

# The Leaderful Practice Model

An excerpt from *The Leaderful Fieldbook* by Joseph Raelin

Leaderful practice offers an alternative approach to the traditional model of leadership. Leaderful practice, as we shall discuss it, is characterized by four contrasting operating tenets known as the Four Cs. These Four Cs call on leaders to be concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate (see Figure 1.1).

The first tenet, that leaders be concurrent, stipulates that there can be more than one leader operating at the same time in an organization. Leaders willingly and naturally share power with others. Indeed, power can be increased when everyone works together. Since leaders carry a variety of responsibilities in an organization, it can be counterproductive to insist that there be only one leader operating at any one time and that this person stay in power until replaced serially by the next authority. For example, an administrative assistant who “knows the ropes” and can help people figure out who is knowledgeable about a particular function may be just as important to the group as the position leader. However, this same position leader does not “stand down” or give up his or her leadership as members of the group turn their attention to the administrative assistant. The two of them as well as many others can offer their leadership at the same time.

According to the second tenet, leaderful practice is collective. Since a group can have more than one leader operating at a time, people might operate as leaders together; in other words, leadership is a plural not just an individual phenomenon. The collective view purports that leadership does not derive from individual influence; rather it emanates from the process of people working together for a common purpose. According to this interpretation, anyone may rise to serve the group’s leadership needs. The entity is not solely dependent on one individual to mobilize action or make decisions on behalf of others. I include in this assertion the role of the position leader. This “authority” may have formal power conferred on him or her by the organization, but formal authority is not necessarily the most valuable to the operation. Decisions are made by whoever has the relevant responsibility. Leadership may thus emerge from multiple members of the organization, especially when important issues arise, such as preparing for a strategic intervention, creating meaning for the group, or proposing a change in direction. Although someone may initiate an activity, others may become involved and share leadership with the initiator.

Consider a team temporarily stymied in its attempt to solve a problem. Feeling disconsolate, members wonder if they will ever find a solution. Suddenly, some member offers an idea, perhaps not a mainstream idea, but one that has an immediate appeal and engages everyone’s imagination. Soon, others begin throwing out additional thoughts and tactics to build on the original idea. For a time, there is an almost breathless quality to the team’s functioning as it becomes absorbed in this all-encompassing solution process. The team is experiencing collective leadership; it is not dependent on any one member, not the position leader, not the idea initiator; everyone is participating. Further, the collective nature of leadership illustrated here incorporates the critical components of learning and meaning making. Team members use their conversation

to invent new ways to attack a problem and collectively make sense together from what once was a state of “not-knowing.”

The third tenet posits that leaderful practice is collaborative. All members of the organization, not just the position leader, are in control of and may speak for the entire organization. They may advocate a point of view that they believe can contribute to the common good of the organization. Although they might be assertive at times, they are equally sensitive to the views and feelings of others and consider their viewpoints to be equally valid. They thus seek to engage in a public dialogue in which they willingly open their beliefs and values to the scrutiny of others. It is through dialogue that collaborative leaders co-create the enterprise. They also understand the difference between collaborating as a pretense versus becoming fully involved. In pretentious involvement, one quickly discovers that all the critical decisions seem to be made when one is absent. Collaborative leaders realize that everyone counts—every opinion and contribution sincerely matter.

Finally, leaderful managers are compassionate. By demonstrating compassion, one extends unadulterated commitment to preserving the dignity of others. Stakeholders' views are considered before making a decision for the entire enterprise. Rather than have one key individual make decisions dispassionately for the “good of the enterprise,” each member of the organization is valued, regardless of his or her background or social standing, and all viewpoints are solicited whether or not they conform to current thought processes. In practicing compassion, leaders take the stance of a learner who sees the adaptability of the organization as dependent upon the contributions of others. Members of the organization, not necessarily the position leader, handle problems as they arise. Compassionate leaders recognize that values are intrinsically interconnected with leadership and that there is no higher value than democratic participation. The endowment of participation extends to the wider organization affected by the actions of a given stakeholder. If building a new corporate complex will affect the existing ecology or serenity of a neighboring property, the compassionate leader includes the neighbors in deliberations concerning the construction.

So, we have the ingredients for establishing a leaderful culture within the organization. Unfortunately, leaderful practice has not appeared in most Western cultures as the default option in exhibiting leadership. The individual heroic model still persists as the dominant approach. Consider a case, initially recounted by Dr. Richard Boyer<sup>1</sup>, of a hospital unit team. The members, having put up with a heavy-handed supervisor for fifteen years, got a chance to try out a self-directed approach when the supervisor left the hospital. They chose as their team leader someone who had highly developed interpersonal skills and who was considered to be a much kinder and gentler person. Originally, the team was excited about performing some of the administrative functions that had previously been handled by the former manager. The new team leader and the staff now worked alongside each other sharing administrative responsibilities. Over time, however, the team members began to push a lot of the shared responsibilities back onto the team leader. They reverted to their old ways and began to insist that the new team leader take on many of the responsibilities of the former manager. What happened to the self-directed team concept?

