



Awakened leadership in action: a comparison of three exceptional business leaders

Joan Marques
Woodbury University, Burbank, California, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce a meta leadership style, awakened leadership (AL), as the most appropriate tool for leading organizations of every nature in the twenty-first century.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper chooses as its subject organizational leadership. The study presents results from verbal interviews carried out on the topic. It also presents: a literature review on existing leadership theories; an explanation and definition of AL; the elements that make up for AL, including a figure for illustration purposes; an overview of the performance of awakened leaders; and important issues for awakened leaders, including verbatim statements of the three interviewed leaders.

Findings – The study finds that: AL enables a positive work environment; AL is primarily relationship oriented, and through that, goal oriented; and awakened leaders perceive profits as a logical consequence rather than an initial goal.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations to the research are that the population used for data was limited, as it consisted of only three leaders who were all located in Southern California. The interview protocol had a limited number of questions, and could therefore have left important contradictions among these leaders out of the perspective. It is suggested that applying this study on broader populations would provide a greater foundation in findings.

Practical implications – There are some qualities that work in leadership all the time and everywhere, and leaders could use the pointers presented in this paper as an encouraging reflection onto their practices.

Originality/value – In these times when all leadership sources claim that successful leadership is as dispersed as the situations and natures of followers, this paper provides a refreshing viewpoint that there are unified qualities in existence that will enhance a leader's performance, regardless of the nature of the constituents.

Keywords Leadership, Leadership development, Management styles

Paper type Conceptual paper

A look at awakened leadership

In the past months I interviewed three Los Angeles-based business leaders who have earned great respect from those who work in their organizations, as well as most individuals and organizational entities that had any dealings with them through the years. These leaders are:

- (1) Richard King from King International Group, a business organization that specializes in business connections between the USA and other Pacific Rim countries.
- (2) Gary Hickman, president, Junior Achievement of Southern California.



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- (3) Russ Hanlin, recently retired president of Sunkist Growers, the world's largest citrus marketing cooperative.

Although these executives did not label themselves as “awakened leaders,” they were fully aware that their leadership style was a multi-faceted one that placed the human factor central in their decisions, while not foregoing the importance of the bottom line. The term “awakened leadership” (AL) has not been a commonly used one thus far. The author of this paper got encouraged into finding an overarching term for the multi-faceted leadership style that emerged from the examination of the interviews with these and other leaders. Yet, while they had no specific term to label their leadership style, these three leaders were all aware of the fact that their leadership involved flexibility, integrity, supportiveness, consciousness, authenticity, devotion and a high degree of relationship-orientation.

From the interviews with these three executives, some interesting findings surfaced. This paper will first present an overview of some leadership theories, styles, and characteristics that contribute toward the theory of AL. Subsequently, a definition and brief analysis of AL will be presented. Afterwards, fragments of interviews with the three earlier introduced managers will be presented, in order to demonstrate that AL is possible in practice, and that these managers are, in their practice, in line with AL.

Theories toward AL

The leadership field is a vast one, with a multiplicity of theories and styles, that all seem to target specific situations and follower groups. For the sake of clarity, and for the purpose of remaining within reasonable page length, the review of existing leadership theories and styles in this paper will be limited to those theories, styles, and characteristics, that form the basic elements of the meta-leadership style AL. The following leadership theories and styles should therefore be seen as an introduction to the theory of AL.

Situational leadership

One of the popular leadership theories is Hershey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), in which a distinction is made between task- and relationship behavior. The application of each of these behaviors is determined by the level of follower maturity. In their review of the situational leadership style, Hughes *et al.* (2002, p. 364) find that “task behaviors include telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and who is to do it”, while “relationship behaviors include listening, encouraging, facilitating, clarifying, and giving socio-emotional support” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, p. 365). Through analysis of this leadership model, Hughes *et al.* (2002) perceive some strengths and weaknesses. Some of the strengths of this style they mention are, that “this theory goes well beyond decision making” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, p. 367), and that it is “appealing to students and practitioners because of its commonsense approach as well as its ease of understanding” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, p. 367). As weaknesses Hughes *et al.*, 2002, p. 367) list that “there is little research to support the predictions of SLT in the workplace”; that “follower maturity is poorly defined” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, p. 367), and that “the model provides inadequate rationale or sufficiently specific guidance about *why* and *how* particular levels of task and

relationship behaviors correspond to each of the follower maturity levels” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, pp. 367-8).

