CAMINO

LEADERSHIP NOTES ON THE ROAD

LEANDRO HERRERO

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BASE CAMP

Philosopher Martin Heidegger requested before his death that the collection of his writings be called 'paths, not works'. He had used the word 'paths' several times. It provides, according to some interpreters of his 'works', an image of 'leading' but not necessarily to anywhere in particular; like many paths do in the woods.

The great Spanish poet Antonio Machado said it well in one of his most acclaimed poems. It would read in English something like this: 'Walker, there is no path, you make the path by walking'.

The allegory of the path, whether Machado's path making or Heidegger's 'paths, not works', is a good metaphor for leadership. I really believe that cartography and leadership are twin sisters.

Pilgrimage is also another good metaphor for the leadership journey, a journey that can be done in solitude but also accompanied by followers. The pilgrimage has both the personal and the collective, all in one. The journey contains all sorts of challenges and discoveries for the pilgrim, as it does for the leader. The difference in the pilgrimage is that it has a fixed destination. But arriving is never landing by helicopter. You have to walk, to go, to move, bit by bit, and then sense, learn, live.

Every year, about 300,000 people walk the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St James) a network of routes starting in France or Portugal, or Spain itself, and that ends in Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, Spain. Probably a minority will walk the 'required' last 100 km on pure religious grounds. But most will talk later about the transformative effects of the Camino, the route, the pilgrimage.

Constantine P. Cavafy is one of my favourite poets, and *Ithaca* my favourite one. He describes the perils of the journey to the mythical Ithaca. A destination. 'Keep Ithaca always in your mind. Arriving there is what you're destined for'. But he says that most of those perils may be in your head. And then he recommends to take your time, not to rush, go slowly, stop in all the ports, learn from the locals, and buy their perfumes. And he warns, maybe when you finally get to Ithaca, you'll be disappointed. It has nothing to offer compared with all you've learnt and lived and changed. 'Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you will have understood by then what these Ithacas mean'.

Good leaders are good path makers. Sometimes the journey is not clear. The destination may still be ambiguous. Again, it's all about cartography. For me, a leader is the cartographer in chief who, whilst walking with others, also becomes an architect and a builder. If this is about journeys, and maps, and building, and Cavafy's 'enter (ing) harbours you're seeing for the first time and stopping at Phoenician trading stations, to buy fine things', then there is almost no end to it.

On my imaginary journey inside my head, I took notes and articulated ideas. Most became a Daily Thought, a blog I have been running for years. This is a collection of those notes. Don't look for Harvard here, there are only harbours and other places that have generously adopted the content between them.

In this Camino of mine, I have also learnt to spot the real things, the fundamentals, the rocks. These are my Rules. A small collection of warnings, strong views and discoveries that I do not intend to be transferable. After all, the journey is not transferable, nobody can walk the Camino for you. Liberated by the idea that I don't need to impart universal wisdom to end in a sterile case study and that I can share these rules like one shares a meal without having to explain the chemistry of the ingredients, here they are, still full of dust from my journey. The one I have only just begun.

1. Earn credibility all the time. Stocks deplete easily.
2. Act as if you do not have anything to lose.
3. Be unreasonable in your demands, the reasonable ones are taken.
4. Detect bullshit and become proficient at detecting it. Then, protect yourself and others.
5. Exercise provocation with panache and respect. Aim at being appreciated, not hated, for it.
6. Don't be a provocateur, rebel, maverick, contrarian or challenger for the sake of it. Have a good 'because' ready.
7. Infect others, don't do it alone.
8. Be restless, be uncomfortable (and foolish and hungry and the rest...). They're the only things that confirm that you are alive.
9. Watch your ego. Most of the time it is not your friend. Rule of thumb, most of the time it's not about you.
10. Never settle for one possibility only.
11. Don't waste your time managing the 'inevitable'. There is a lot of 'possible' waiting for a leader. Look for what would not happen without you.
12. Seek unpredictable answers. The predictable ones are already seeking you.
13. Don't be against anything. Don't create enemies. The exceptions are mediocrity and dishonesty.
14. Write down your little bit of daily legacy in a secret little book.
15. There is only one test: what will you tell the children? (that you do, you did, you didn't do).
16. More important than what you say is what people hear when you are saying it.
17. Practice 'I don't know', possibly followed by 'and I don't think you know either, so let's figure it out'.
18. Make things happen first, then clean up the process for the next time. In that order.
19. The unexamined leadership, like the unexamined life, is not worth living.
20. Play as many roles as you want, but never a victim or an enemy. Both being 'victim' or 'enemy', requires your full consent.

