

# Leadership for a VUCA World – Part I

A TIME WHOSE IDEA HAS COME

MICHAEL HAMMAN

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## Introduction

I often find myself reluctant to use the term “leadership”; the word has such a deeply “calcified” meaning frame, that to break free of the power of its legacy seems impossible. The moment one says the word “leadership”, a set of common-sense, culturally-defined, meanings are immediately activated.

In this article I want to propose a new way of thinking about and exercising leadership that is not bound by those meanings—to articulate a way of understanding leadership that is, I will assert, a better fit for the 21st century paradigm we find ourselves in. Toward this end, I will make two major moves.

First, I want to differentiate two models of leadership. The first one—one which predominates in, and determines, our current culture—subscribes to a Newtonian/Cartesian worldview which, perhaps valid at a previous moment in history, is now insufficient to meet the circumstantial challenges (and *meta*-challenges) we face today, whether in organizations or globally.

I contrast this with a new model of leadership—one which subscribes to what I call a “Quantum/Complexity” model—a model of leadership which, I assert, provides a more adequate frame for a 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Second, I want to make a case that the primary work of leadership—distinguished in terms of this new model—is to facilitate the emergence of human capability. Specifically, that human capability needed to respond to the current conditions and circumstantial challenges we all face, in ways that are at once generative, holistic, and systemically informed. Ultimately, this means that people come to be able to think and act with the complexity of mind needed to deal with the challenges and problems we face today.

Note (perhaps, of warning?) that this article does not provide any easy answers or quick tips on agile leadership. We’ve all tried those and most of us know that they are of limited value. Instead, this article will challenge the reader to think a bit more deeply. It is hoped that through such a thinking, the reader experiences an alteration in the way in which s/he looks at leadership.

This article is Part I of a two-part series; it provides but a small slice of a larger body of work, which you can learn more about by visiting [evolvagility.com](http://evolvagility.com).

## Two Orienting Models of Leadership

We begin by differentiating two models of leadership. In doing so, I want to be clear what I mean by “model”, and what I don’t mean. What I *don’t* mean by “model” is a structure by which a specific arrangement of interrelated ideas is consciously assembled and organized. Nor do I mean by “model” something we can draw on a whiteboard, or put in a PowerPoint slide.

What I *do* mean by “model” is more like a *mental model*: a cognitive frame that orients how we understand some aspect of our world. Such a notion of “model” is one we may not even be consciously aware of, and yet its cognitively organizing principles are ever at work whenever we function in that piece of the world where that mental model is operative.

In this paper, we are referring to the orienting mental model we associate with that phenomenon we call “leadership”.

With this in mind, I want to articulate and differentiate two orienting (mental) models for leadership.

### A Newtonian/Cartesian Model of Leadership

The first I will call Newtonian/Cartesian. The Newtonian/Cartesian model is one that dominates our collectively-held world view, more generally, and as it relates to our colloquially understood model of leadership.

The Newtonian/Cartesian worldview is one that assumes a dualism of mind and body, where the mind is non-physical, and the body is physical, and, action is a product of mind—a psychological/physiological worldview of human action.<sup>1</sup>

This is a worldview that sees the world as a large and very complicated clockwork. One whose secrets can only be fathomed through logic and scientific investigation. One in which there is a singular right way of seeing things, and that it is the job of primarily scientific investigation to fathom its inherent, and largely static features. A world composed of isolated objects and entities separate from one another. A world in which cause and effect are linearly connected and irreversible.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Erhard, Michael C. Jensen, The Barbados Group, “A New Paradigm of Individual, Group, and Organizational Performance. Harvard Business School NOM Unit Working Paper No. 11-006, May 30, 2002. Retrieved July 30, 2022 from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1437027](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1437027).

When there is something we don't understand, it is axiomatic that we can find out more through more observing, more analysis, more and better measurements. Meanwhile, human selves are understood as separate, agential entities, with inner qualities that can be similarly studied, analyzed, and measured.

This is not a worldview that we necessarily reflect on: it is not a worldview that we consciously *have*—rather, it is a worldview that *has* us.

