around her own experience and that might have brought either clarity to that experience or that might have further problematized it.

Something similar can be said of many leaders and their practice of leadership, that it is insufficiently theorized. Many leaders have little or no knowledge of the vast critical literature on the subject of leadership. Their knowledge is largely anecdotal, or restricted to popular publications. They may have little or no familiarity with various perspectives on leadership, a fact which often leads them either to operate at a purely intuitive and unconscious level of awareness, or that leads them to become acolytes of this or that particularly dominant popular voice on the subject. Perhaps most importantly, they may be unaware of the conversations and the *history of the conversations* that rage around us regarding various aspects of organizational leadership. But knowledge, even deep knowledge, of leadership theory is not enough. I would add that it is not only valuable to have a leadership practice that is richly informed by leadership theory, it is also valuable (indeed, I would say it is essential) to practice leadership that is deeply grounded in a larger matrix of theory: especially theological, sociological, political, and cultural.

Many leaders see theory of any kind as extraneous to the practice of leadership. Indeed, for some leaders the very word "theory" is a derogatory term. I think the problem here lies, at least in part, with an inadequate theory of theory. Several years ago an astrophysicist lectured at Austin Seminary in an endowed lectureship we annually sponsor, the George Heyer Lectures, which bring leading university scholars and researchers in fields *other* than religion to our campus. The physicist spoke on the subject of scientific theory. He defined a theory as a descriptive model for how reality functions. He said that while no theory is perfect, some theories are useful. For instance, he observed that while every physicist with whom he works (he is one of the leading scientists on the Hubble Telescope project for NASA) recognizes that Einstein's theories in physics represent the workings of the physical universe more profoundly and more accurately than Newton's, if you want to properly calculate the trajectory of a rocket from earth around the moon and back to earth again you don't use the theories Einstein developed, you use Newtonian physics. Einstein's theoretical model for the way the universe works is not as useful for this particular task as Newton's. However, a physicist who only has Newton's understanding of the uni-

verse at her fingertips is working at a significant disadvantage. Her understanding is insufficiently theorized to deal with a wider range of practices. A physicist needs both theories (and, indeed, many others) in order to practice the art of physics.

The promotion of deeply theorized understandings among leaders can, I would argue, help them to look beyond solving the problem de jour to discern the deep structures of human behavior and organizations, the web of social life, encouraging critical reflection and critically informed practice that can lead to a more profound comprehensive engagement with reality. I would argue, in fact, that this it is only by possessing a multitude of different, even contradictory, theoretical models that we are able to gain an appropriately complex understanding of the organizations we lead. A pastor, for example, whose practice of congregational leadership is informed by Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*, Dale Irvin's work on Christian traditioning, Ed Friedman's application of family systems theory to congregational life, and the various sociologically and historically informed approaches of congregational studies scholars such as Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley and William McKinney is likely to be more adaptive and theologically reflective in his or her leadership. The pastor's practice of leadership is likely to be even better if informed by theoretical studies in leadership such as those of Edgar Schein and Ron Heifetz. However, pastors who have also worked integratively and synthetically in the broader vineyard of theoretical studies have the opportunity to discern even more possible angles on their leadership. And this is crucial, because discernment, perception, judgment, prudence and wisdom represent the gold standard of leadership.

This is what I meant several years ago when I responded to questions following the presentation of a paper on pluralism at a theological conference. Someone asked: "What does the Church most need when it comes to dealing with diversity?" My response was: "The greatest practical need of the Church in dealing with diversity is to learn to account for diversity in a non-monistic framework. We need better theory." A member of that audience, a denominational leader, quickly dismissed my response as "pie-in-the-sky abstraction." "Of all things we need, it isn't another theory," he said, "We

need something more practical.” In fact, what I was saying was this: we are not equipped to understand and deal with diversity as a theological good because our current understandings of diversity (whether relativistic or absolutist) operate in a non-pluralistic framework. Until we get a new framework for understanding it, the diversity surrounding us will continue to appear as a curse rather than a blessing. The shift from one theoretical framework to another is fundamental. And it is practical. This is why each major breakthrough in science requires us to see the world in new ways (the sun really does look like it revolves around the earth until we remember Copernicus). Unless we have the framework, the model, the theory, we do not have the categories, the basic tools, even the vocabulary to “see” things. Seeing does not take place in the eyes, but in the mind. Perception is a function of interpretation

A THEORY IN PRACTICE

If I may, then, return to the situation with which I began this essay. As my colleagues discussed our budget planning process and noted, rightly, that we were heading for some fundamental systemic conflicts between centralized control and localized control of the budget, between a zero-base budget process and a process that assumes some programs (including innovative ones) will make savings in one year that will be held over to future years, two or three theories popped into my head.

The first theory derives from John Kenneth Galbraith who argued that healthy organizations, groups, institutions, societies and even whole nations are characterized by vigorous countervailing forces. The second derives from Isaiah Berlin who believed that values are often incommensurable, that is, that some things we believe to be worthwhile and good are in conflict, that they cannot be resolved in a hierarchy of goods, that they must simply compete, and that our settlements between which goods we seek cannot be ultimately or finally resolved, but must be negotiated and re-negotiated periodically. Berlin’s theory, similar to Galbraith’s, also argues that such is the inevitable state of human societies, and that this state of affairs is not something to regret, but represents

at least a potential strength. For me at least, supplementary to both Galbraith and Berlin is the theory that conflict is not only necessary, but is often crucial and positive, and that an institution lacking in certain kinds of conflict is not as vital and healthy as those who possess such conflict. This last theoretical perspective derives from Lewis Coser's seminal research some fifty years ago, which built, in turn, on Georg Simmel's theories of social conflict.

Once these theoretical perspectives were put on the table in our cabinet discussion (and I described them in an even more truncated form in our retreat than I have here), we were able to discuss the budget planning process at a formal level, rather than merely at the episodic level. We were encouraged to reflect on the interests, concerns and responsibilities represented by the various cabinet members, the department heads and the office of business affairs, not "personally," but in terms of *the roles the cabinet members, department heads and business officers play* in the seminary's leadership team. We were enabled to bless the reality we face together. If I know you differ from me, not because you are cantankerous and I am nice (although that may also be true!), but because you and I play different roles and represent necessarily conflicting perspectives, interests and values. If I know that such conflict is evidence of and contributes to the health of our school, then we can appreciate even more our conflicting perspectives for the sake of the whole. We will not try to ignore or smooth over our differences prematurely or silence voices that demand that we justify the decisions we make. The school is richer because the conflicting values have their champions.

This is only one small example of how theoretical knowledge informs our leadership. There are so many others. I wonder, for example, how various theories of history might challenge our institutional self-consciousness, and might help us understand the distinct responsibility of theological schools to remember the past for the sake of the church. I wonder how various theories of human sinfulness might inform the perennial struggle many managers have over staff terminations (while Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* remains a valuable text, I have come increasingly to sense that it is simplistic in its thesis, especially when applied to leadership). At the very least, more sufficiently theorized

understandings of leadership have the potential to limit our frequently clichéd justifications for what we do and for what we avoid doing as leaders. Even a modest advance on this front would be worthwhile.