Off to the next harbour.

OXFORD, BLACKWELL'S

Five spaces that the organizational leader needs to design and nurture

What about the leader as a designer of spaces, a social architect that creates places (physical) and spaces? Not hard to imagine, but I think it is an underestimated concept, perhaps lost in the rhetoric, in the analogy.

Leaders need to create space for employee voices. For that read opportunities, platforms (digital and analogue), vehicles, processes and systems if needed, and, above all, the encouragement of behaviours: speak up, make yourself heard, provide an input, contribute, not just 'doing your job'. This is the first space.

The second space is the informal organization, the one that does not 'contain' teams, committees, task forces, fixed conference calls and any other formal structure. Here, read the corridors, the buffer time, the cafeteria, the informal brainstorm. The informal organization is the oxygen of the company. Shrink that supply at your peril. This second space is also a mixture of physical and psychological spaces. Table tennis in a corner is not enough, if there is not a culture of informal conversations or if the culture sees them – those spaces, those semi-artificial break outs - as a waste.

The third space is personal. The space to think and reflect, to look at things with a critical view, to digest and compare, to form an opinion, to open yourself to the possible aha! To say, "I have a Wednesday afternoon free for this", does not work.

It must be embedded in the culture. A culture of 24/7 busyness does not provide that space.

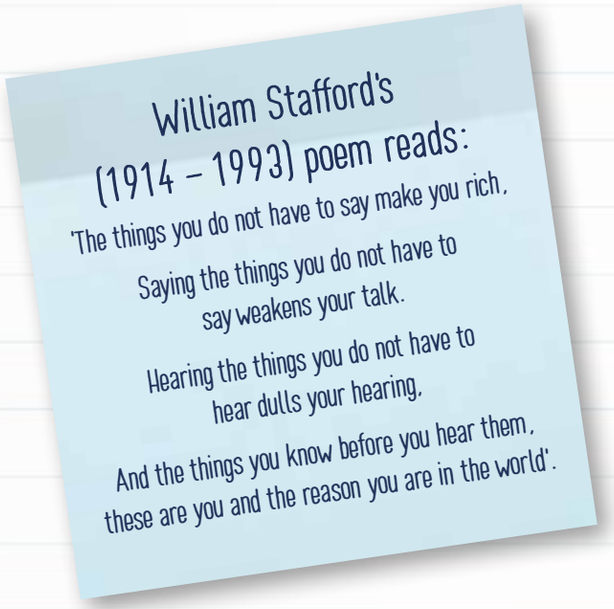
The fourth space is also personal. It is the space of professional and personal development. It includes, of course, formal courses and training but goes well beyond these to mentoring, to time to shadow somebody, to do something that is not in the job description, or well beyond these, stretching people's skills and imagination. This space requires the leader to not only accept, but create some slack in the system, some redundancy, some buffer that is not considered a waste. 'Personal' and 'professional' are blurred here. The thing not to do is to be obsessed with the ROI, with how doing this could have an immediate return. As soon as you start counting these beans, the desired effect goes out of the window.

The fifth space is collective. It's the space for experimentation with ideas, the generation of as many bad ones as possible, the mental prototyping of possibilities, the playing with 'unfinished thoughts' and half-baked opportunities. Many leaders hate this. These are the ones putting off employees by saying, 'come back when you have a perfect business case'. Since there is no such thing, people never go back.