The entire edifice of the western world, and of modernity more generally, enshrines this world view. It informs every aspect of our daily lives: our universities, our legal systems, our technologies, our professional certifications and degrees, and even the way we see our own minds. It is enshrined in our very language, down to its minute grammatical structures. We, as human beings, are like fish in water—there is no place we can go, no pattern of action we engage in, that is not immersed in this worldview.

And while other, alternative models are at work within certain, rather specialized fields (such as quantum mechanics, postmodern philosophy, certain branches of mathematics, astronomy, and neuroscience), the Newtonian/Cartesian model remains the mental space in which we predominantly dwell (e.g. the arguments postmodernists have at home with their spouses, and the means by which many pursue their academic careers, still reflect embeddedness in the Newtonian/Cartesian worldview).

How does this worldview express itself in the domain of *leadership*?

You could say there are essentially four foundational ideas that are at the heart of how we understand leadership, within the context of the Newtonian/Cartesian model:

1. Leadership is constituted in terms of specific “traits”;
2. Leadership is an “individual” capability;
3. Leadership is understood in terms of *leaders* (“*rulers*”) and *followers*;
4. “Action speaks louder than words”.

Let's briefly look at each of these....

**Leadership is constituted in terms of specific “traits”.** The first main idea defines leadership in terms of specific **traits**. These are qualities, abilities, and attitudes which some leaders have and some don't. For instance, we might say of one leader that she is “assertive” and that's what makes her an effective (or, depending on your own perspective, *ineffective*) leader, while we might say of another that he is “humble” and that's what makes him an effective (or ineffective) leader.

Traits are typically *culturally laden*. That is, they reflect particular cultural values. In some cultural *milieux*, we might value traits such as “gentle”, “facilitative”, and “emotionally disclosive” while in others we might value more traits such as “forceful”, “decisive”, and “confident”.

It is common to measure leaders—either formally or informally—against some set of traits deemed valuable or important within a particular *cultural milieu*. Leadership “development” programs tend to orient themselves around growing particular traits in leaders within a given organization according to a particular cultural value orientation.

**Leadership is an “individual” capability.** Related to the notion of a “traits”-based leadership is the notion that leadership is an inherently **individual** phenomenon. When we speak of “leadership” as it applies to people, we almost automatically think of it in terms of *individual* leaders. We look to *individuals* for “leadership”. We send *individuals* to leadership training programs. Leadership profiles and assessments are performed in relation to *individual* leaders.

And, while we might speak about a “leadership culture”, we still tend to see the *manifestation* of such a culture in individual leaders. It would sound strange to our ear, for instance, to say something like “we looked to servant leadership culture for direction”, for instance. Yes, we could bend things around so that the sense of such an articulation could be rendered plausible. But, if we want to know where people’s heads are at (including ourselves), listen to what comes right off the tip of their tongues.

By the way, I want to say that I’m not suggesting there is anything inherently wrong with this perspective—or *any* perspective that is a product of the Newtonian/Cartesian model. I’m simply saying that, in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century VUCA life, it is a perspective that has limitations in terms of its capacity to adequately address the challenges we find in such a life.

**Leadership is understood in terms of *leaders (“rulers”)* and *followers*.** This is an aspect of the current model of leadership that relates to deeply psychological notions of authority and power. And while we may not like to admit it (especially those of us who espouse notions of equality and non-hierarchy), the truth is that, for the most part, when we hear the word “leader”, our minds almost immediately jump to someone in a position of power and authority, with all of the psychological associations that conjures. (By the way, if you’re not quite sure about this for yourself, you might ask yourself how comfortable you are speaking authoritatively—e.g. with assertive confidence—with a senior executive in a company you work for.)

Of course, this property is enshrined in the way our social institutions are constituted—those in the role of “leaders” typically *do* have power which others

don't have. But the existence of a particular social structure which confers power to particular individuals is actually the point: as human beings, we are drawn (subconsciously and otherwise) to establishing power hierarchies around us. Power and authority is fundamental to the very fabric of our psyche and culture, and is as such a key element of the current model of leadership—one that is particularly hard to break free of.

Once again, I want to reiterate that there is nothing inherently *wrong* here: I'm not trying to make a case for "non-hierarchy" in human systems. I'm simply pointing to the automaticity with which we categorize things, and how our autonomic categorizing of "leaders" as authority figures makes it hard for us to envision a different possibility for leadership more generally.