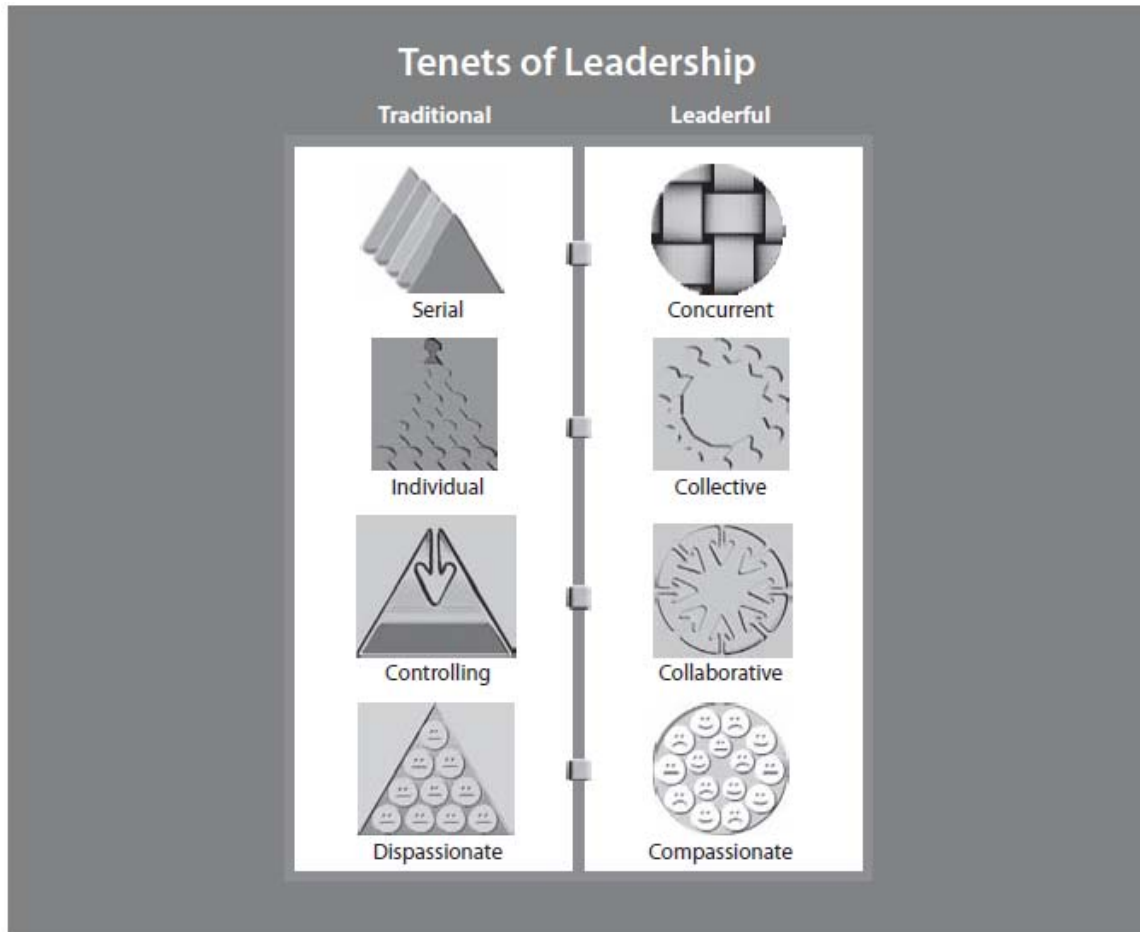
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<sup>1</sup> See the full case in M. Duncan Fisher and K. Fisher, “Leadership on Self-Managing Teams,” *At Work*, May/June, 1998.

The case brings up the challenge of introducing leaderful practice when people and institutions aren't ready for it. Individuals and communities are not always standing by, primed to assume leaderful behavior. They need to evolve both an appreciation for and an ability to adopt leaderful practice. Although I advocate that individuals and institutions adopt a leaderful approach, I recognize that communities cannot become leaderful overnight.

Consequently, institutional change needs to be mobilized by internal or external change agents who can encourage the endorsement of a culture of learning and participation within the system in question. Change agency, in turn, needs to occur at multiple levels of experience: individual, interpersonal, team, organization, and network. Although members of a team or institution may be at a stage of readiness to assume leaderful properties, they may not choose to act without some provocation by those bold enough to take action. So in some instances, the change agent may only need to nudge others to act on their own and collectively; in other cases, the agent may need to mobilize a more dramatic change in outlook and behavior.

Figure I.1  
The Four C's of Leaderful Practice\*



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