Yes, leaders need to see themselves as architects, as space designers, creators, and implementors.

This is an area where, what the leader says counts less than what the leader does in this social engineering. It is therefore very silent, but the spaces will be very visible and the legacy will be enormous.

‘The things you do not have to say make you rich’



Attention leaders. Judging by the above, we are pretty poor. We talk too much, we command too much, we say too much, we repeat.

I am not against the famous ‘walk the talk’. It’s just that I think the order is wrong. Walk first and then do the talking about the walk: why the walk, the benefits of the walk, why others should join the walk… Talk the walk!

If people see you walking, maybe then you will have less to say. And, if as a leader, you accumulate more and more things that you don’t have to say, you are rich, and you are doing great as leader. This is lesson One of Disruptive Economics for Leadership.

‘The things you don’t have to say make you a rich leader’.

‘You don’t have to attend every argument to which you are invited’

This quote is from an unknown author. He or she must have known a thing or two about the futility of engaging in every single discussion that comes your way. The quote is also a proxy for ‘pick your battles’. There are battles worth fighting and battles that are not. It may also serve as a reflection on what leaders choose to do.

In organizational life, people are often pulled in too many directions, where ‘signal’ and ‘noise’ get confused all the time. Big things get mixed up with small things. The important gets confused with the urgent. The strategic and the tactical become mixed up. All things become equally important, equally relevant, equally necessitating a response, to have a say, to send an ‘I agree’ message.

I am not fond of the word ‘prioritisation’. Not that I don’t believe in the need to prioritise, but I have little faith in our standard ways of doing this. For leaders, a better angle is ‘What will make the difference?’ Or better, ‘What can I personally do that will make the difference, and perhaps only I can do?’.

We need to switch from spending our time on ‘managing the inevitable’, to leading what will not happen unless we lead it.

In this quest, you don't, as leader, have to attend every argument to which you are invited, you don't have to get involved in everything and certainly, you don't have to spend your time fighting every battle. The magic word is choice. Choices are always in front of you.

A 6th Century Leadership Manual starts with the word 'Listen!'

It's impossible to listen in a noisy room. If you want to listen to your breathing, you need silence. You can't listen in busyness mode; we hear lots of things, we listen to few.

Listening to music through your earphones when walking around is more hearing the music than listening to it.

We hear other people, we hear the CEO, we hear the news, we hear our team members, we hear complaints, we hear people suffering. It does not follow that we listen to any of them.

Listening is becoming a rare quality. It requires active willingness to do it.

There are four magic questions for leaders about listening:

(1) What am I saying?

(2) Am I being heard?

(3) Is anybody listening?

(4) How do I know any of the above?

In, ***The Leader with Seven Faces***, one of my books and the basis for my Leadership Programmes, language is face number one. The above questions are key leadership hearing aids.

Listening is sometimes an anxious request. Listen to me! Would you listen! One of the oldest Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and Leadership Manuals in the world is *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, written in the 6th Century for monks in monasteries, although there were other similar Rules even before. For centuries, it has inspired religious and non-religious life. It caters for all needs in the community and provides guidance and solutions to potential problems. Still today this Rule, with its modern adaptation, is in place in all Benedictine communities around the world. Benedict of Nursia, patron saint of Europe, wrote his Rule in ordinary Latin. It has a Prologue and seventy-three chapters, not bad for an SOP! The Rule starts with one single latin word, on its own: 'Ausculta', that is, Listen! Perhaps he anticipated modern organizational life.

For leadership, look around, not in research papers

Leadership has traditional sources of learning, reflection, role modelling and a 'body of knowledge'. There are four that dominate. This is my humble classification: The Military, Corporations, Civic and Religious models, and Sports.