**The notion that "action speaks louder than words".** This is reflected in the fairly common phrase that goes something like this: "Enough talk, let's move to action". It is a way of seeing leadership as inherently action-oriented—a way of seeing leaders as "doers", as "decisive", while viewing discussion, dialog and conversation as that which we might tolerate in small doses, but only insofar as it helps us get to a decision and on to action.

Ok, so having briefly established a basis for understanding the current model of leadership, let's look at an alternative model, one that is radically different from the current one, but which is gaining increasing traction in the world of leadership theory and leader development (though it is still treated with laggardly disinterest within most of today's organizations).

## The Quantum/Complexity Model

It seems to be axiomatic that the leading edge of philosophy and science (and art) are almost always 100-200 years ahead of where the collective mind of the general population is. Quantum and complexity models have been around for nearly 100 years. And yet, we are only just now catching up, in terms of bringing "applied" fields such as "leadership" up to speed with this emerging worldview.

To briefly say what I would want to say about the Quantum/Complexity model and worldview.... Basically, this is a model of the world that sees mind and matter as inherently *inseparable*. It is a view that understands social life as socially constructed (as the philosopher Richard Rorty once said (which I'm paraphrasing): "where there are sentences there is socially constructed truth"), and can accept the notion that how we make sense of the world, to a large degree, determines that world.

It is a worldview that sees the deep interconnection of all things: that we all exist in a complex meta-systemic web of interaction and collectivity. It is a worldview that comprehends the complex and dialectical nature of reality: rather than one

large piece of clockwork, the universe is an ever-evolving, ever-emerging, ever-unfolding that is at once this thing and its opposite. It is a universe that is, quite literally, beyond logical comprehension.

This is a worldview that sees cause and effect not as linearly causal (as the Newtonian/Cartesian model would see it), but as circular. Meanwhile, time is bound by the nature of space, which itself has a tendency to bend, doing so differently depending on where in the universe we are, and what instruments you use to observe it.

Unlike the Newtonian/Cartesian model, this new model is not one that we have yet internalized: our minds have not yet come to be owned and operated by this model in the manner that it has come to be owned and operated by the Newtonian/Cartesian worldview. And yet, the world conditions we find ourselves in are increasingly of a quality that the older (though currently prominent) worldview can no longer account for—they envisage elements of a new world order that are increasingly congruent with a Quantum/Complexity worldview.

And, while many scientists use Quantum and Complexity theory to look at the physical universe, we have yet to use it, more generally, to *look at ourselves*. It's as though our social institutions, forms, structures, and designs are running on a very old operating system. We can still run those institutions, forms and structures as such, and it may even seem as though they are functioning. But, in fact they are not. We can see evidence of the breakdown, not merely of our social institutions, structures, and designs everywhere we look, but of the deeper, underlying social and cultural edifices on which they are built.

We need to upgrade that operating system. And the only place we can do that is in our own minds, both individually and collectively.

One of the ways in which we might upgrade that operating system in our minds, is to upgrade the practices we engage in within the social sphere, as well as the distinctions and concepts that inform those practices. This notion will take on increasing significance in terms of where we're going in this article.

There's one last thing I want to say before we proceed.... Just as quantum physics doesn't nullify classical (Newtonian) physics—and just as modern models of the mind don't cancel out the Cartesian model of the mind—so too is it that the new model of leadership I'm proposing here doesn't cancel out the old one. It's more like we're bringing in an additional dimensional wing to bring about a broader, more systemically complete way of thinking about leadership.

So, we want to orient ourselves around this new model as it relates to leadership. And, just as we were able to articulate four notions of leadership which reflect

key aspects of the Newtonian/Cartesian model, so too will I propose four notions which reflect key aspects of the Quantum/Complexity worldview. These are 4

1. Leadership as *emergent*;
2. Leadership as an *everywhere* phenomenon;
3. Leadership as *co-created*;
4. “Words *are* actions”—i.e. leadership arises in *sensemaking* .

Let’s briefly look at each of these.

