

The Postmodern Condition: II. Troubling Ambiguity with Shifting Boundaries and Multiple Roles

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In his penetrating and controversial description and analysis of the postmodern world, Frederic Jameson speaks about the troubling ambiguities of the boundaries that exist in this new era. This troubling ambiguity exists at all levels—personal, group, organizational and societal. At the personal level, the postmodern world has helped to produce a sense of rootlessness—a pervasive sense of not quite belonging anywhere. One of the Tarot cards contains a portrait of the charioteer. This person carries his home on his back. He is always in transition and depends fully on the specific context in which he finds himself to determine what he believes and even who he is.

The postmodern charioteer is also without permanent holdings or tangible possessions. She may be wealthy, but her wealth is often quite transitory and based to some degree on smoke and mirrors rather than on anything one can touch and hold. The massive wealth that was made from the sale of stock in new e-commerce companies that had not even turned a profit yet—or the overnight losses in companies' value and their employees' net worth when unexpected bad news is made public—speak to this sense of impermanence, as do the many "virtual possessions" that people can now buy which are so readily disposable.

The New Company Town and Neighborhood

We find the same confusion and complexity regarding boundaries inside organizations. Probably the most dramatic instances of this blurring of boundaries are to be found in the new company towns that have sprung up in many high tech environments. Young knowledge workers seem to live-and-breathe their work in exciting, fast moving organizations. And the companies have accommodated their all-consuming passion for work by providing everything the knowledge worker needs right on site. Like the old company towns of the coal-mining era, the new company towns provide all the worldly goods.

Unlike the old company towns, however, no one is being forced to buy from the company store. Much more subtle forms of coercion are applied. We demonstrate loyalty to the company by working long hours, which in turn require (for the sake of our sanity) the simplification of life away from work. We also find our identity and sense of meaning in life and purpose in the organization; and the all-embracing company town offers a constant reminder and reinforcement of the core identity and values being proffered by the organization.

What do these company towns tell us about the diffusion of boundaries in our emerging postmodern society? First, they tell us that the traditional distinctions between work and home are crumbling. Thanks to computers, faxes and cell phones we are bringing our work home now. Thanks to the company towns, we are also bringing our home into the workplace. There is a second implication that may be of even greater importance: our workplace is becoming our new neighborhood. We find our friends at work rather than on the block where we live. We don't invite people to our home or even out for dinner. We now invite them to walk down the hall with us to the company restaurant.

New life style enclaves (to use Robert Bellah's term) are created. The company may host clubs for the lovers of chess or genealogy. Informal meetings are held inside the organization for gardening or model airplane enthusiasts. Weekend tennis, karate, scuba diving or X-game programs might be sponsored by the company. It might even support the participation of employees (during work hours) in charitable activities. The company becomes the setting for many extracurricular activities: we might even court and fall in love with our co-workers-a dangerous proposition given the potential for charges of sexual harassment.

The third implication may be even more disturbing. Work is now becoming the place where we find our own identity and sense of self-worth. One can live and breathe the organization without ever having to confront alternative realities or competing senses of self. We have both coached executives who behaved like compulsive workaholics, unable (even when their career and work conditions allowed it) to tear themselves away from the office or the computer. Sadly, deeper conversations often revealed how much more complicated and emotionally unpredictable life outside the office felt to them, and how scary. Do we stay at the office to avoid facing an unhealthy relationship, an aging parent or an exasperating ADHD child? Or is it because we spend so much time working (i.e. problem-solving) that we feel unable to handle the more subtle and patient interactions required outside the company town, especially when they won't yield (as work can) immediate visible "success"? The company town comes to our apparent rescue. It offers everything for the new knowledge worker (-at a rather substantial

though subtle price). The organization in which we work has become our community of reference and the place many of us most want to be.

Blurring of Home and Work

Even if we are not part of the new company towns, we often still don't know if we are inside or outside an organization. Given the proliferation of car phones, home computers, and home-based faxes, it is often hard to determine if we are at home, on the road or at work. Automobiles become mobile offices that are equipped with cellular phone, pager, dictation machine, laptop computer (for the traffic jam), car fax machine, and cassette player (books on tapes). Given this gadget-filled vehicle, when do I begin work each day? Is my commute a time of day when I can recollect my thoughts, make the transition from home to work, and perhaps even day dream a bit, or is this the start of my busy work day?

The automobile has even become a part of our home. We find some quality time with our children as we transport them to school, or build close friendships with the men and women with whom we car pool. The automobile becomes a setting for microwave ovens and all of those other remarkable domestic chores that we observe people do while driving-ranging from having breakfast to changing diapers to paying bills by phone, to buying gifts, to putting on their make-up or flossing their teeth.

Even when we are out of town, our motel or hotel room becomes our office-to an extent that the traveling salesman of the early 20th century could not have possibly imagined. It is a world of modems, laptops, E-mail, on-line data services, logon names, voice mail, pagers, cellular phones and Wi-Fi connections. Wired executives stay on top of their work anywhere in the world. Portable computers and telecommunication devices liberate many of us from the physical constraints of the office. Organizations (such as IBM, which helped to bring about the digital revolution) often do not even provide offices to their employees, given that these high tech men and women can just as easily work from their digitalized home offices and interact with one another independent of any physical contact. We must wonder about the long-term consequences of this newly found freedom and productivity.