Importance of this theory to AL. The SLT requires a high level of flexibility. This theory demands an estimation of the situation and the followers’ maturity level in order to determine the appropriate leadership style. This element of flexibility is a significant driver for AL as well.

Contingency model

Another, frequently mentioned theory is Fiedler’s Contingency Model, which, as Hughes *et al.* (2002, p. 369) state, “is often perceived by students to be almost the opposite of SLT”. These authors find that the contingency model assumes that leaders are not flexible but rather consistent in their behavior. The contingency model deduces that “some leaders may be generally more supportive and relationship-oriented, whereas others may be more concerned with task or goal accomplishment” (Hughes *et al.*, 2002, pp. 368-9).

Importance of the contingency theory to AL. The Contingency Theory supports AL in a contradictory way. While the Contingency Theory assumes that leaders can be either relationship- or task-oriented, AL assumes that leaders can be both, depending on the requirements of the situation and followers at hand. This, again, underscores the flexibility aspect that AL assumes as an ultimate necessity toward success.

Styles involved in AL

Some applicable leadership styles

As the attentive reader may have already discovered, there are not only multiple theories, but also various leadership styles in existence. Some of the leadership styles that surface into AL are: servant leadership (Greenleaf and Spears, 1977; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003), self leadership (Manz, 1983; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003), *laissez-faire* leadership (Knight and Emmett, 1999; Frittz, 2005; Canty, 2006; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003), authentic leadership (George, 2003a, b), authoritative leadership (Fullan, 2003), charismatic leadership (Northouse, 2000; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2002), team leadership (Northouse, 2000; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2002), and transformational leadership (Northouse, 2000; Pierce and Newstrom, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2002). Following is a review of the styles that are of particular importance in the application of AL.

Autocratic, laissez-faire, democratic, and servant leadership

In her essay “The gold collar leader”, Curtin (1995) lists basic leadership styles, which are incorporated in AL, each under appropriate circumstances:

- “*Autocratic* – in which the leader simply issues detailed orders and expects them to be carried out automatically” (Curtin, 1995, p. 7, italics added). Although not considered the most preferred way of leading, AL assumes the use of autocratic leadership to be appropriate in circumstances where quick decision-making and fast action are required.
- “*Laissez-faire* – in which the leader lets subordinates virtually do as they please” (Curtin, 1995, p. 7, italics added). Although not to be applied under all circumstances, the theory of AL acknowledges that there are situations (e.g.

consultancy settings and highly specialized environments), where the best results are achieved with a *laissez-faire* approach.

- “*Democratic* – in which the leader allows people to participate in decision making” (Curtin, 1995, p. 7, italics added). This might be considered a more preferred approach in AL. However, democratic leadership will – just like autocratic and *laissez-faire* – be applied when and where the situation and followers require this approach.
- *Servant leadership*. This leadership style “emphasizes the leader’s role as steward of the resources (human, financial and otherwise) provided by the organization. It encourages leaders to serve others while staying focused on achieving results in line with the organization’s values and integrity” (Wikipedia, 2006, para. 1). In the theory of AL it is assumed that leaders will assist their workforce when and where needed to achieve results and enhance morale and motivation.

Radiating through all of the theories and styles above is the theme of flexibility, which should therefore be listed as an unequivocal element of AL. One of the main assumptions of AL is that an awakened leader applies the most useful theory, style, or trait, after thorough consideration of the situation and the followers. An awakened leader will always first evaluate, the readiness, capabilities, and availability levels of followers; the circumstances at hand; and the immediate and extended environment at stake; after which he or she will determine the most appropriate style for that particular case. As stressed before, AL has this flexibility approach in common with SLT. However, AL reaches beyond SLT in that it considers all stakeholders in the largest possible sense in determining the appropriate leadership style.