**Leadership as *emergent*.** One way we might characterize leadership within the context of this new worldview is that it is *emergent*. That is, it arises in the moment when it's specifically called for; whenever some new possibility, some new potential presents itself. All-too-often, particularly in a VUCA world, possibility and potential are not seen as such—usually they are either seen as “problems”, or they are simply not seen at all.

This is where leadership, as a moment of sensemaking (we’ll come to that in a minute), comes in. Through reframing (or perspective-bending), it transmutes what might currently be experienced as a problem into something that presents itself—sometimes quite suddenly—as a new *possibility*; a new way of seeing the world, a new quality of awareness. When such a new realm of possibility opens up, new potentials for action, for partnership, for collaboration, for collective sensemaking opens up where things were once closed.

Again, we’ll say more about the sensemaking aspect in a moment—the point here is that such a moment of leadership cannot be planned or even anticipated. It arises when the moment calls for it. Such moments can either be relatively large (e.g. a breakthrough in medical science) or relatively small (e.g. we as a team resolved an interpersonal struggle that has plagued us for the last month).

Let’s consider an example. Imagine a team that is having a hard time dealing with conflict. They are currently stuck: their capacity for action is stunted by their inability to withstand the heat of conflict.

But then, at some point, one team member—we’ll call her Pam—makes a courageous move: she admits to the team that she has been harboring a grudge against another team member—Carl—and that this grudge results in her feeling impatient and resentful, degrading the quality of their interactions and collaboration—a degradation that infects the rest of the team in ways that are subtle and hard to even notice.

Pam’s admission opens up a conversation between the two—Pam and Carl—in which Carl himself admits to being overly accommodating toward her out of

deference to the resentment he feels in Pam. That mode of accommodating further irritates Pam, and a vicious cycle ensues.

This dual admission has the effect of “clearing the air”; it quite literally shifts the emotional energy of the team, making possible other admissions and further openings. That initiating move by Pam helped this team move to a new place: other disclosive admissions became possible, which further opened up the space within the team. Pam’s initiating move helped that team to become a fuller, more capable version of itself—it helped the team to *evolve*.

This initiating move by Pam, I assert, ignited a social unfolding. And though it was Pam’s initiating move that ignited the process, it was in this *unfolding itself* where the leadership, as an emergent quality, arose.

This is a radical notion that is not so easy to grasp, so I’m pausing for a moment to reflect on this. From a more ordinary interpretive perspective, you could say that Pam’s move *was* leadership. And this wouldn’t be wrong, necessarily. But it misses a subtle aspect of what happened after Pam’s initiating move—the co-created unfolding of a series of similar moves by others on the team. That series of moves built upon Pam’s move, and from there completed the unfolding toward a new possibility for that team: the possibility of being able to manage conflict.

This leads quite naturally to another key notion of this model of leadership.

**Leadership as an *everywhere* phenomenon.** As I just now articulated, the new leadership is one that is *emergent*: it reflects an aspect of the system that wants to evolve, that wants to move toward greater capability and complexity. The particular initiatory move in the above example was made by a specific individual. However, that doesn’t mean that the next such move would necessarily be made by *that* person. There may be other moves, in the face of other aspects of that team’s circumstantial environment, that are called for, which may be fulfilled by other team members, in other ways.

The same could be said of teams and systems elsewhere across a given organization. At any time, there may arise a possibility for a given system to evolve toward a greater complexity—a moment which presents itself, initially, as a challenge, as something that is hard for that system, as a block, a limitation.

At such a time, a moment of leadership—defined along the lines we’re articulating here—is called for. And, in that moment, this or that person may step forward to fulfill the need presented at that time. Not someone from outside of the system—a manager or even a “coach”—who is obliged by the call of their position to act on that system’s behalf. But rather, someone who has real skin in the game—some individual within the system who is called to act leaderfully.

Leadership, seen in this way, is an *everywhere* phenomenon: it is realized when individuals everywhere, at all levels and in all kinds of roles, take responsibility for their world and are willing to influence others in creating that world. In this sense, you could say that the new leadership belongs to the *system* at least as much as it belongs to the individual who exercises it at this or that moment.