On the one hand, we can individually and collectively achieve more than any generation before us in less time. We enjoy world-wide experiences, friendships and knowledge. We can test our wildest ideas, wield enormous influence, and have great fun! Our needs for achievement and challenge are more than fulfilled, and this gives us a great sense of personal satisfaction. The community we create at work is not just a substitute. It's a genuine crucible of interpersonal growth. What happens when the leader does

relax, at the end of a hard day on the road? Not many years ago, we could all relax when we finally settled into our seat on an airplane, knowing that there was little we could do other than read, sleep or jot down a few notes. Now we can bring along our portable computer and can make use of the sky-phones and cell-phones to keep in close contact with our office.

Is this a good thing? Is the edginess of the postmodern era a result of continuing confusion about what is work, what is home and what is leisure? What happens to the time that we save with our wonderful new devices? What happens to the time that we take away from our own lives and the lives of people with whom we don't work (our friends and family)? Is the appointment that we are least likely to keep the one that we have made with ourselves? Or don't we even bother to make this appointment, given all of the other demands on our time?

Implications for Leaders

Facing the challenge of providing leadership in organizations that are filled with turbulence, unpredictability and complexity, many leaders have given up on finding a coherent set of answers to the questions they pose. They certainly don't expect to discover a unified theory of leadership. Other leaders have grown cynical of any set of strategies or any theory that purports to tell them how to lead a 21st century organization. Most postmodern leaders are inclined to dismiss any prescriptive model that identifies a right and wrong way of operating. Given the nature of the postmodern condition posed in this series of essays, they turn instead to more contextually-based models that address the complex dynamics of most organizations.

Abraham Maslow was among the first to recognize that there was no one right way to lead or manage. Unfortunately, he presented this notion in an obscurely titled book, *Eupsychian Management* (later re-titled *Maslow on Management*), which received little attention. Others (such as Woodward, Fiedler and Vroom) also tried to make the point, but were either too academic or were located in an out-of-the-way place (such as England!). It really was not until the 1980s, when Hershey and Blanchard coined the term situational leadership that the notion of multiple models of successful leadership and management took hold among both the theorists and those who actually practice leadership and management on a daily basis.

At the heart of any contextual model are two concepts: ecology and relationships. The first concept relates to the relative influence which personality and situation have on the actions of all people—

particularly leaders. While traditional models of leadership tend to focus on personal attributes, such as intelligence, honesty and dedication, postmodern models recognize the powerful role played by the complex ecology in which leadership is expressed. This ecology influences not only how a leader behaves, but also how those who encounter this leader interpret her behavior. As many behaviorists have suggested, the actions of any one person is more accurately predicted if information is available about the setting in which action is taking place than if information is available regarding this person's personality or character.

In summarizing this ecological perspective, the best-selling author of *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell, states that:

Character . . . isn't what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It isn't a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits, and it only seems that way because of a glitch in the way our brains are organized. Character is more like a bundle of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstance and context. The reason that most of us seem to have a consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment.

From this ecological perspective, a leader isn't successful because of her inherent talents or personality, or even the styles and skills she has acquired during her lifetime. Rather, she is successful because she creates or moves into ecological settings that are conducive to her display of effective leadership. An ecological analysis would conclude that Jack Welch was successful in running General Electric not because of his leadership skills, strategies or perspectives, but because of the GE ecology (market trends, financial conditions, the company's life cycle, organizational culture, resources and history of the organization, and so forth). The ecologically oriented book to be written about the Welch success story would focus on the organization and surrounding environment, not just the person of Jack Welch.

In turning to the second concept, relationships, we begin with an analogy drawn by Margaret Wheatley between quantum physics and organizational functioning: "Nothing is independent of the relationships that occur. I am constantly creating the world-evoking it, not discovering it-as I participate in all its many interactions. This is a world of process, not a world of things." We are always acting as leaders in relationship to the environment in which we find ourselves. There are moments and places within an organization when specific types of leaders are needed; furthermore, each of us can provide certain kinds of leadership functions in specific moments and places.

Postmodern leadership is likely to be effective in an organization if there is a good match between the leader's needs and style at that specific moment and place and the organization's needs and style at that same moment and place. The context for leadership concerns this matching process. A leader may find, for instance, that he must be capable of and willing to shift his style when working with a relatively immature work group or with a group that is highly mature. Within this context, however, and in his working relationship with members of this group, he may help to promote their maturity, thereby necessitating yet another change in style (which may or may not fit with his own ability or willingness to shift). Similarly, the nature of a task or the processes of decision making in the organization may change. Leaders must shift gears when entering varying situations. If they are effective, however, leaders will also influence these situations. As a result, leaders may be forced to shift roles precisely because they have helped to bring about a change in context and relationships.

Given the postmodern interplay between globalization and localization, we can expect many leaders to simultaneously play on the global stage and the local stage. We can also expect them to be deeply embedded in their own organization (as a new neighborhood) while also seeking to retain a viable family and community life. The boundaries between work and home are inevitably blurred, leaving little time, in many instances, for leaders to reflect or plan ahead. These postmodern conditions confront the leader with challenges that require both courage and insight.

The vertiginous rise of professional psychological practice during the last two decades years - in its myriad variations - is a response to these challenges, both as a tool for self-development in the context of work and as a form of self-care. If leadership is situational, professional psychology is called upon to provide leadership development of the most customized and "just in-time" kind.

This set of essays is about our postmodern condition. They are meant to encourage reflection—as well as action—in their readers. This reflection and action, in turn, might finally require that each of us, as busy leaders and professional psychologists, keep that long-delayed appointment with ourselves, so that we might ponder the implications of these themes and their variations in our own life and in our vast as well as intimate communities.