Characteristics that support the performance of AL

Consciousness

One of the specific characteristics required for a successful implementation of AL is a high degree of alertness, or consciousness. In his 2001 article “The conscious leader”, Secretan explains the essence of this characteristic when he affirms, “Consciousness is being awake to the mystical and ineffable aspects of being alive. The rational mind sees a world of scarcity and responds with fear. The conscious mind sees a world of abundance and responds with love” (Secretan, 2001, p. 19).

Importance of this characteristic to AL. Alertness or consciousness, sometimes also referred to as “mindfulness,” is an important quality in maintaining awareness of the “here and now,” while, at the same time, nurturing a positive attitude toward future developments. An awakened leader should always try to adapt toward local circumstances in order to obtain higher understanding and achieve greater support from co-workers.

Drive, motivation, honesty, and more

In his 1995 compilation of leadership traits, theories, and perspectives, Wren lists Kirkpatrick and Locke’s list of traits perceived to be crucial in leadership. These traits are:

- drive;
- motivation;

- honesty and integrity;
- cognitive ability;
- knowledge of the business; and
- other traits such as charisma, creativity/originality, and flexibility (Wren, 1995, p. 135).

Importance of these qualities to AL. Although not all of these qualities can be present to the same degree in every leader, leaders who aspire to practice AL should at least focus on mastering the first five, while, of the sixth point, flexibility already counts as the foundation of this leadership style.

Emotional intelligence. Two specific skills are of tremendous value to AL: emotional intelligence, and authenticity. Goleman (1998, p. 36) explains emotional intelligence as “the ability to rein in emotional impulses, to read another’s innermost feelings and to handle relationships and conflict smoothly”. Mayer *et al.* (1999, p. 267) add to this explanation, “Emotional intelligence is involved in the capacity to perceive emotions, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information of those emotions, and manage them”.

Importance of this quality to AL. In order to obtain greater understanding of others, a leader needs to understand the self first. Awakened leaders know that there is oftentimes more said through the unspoken word, and that sensitivity toward others’ emotions is crucial in establishing meaningful and constructive relationships.

Authenticity

George (2003a, p. 6) explains authentic leadership as “driven by passion and purpose, not greed”. George (2003a, p. 6) elaborates that “there are five essential dimensions to authentic leaders: purpose, values, heart, relationships, and self-discipline”.

Importance of this quality to AL. Awakened leaders are those who refrain from parking their souls at the office door, and adopting multiple personalities. They maintain their authenticity throughout all kinds of situations, realizing that this is the least complicated (for the self) and most preferred (by others) way of being.

Figure 1 demonstrates the leadership styles and traits involved in AL.

AL as a theory

Based on extensive literature review, of which a brief excerpt was presented above, and multiple interviews with leaders in the past three years, of which three will be presented later in this paper, I came to the following definition of what I call, “awakened leadership:”

Awakened Leadership is the all-encompassing leadership approach involving, 1) the leader’s awareness to incorporate the appropriate style given the followers and the situation; 2) the leader’s capacity to sharpen the skills necessary for guiding the self, the followers, and the organization toward advancement; and 3) the leader’s ability to remain emotionally attuned to the self, the stakeholders, and the environment, thereby maintaining the highest level of authenticity possible.

To put it in simpler wording, I consider AL a way of being rather than a leadership style. However, if to be considered within the context of leadership, AL would be a meta-leadership style some kind of “situational-plus” style, whereby the leader realizes



Figure 1.
The elements of awakened
leadership

that every leadership style has its appropriateness in the right situation, and with consideration of all stakeholders.

The congruence between AL and the SLT is, that both assume that leaders should be flexible in their approach toward followers and the situation. Yet, AL adds an important third factor to its considerations: the environment at large.

