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**Session Title: The Birth or Death of Followership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

Presentation Speech by Dr. John P. Dentico, President LeadSimm LLC  
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Full Version

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me offer you an alternative perspective. Imagine for a minute that you are driving down a superhighway in your brand new automobile when without warning you hear a loud bang. Suddenly you realize that the loud noise was your front right tire and yes, you have a flat. Undaunted by this little mishap in your life, you pull off at the next ramp, and begin to search for someplace where you can get the wheel fixed. You drive for a time listening to the thump, thump, thump of your front tire on the road when out of nowhere appears a sign. The sign says welcome to the farm and factory wheel repair facility, if you don't see what you need just ask, I am sure we have it. Great you exclaim I'm saved!

You pull in parking the middle of the lot, exit your car and soon after an attendant approach's and asks "How can I help?" I have a flat tire and I have been driving on it for a while, I may need a new wheel you reply. Have you got a wheel?

"Wait right here" says the attendant. Five minutes pass and the attendant returns, rolling a large wheel towards your car. Confused you realize the wheel is a great deal bigger than the one on your car, in fact, it looks to be a wheel designed to fit a covered wagon. Realizing this may be the only wheel facility within miles you say in your most respectable tone, Sorry I don't think that is going to work, I don't think it will fit my brand new car. Thank you for your effort you say, but Got anything else?

The attendant shrugs his shoulders and says, Be right back! 10 minutes pass and the attendant returns this time with a large rubber tire, on a wooden spoked wheel. Remembering the time you sat on your grandfather's (or great grandfather's) knee while he showed you pictures of his youth, you realize that this wheel, comes for a Ford Model T circa 1925. You look the attendant straight in the eye and say well it is a lot closer but it will not fit on my car and secondly, if you were able to make it fit, I am sure I would crash. That tire was never made to go 70 miles an hour on a superhighway. And you'd be right, driving your brand new automobile on a wheel made for a covered wagon or a 1925 Ford Model T would most likely spell disaster in a very short period of time. It seems obvious, doesn't it?



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Then can anyone tell me why everyday we run our 21<sup>st</sup> Century organizations on models and ideas designed for yesterday's farms and factories? In the idea economy, where as Peter Drucker has written the knowledge worker is the leading class we remain at the mercy of industrial models---doesn't this too spell disaster?

Nowhere is this more evident than in the notions of the nature and practice of leadership. In 1978 James McGregor Burns, the patriarch of leadership thought in America, wrote that the predominant leadership approach tends often unconsciously to be elitist; it projects heroic figures against the shadowy background of drab powerless, masses. I wonder-- how many of you sitting here today want to be associated with a notion of leadership that portrays the majority of participants as drab and powerless. For too long leadership has been portrayed as that indescribable set of traits fully owned by the leader. In the factory mindset, whatever the leader does is leadership. All we have to do is make better leaders follow their orders and we too are saved!

The fact is that the ideas and principals of the leadership models built for the industrial times are grossly limited and incongruent for a society enraptured with technology and information, surrounded by rapid complex change, faced with infinitely difficult decisions and who, at the core of its being, seek purpose and meaning from the work they do. The time for change has come and gone. We must move beyond the limited perspective of the mythical power of one leader to the real power of people engaged in an equitable influence relationship and dedicated to bringing about real change.

Let me say it a little bit differently, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, public and private organizations and communities are faced with an environment that is extraordinarily diverse, ambiguous and turbulent, information rich, and subject to continuous complex change. This hyper-dynamic environment requires the full support of creative and innovative people who are searching for intrinsic satisfaction from the work they do and are fully committed to the process of keeping abreast with and making change.

In this environment, the job of leaders is changing dramatically as innovation, leadership and learning at all levels of an organization are required. 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership must focus on melding a multitude of diverse talent and individual ability into collaborative, interdependent, and unified action capable of addressing the most complex and intractable issues and challenges.



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The challenge for all 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders is to create environments built on mutual trust and continuous learning where participants in these “leadership-dynamics” are fully engaged, derive meaning, take ownership and responsibility for the results, and come to “do their best work” everyday.

Today at this gathering of the International Leadership Association, my goal is to challenge the congruity of the term and notion of followership to the ideas and practices of 21<sup>st</sup> Century leadership. For me the term is as limited or dare I say broken as the industrial models of leadership, in the end nothing more than the reaffirmation of yesterday’s news. We wait patiently for the leader to save us, when in reality we need to engage the challenges and save ourselves.