Where do organizations borrow from for leadership models? The military source is mostly about language (as opposed to individuals). The language of war is well embedded in organizational and business thinking: killing the competition, price wars, winning and losing markets etc. Occasionally there is reference to true military strategy and leadership, but not too frequently. Civic and religious leadership is also referred to, but here instead, only with the accent on individuals. 'I have a dream' and Luther King must be the most admired example. Business organizations love sports analogies which, in my opinion, are overrated and oversized.

There is a point here, however. There are multiple sources from which to learn, mirror, copy, study, draw conclusions about Leadership. Multiple models and examples. It was in this context that some time ago, I was taken aback when invited to participate in a round table on the topic at a prestigious global business school. The Head of Research presented their five-year research data on the future of leadership. It consisted of in-depth interviews with most of the Chairmen and CEOs of top FTSE 500 companies and from this he claimed that they now knew what the future of leadership looked like. That was it!

I put it to them that they had completely missed the point and the views of the Chairman of Coca Cola, for example, (with all due respect to the Chairman of Coca Cola) were hardly relevant to day to day leadership in organizations.

There is a myriad – I pointed out – of small or not so small enterprises that are full of people 'leading' from day to day, navigating through life, with different degrees of resilience and most of them without a golden parachute should they screw up. 'Where was that data?' I inquired.

I didn't like the way he looked at me and I realised I was turning into a Martian to them. I am sure that 'the research team' enjoyed a pleasant travel budget and found the research rewarding, but to call this the latest on the leadership of the future was slightly insulting to say the least.

Every day we miss the reality that is there in front of our eyes, in favour of the big names and big label position papers and reports. For leadership, it's easy: look around. Don't look up at The Big Names. Or don't look at them only. Try schools, neighbourhoods, community leaders, small companies, medium and big, churches, public servants, good CEOs even if not those on the front page of the newspapers. We are rich in examples of good leadership. As rich as we are poor in so-called 'research'.

Sorry, it's not about what the CEOs of the FTSE 500 think. Leadership, good or bad, is all around us, because it's a praxis.

If we are serious about research in leadership, we need to come down to earth and do a whole lot better than interviewing the usual suspects. Update: I keep waiting for an invitation to another of their roundtables – but they haven't called me.

The three 'magic' words: transparency, clarity and fairness

These three organizational 'magic' words manage to get mixed up a lot. It's hard to believe because they are so different. But people love the mixing because the use of language in organizational life has a sort of 'complete freedom', which results in lots of 'prêt-à-porter' word concepts. So, 'magic' here has to be interpreted as producing an abracadabra effect: use them and many doors will be open (even if their meaning is mixed up).

More than once I have seen these three 'magic' words in a single value system as if their combination validates the good intentions of the company and provides a stamp of integrity and honesty (incidentally, two more 'magic' words).

Organizations seem to thrive in conceptual muddle. My friend and brilliant inter-cultural consultant, David Trickey, calls this 'a conspiracy of self-inflicted ambiguity'.

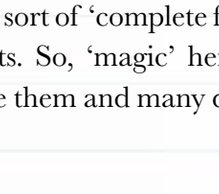
My definitions, to dispel the magic a bit:

Transparency: everybody can see it, there are no secrets

Clarity: everybody understands

Fairness: nobody is discriminated against

That's it!



Something may be transparent to the staff, but unclear, even opaque. Something may be clear for management, but not transparent to others. Something may be fair to people, but it's not clear or transparent.

Problems arise when there is a free, interchangeable use of the three. People tend to assume that something is unfair when it's not transparent. But transparency does not make it automatically fair. There is nothing unfair about not making something transparent to everybody. It may or may not be unfair. Some managers preach transparency, but they mean clarity. Other managers preach fairness, on the basis of clarity and transparency to all. But the issue may be very unfair, yet, clear.

I suggest you carry on playing with the permutations but avoid at any cost the indiscriminate use. Beware of the prolongation of 'self-inflicted ambiguity'.

I hope I am clear, have been transparent
in my intentions and you find these points fair.
If not, I will have to start again.