AL also uses Fiedler's Contingency Model as a guide, in that it acknowledges that some leaders may be generally more supportive and relationship-oriented, whereas others may be more concerned with task or goal accomplishment. Yet, contradictory to Fiedler's assumptions, AL assumes that leaders could realize their strengths and weaknesses, and either learn to adopt elements of the opposite approach, or seek complementary leadership assistance from other parties that have a better mastery of the lacking leadership capacities.

How AL is performed

Now that the foundations for AL have been presented, it might be clarifying to review the application of this meta-leadership style. How is AL implemented in a work organization? In the following section I will present statements made by – and conclusions drawn from – interviews with Richard King, Russ Hanlin, and Gary Hickman, the three leaders I identified as practitioners of AL. As stated in the introductory part of this paper, these leaders did not label themselves as awakened leaders, because they were not familiar with the term. However, their leadership behavior and interview statements underscored many of the elements considered crucial for AL in action.

Qualities

Although it is not the intention to present the interviews with these three leaders in their entirety, it may be interesting to project some of their statements, in order to find out how they perceived themselves as leaders.

Richard King, founder and president of King International Group, stated in that regard:

Personally I am a strong believer that you can do good and do well. I tend to exert my decisions and my executive behavior in a different dimension than most executives do: a dimension that reviews more than the bottom line, but considers enhancing the quality of life. That's big criteria for me. Not being money motivated. I believe that if you are constantly focused on the quality of life and try to do things in a higher dimension the money will come automatically. I also think that I'm a business renaissance executive because I tend to be more interested in developing relationships and developing people than in a quantifiable product or service. In that context I am a giver not a taker, but a leader focused on service: a servant leader. And, finally, I do believe that every business has a responsibility far beyond the bottom line but toward all the stakeholders, and to the world in general: that we have the responsibility to take on these major issues in a business-like way. So I think I am that kind of executive that looks at the big picture; looks at the higher dimension; looks at motivating people, making them more productive by adding some meaning to the workplace. I think those are some of the reasons.

Russ Hanlin, recently retired CEO of Sunkist Growers Inc., perceived his performance as follows:

I have always had the tendency to demand of myself and my colleagues ethical business and personal practices: I arrived early, stayed late, worked diligently, knew my business thoroughly, and treated others with respect and dignity.

Gary Hickman, president of Junior Achievement of Southern California, worded his leadership style as follows:

I believe in people and want to provide those that work for me an environment of freedom to be themselves. I'm very pro-family and try to allow employees every opportunity to have balance between the workplace and their personal lives. Achieving the highest level of integrity in everything we do is paramount to my leadership style.

Listed below are some AL essentials to be extracted from the above and other statements made by these leaders:

- They believe that you can do good (to stakeholders) while doing well (in leading the organization).
- They exert their decisions and their executive behavior in a dimension that reviews more than the bottom line, but consider enhancing the quality of life as a whole. They believe that, if you do that, the revenues will come automatically.
- They are more focused on developing relationships and facilitating people than merely producing a quantifiable product or service: they consider themselves servant leaders when it comes to the people aspect.
- They understand that motivating employees does not only make these employees feel better about themselves, but also elevates their willpower toward enhanced productivity.
- They understand the importance of family and try to allow their employees every opportunity to sustain a balance between the workplace and their personal lives.

- They believe in the power of integrity as a source of community enhancement in their workplace.
- They are passionate about their work: they love what they do. Therefore, they put their hearts into it, and exude this contagious attitude toward their co-workers. They are convinced that their passion creates a bond with workers at all levels in their organizations.
- They maintain high expectations from themselves as well as their co-workers: they work hard yet keep priorities in order. This entails that they can be firm, and even tough at times, but they are also flexible and try to emphasize the positives while de-emphasizing the negatives
- They stay away from toxic situations: they will do what it takes to keep their work environment as healthy as possible, so that employees can feel spiritually motivated to attend work, and psychosomatic symptoms as a result of work related stress remain minimal.
- They believe in learning: they therefore keep themselves abreast of developments within their organization, within their industry, and within global trends; and they ensure a pro-learning mentality among their co-workers as well.
- They treat others with respect and dignity, and find that they get treated in a similar way in return.
- They understand the responsibility they have as business leaders to take on major issues pertaining to the environment, hunger, and security in a business-like way.
- Due to their above listed qualities, they have been able to hold their positions successfully and earn great respect from all stakeholders for a long time.