In its stead, I offer the term partners because from my more than 16 years of doing leadership development and involvement with such issues as crime reduction, counter terrorism, identity theft and school safety, partnership remains the Elmer’s glue that holds the diverse relationships together. It is a term that bespeaks respect for one’s ideas and knowledge and full inclusion into the decision making process. Moreover, hierarchies are in trouble, real trouble.

Consider this quote from Bill George author of True North on what I refer to as the emergence of the Super-networkers. “Their approach to leadership is entirely different . . . They don’t care about position, power or status or organizational hierarchy, or even having followers. Instead, they are superb networkers who find collaborators to create opportunities and businesses. They are on line 24/7 always networking; always in touch . . . The emerging leaders are knowledge workers who typically know more than their bosses. They collaborate with people who have skills they don’t, growing up with diversity as the norm, they understand the benefits of a diverse people working together to solve the world’s most pressing problems.” (George, 2007).

Yes I know, there are those who believe in their heart that the term leadership and followership are inseparable. One cannot exist without the other, they are in fact, the two sides of the same coin. I have great difficulty with this idea and have come to fervently reject this notion, you see the time has come to mint new coins.

Something is happening, something big, something that is causing us to see leadership more clearly than ever before. Let me give you some examples. We are coming to realize that leadership as it has been



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described has very little to do with charisma. While someone may very well be charismatic, the question is can they be trusted?

We now know, that leadership cannot be described as a particular set of traits. After more than 60 years of research we have yet to list or describe a set of traits that when found will reveal a true leader--every time.

We now know, that leadership is not a situationally induced one-minute nudge based on the willingness of the drab and powerless to move cheese or to follow on any given day. People have grown tired of being manipulated and with a notion of leadership that celebrates inconsistency and presumes perfect knowledge on the part of the leader in this complex world in which we live.

We now know, that leadership is not about empowerment. Empowerment is in reality a mask, a manipulative strategy designed to maintain the status quo of those who sit at the apex of the hierarchy. Its transformative effect has been challenged by Argyris and the use of the term rejected by Drucker.

Moreover Charles Handy, renowned as one of the world's most prominent management thinkers, tells us that empowerment is inherently a contradictory idea! If power is bestowed, it can also be withdrawn and is therefore no power at all; it is at best benevolence, at worst manipulation. An individual has power only if it is their right to keep the power or to give it away.

Instead Handy offers us the concept of subsidiarity. "Subsidiarity involves 'leaving power as close to the action as possible.' It depends on 'mutual confidence', not rules, which as often as not stand as a sign of mistrust and breed corruption. The mutual confidence on which subsidiarity is based encourages positive disagreement and argument. Subsidiarity is not like empowerment, where somebody on high has given something away. Subsidiarity is a matter of seeing to it that power is where it properly belongs, in the complex diversity that is the real world."

And we now know, that the only leader style that truly matters is one within which leaders see themselves as initiating and facilitating an interlocking network of relationships where people work together to make real change.



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In the REAL world---headlines of ongoing terrorist threats, of kids killing kids on school campuses, of people who have been ravaged by identity thieves and of businesses who are confounded by their inability to get employees to take ownership for their efforts—people cry out for effective leadership. Yet the industrial perspectives of leadership offer little or no promise of valuable action.

In a rapidly changing world where a multitude of talent must be applied to complex issues--- the 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspectives of leadership require that people come together in relationships built on mutual trust and work to create substantive change. The reasoning is simple! Leadership can be anything anyone says it is, until you have to go do something with it. Until you have to stem the tide of intractable challenges that hold you and your families' hostage in a country that values freedom and liberty above all else.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, leadership is not about the leader who resides in a state of perfect being. Instead leadership is a confluence of action where all people in the leadership dynamic find meaning from their engagement with the complex challenges of the day. And this can only be attained through the doing of life; because leadership is what people do together. Everyday life asks us for answers to its most perplexing challenges. Where do you draw the line? How shall you respond? What shall you do? In the end, the choice is yours. I encourage you to choose wisely. Thank You.

**George, Bill (2007) *Where Have All the Leaders Gone? (Part III)***

Move over, baby boomers. The emerging leaders have a different set of experiences, expectations, and rules. BusinessWeek, October 22, 2007.