What matters to awakened leaders

Achievements

Reflecting on their career, and subsequently considering their most important achievements so far, these leaders painted an intriguing blend of activities.

Richard King worded his greatest achievement this way:

I think the most important achievement for me is to see that the people that I have interacted with fulfill their mission and become successful in their own right. That, I think, is my greatest achievement.

Russ Hanlin described his greatest achievement as follows:

In addition to Sunkist, several large organizations, both business and civic, have elected me to be their leader. The trust and confidence your peers invest in you when they elect you to lead an important organization is a rich compliment, which I consider to be a great achievement. Even more important than business is the pride I feel in being a successful father. My relationship with my children is wonderful. Each of them possesses admirable qualities and they lead successful lives. I am blessed to have a lengthy marriage characterized by love and respect. Finally, I love my country. I was proud to serve as a soldier. I believe we are the hope of the world.

Reviewing several decades at the helm of Junior Achievement in Southern California, Gary Hickman stated:

In 1999/2000 we had two years of operating fund deficits but we were able to come together as a team and dedicate ourselves to making certain that never happens again. The staff decided that the best proof of that would be for me to be awarded the Charles R. Hook Award. This award is the highest award given by the JA Worldwide organization to a JA Chief Staff Officer. The award is based on performance over a three-year period. I was awarded this honor at the JA Worldwide Leadership Conference in Toronto, Canada last July. My staff set this goal and then worked their tails off to achieve it. This is the greatest achievement of my 30 year career with JA.

The interesting finding about these leaders' perspective on their greatest achievements was, that none of them mentioned personal financial growth as a major milestone in their lives. The focus of these individuals was, without exception, on achievements they earned through their relationships with co-workers, mentees, family members, and other persons within and outside of the work environment. They were all proud of the recognition they earned through the years, expressed in the form of awards received in various continents, but they still seemed to find their greatest gratification in seeing those whose lives they had touched fulfill their mission and become successful in their own right

Success

Another remarkable finding from the interview with these three executives was, that none of them defined success in terms of material affluence.

Regarding his perspective on success, Richard King asserts:

I think success is the satisfaction of being fulfilled in terms of your own values: Of seeing things, business or whatever it is; to see something that rewards and reinforces your own values; your own ethics; your own morals; your own beliefs; your own convictions. I think that's it. And it has nothing to do with money. But it's that total fulfillment of who you are, what you are, what you believe in. And to see that reinforced in a practical way. I think that's what success is.

Russ Hanlin philosophically states:

There are many starting points in life. Some are privileged and some are not. I take satisfaction in looking back at both the personal and the business journey and measuring development and progress. That is an on-going process. Learning and growth are life-long endeavors.

Gary Hickman claims:

Achieving goals consistently and making a positive difference in lives of our young people is my definition of success.

As illustrated in their statements, these leaders emphasized the achievement of goals, set in personal and work-related issues, as their view of success. They clarified that success, to them, is the satisfaction of being fulfilled in terms of their own values: Of witnessing developments that reward and reinforce their own values, ethics, morals, beliefs, and convictions. In other words: the practical reinforcement of what they believe in, in those environments they care for: that was their main perception of success.

Happiness

With regards to happiness, King *et al.* also had some wakeful views. King formulated happiness for himself as:

To be around happy people. It makes me happy to see people achieve their personal goals. To take time out in my life to observe and appreciate the world around me. Listen to the birds sing and look at the flowers growing. Hear the stream rippling. Those things make me happy. There's a young boy that I held recently, who is terminally ill. Nine years old and terminally ill. And I was working with him and his parents. And the other day, when I left, this nine year old said: "Mr King, thank you so much for coming". He said: "Remember: each day is a gift. Enjoy it". And that makes me happy to be here, to be living this life; to be around great people; to see people achieve their goals. That makes me happy.

Hanlin quoted success for himself as follows:

For reasons that I cannot articulate, through good times and bad, I have always been a happy person. Even as a young boy with no real evidence to support it, I was content with myself. The emotional state of your being is somehow a combination of your natural make-up and the experiences of life. Only part of it can be explained.

Hickman, relationship-oriented as he is, stated as his source of happiness:

Watching my two sons achieve in life and watching employees grow in their career knowing that I had a hand in helping them.

These leaders, as can be concluded, referred without exception to relationships with family, friends, mentees, co-workers, and with nature, as their sources of happiness. Like in all earlier mentioned examples, none of them considered material abundance a source of happiness. Rather, they equated happiness with inner contentment.

Remembrance

A final statement that I would like to share from my interviews with these three leaders, pertains to what they would like to be remembered for.

Richard King stated it this way:

I want to be remembered as a person who put back his experiences into society. As a helper and a giver. As a person who has contributed in some small way to other people's success. And success, again, being a broader term. I like to be remembered for leading a full life. When I pass on I want people to say, "He lived life well and lived it actively" and that includes positives and negatives. And I like to be remembered for what I have done in that life, being that business bridge between Asia and America: I'd like to be remembered for that. I'd like to be remembered for the things I have done to help people in both countries understand each other.

Russ Hanlin concluded that he wanted to be remembered for the following reasons:

A loving husband and father. A patriot. A person who automatically lived by the Ten Commandments. A leader who acquired that status by earning the trust, confidence and respect of his colleagues.

Gary Hickman found it hard to come up with an immediate answer to the question regarding what he wanted to be remembered for. However, from four testimonials, which I collected after the interview, as well as through encounters with his workforce, I could conclude that Hickman is considered to be a highly relationship-oriented

individual, who gets the job done, exactly because he treats those who surround him well. This, then, will most obviously also become his legacy.

From the above, it becomes apparent that none of these leaders want to be remembered for having built an estate or having earned a fortune, but rather for having been able to contribute positively to the lives of others, whether family, co-workers, or other stakeholders in their lives. They also want to be remembered for establishing greater understanding among peoples from various continents, due to their mediation as leaders from organizations that operated among various cultures.

What we can learn from awakened leaders

Advice to other leaders

The advice these leaders had for other executives were:

- To see their responsibility in a much broader way. These leaders felt that there are still too many business executives who have a narrow vision, and do not consider the full responsibility their company has toward the societies it operates in. They reemphasized that it was eminent for contemporary leaders to consider their liability far beyond the bottom line. They called for more attention of the business leaders toward pressing global matters such as the environment, hunger, and security, because governments are unable to do that in a concerted way.
- To pay more than lip service to their relationships with their employees. It was these leaders' observation that too often leaders' walk does not measure up to their talk. Too many beautiful mission statements remain unexecuted. The here interviewed leaders stressed in that regard: "If you take good care of your people they will take good care of you and your mission".
- To be more in touch with all levels of their company, and therewith encourage a team spirit and an elevated sense of meaning, resulting in greater satisfaction, and translated in increased productivity.
- To have a corporate culture that addresses humanity as a whole (the stakeholders) rather than just the stockholders.
- To earn their leadership by executing the qualities listed above, because that would convert leadership from a mere duty to the most rewarding experience.

Three common traits

Overall, I found that these leaders had three main traits in common:

- (1) They all took pride in what they did: they loved their job, and exuded this attitude toward their environment.
- (2) They were all very relationship oriented, without losing sight of the production process or the returns on investments. Rather, by establishing a great connection with their co-workers, they managed to create a work environment of satisfied people and, consequently, optimal output.
- (3) They understood the value of earning money, but did not prioritize it over everything. Rather, they realized that earnings would be a logical consequence of the above two points: loving their job, and loving their people.

With their explanations these leaders provided the perfect illustration of what awakened leadership is all about.

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Corresponding author

Joan Marques can be contacted at: jmarques01@earthlink.net