(A parenthetical aside: I want to be clear that none of this cancels out the more traditional *hierarchical* model of leadership. In fact, we still need organizationally sanctioned leadership roles—and the power conferred upon those roles—to fill out a more complete leadership culture. In fact, a big part of the role of the positional leader and manager is to cultivate organizational ecosystems that bring about the developmental conditions in which this new model of leadership can be realized and fulfilled.)

**Leadership is co-created.** In his recent work on leadership-as-practice, Joe Raelin envisions leadership as co-created *practice*. So, on the one hand the new model I'm putting forth here proposes a notion of leadership that is at once *emergent* and *systemic* (an “everywhere” phenomenon), while at the same time proposing a notion of leadership that happens through co-created practice and activity.

Let me give an example of what I mean by *co-creation*. Recently, I gave a talk at a conference on leadership and realized that while it was me standing in front of an audience doing all of the talking, there was a difference in how things unfolded when I could see that the audience was in fact co-creating my leadership with me, as opposed to when I viewed it as a one-way move of *me* directing *them*.

Coming from the former perspective, I saw that my job was ultimately to be in relationship with the audience—to pay close attention to their listening, checking in frequently, feeling the energy and energetically (and emotionally) responding to that energy. At some point, it occurred to me that the audience was *leading me* as much as I was leading the audience.

This was a really powerful realization; it allowed me to see that when we can view leadership as co-created, leaderful emergence is empowered and enabled in a natural and naturally *human* manner. Leadership becomes at once a form of interpersonal dialog and a form of collective action and intention.

Going back to the above example with the team.... As I intimated above, when Pam confessed to holding a grudge toward Carl, that admission initiated moments that were *co-created*. The leadership impact only worked when Carl responded with his own admission. That impact, in turn, was amplified when other team members began to step in themselves with their own admissions, inspired to do so by the move which Pam (and then Carl) made. Had Pam's initial leadership move of admission not elicited any response from Carl, I would argue,

there would have been very little in the way of leadership manifested—however much it may have been intended.

**Words *are* actions—i.e. leadership arises in *sensemaking*.** In the current model, leadership relates to itself in terms of its “action”. It is only interested in “words”—and in the dialogical and conversational activities whose currency is language—to the degree that they lead to “action.”

This kind of means/ends relationship to leadership, and to human activity more generally, is emblematic of the Newtonian/Cartesian worldview. It says, basically, that the *means* are always defined in terms of the *ends*—that the goal determines the activity—that, somewhat perversely, the ends “justify the means.”

In the new model of leadership, you could almost reverse this: that the *ends* are defined in terms of the *means*. That the words we use, the linguistic and dialogical activities we engage in, and the underlying (often hidden) assumptions which inform those activities, themselves are key to the results we generate.

In this article—and in the work I do more generally—the word I give to this dimension of human activity is “sensemaking”.

Most simply, “sensemaking” is the process by which people give meaning to their experiences. To say it somewhat more precisely, it is the activity by which people transmute ambiguous & confusing events into new possibilities for impactful action and inspired outcomes.

Such an activity has an *overt* part—e.g. the conversations, agreements, and interactions by which we understand, align, and commit to something.

But it also has a *hidden* part. These are the unseen assumptions, beliefs and theories which determine how we understand our world, ourselves, and each other.

Sensemaking is a key element of this new model of leadership, and I will take a moment to say more about it.

But first, I want to bring together these four pieces into what might serve as a quasi “definition” of leadership for a VUCA world (This could only make sense after having read the previous pages.):

Leadership in a VUCA world is an emergent quality of human activity that catalyzes new possibilities for action and impact that would not otherwise happen.

This catalyzing activity starts with the introjection of an initiating action (e.g. Pam in the example above) that in some way disrupts a predominant sensemaking orthodoxy. This initiating action, in turn, ignites a series of similarly disruptive actions (e.g. Carl in the above example, followed by others on the team), each of which builds on that initiating action in order to bring about a new quality of sensemaking (e.g. the quality of ‘openness’ that arises when people on the team disclosed what they’ve been keeping secret, as depicted in the above example).

Such a new quality of sensemaking opens up new possibilities for action and impact that would not otherwise have opened up. The result is a transformation in a given system’s capacity for effective action.

Notice that leadership happens throughout the unfolding of the *overall movement*, not “in” a single individual, not by virtue of any particular “trait”, and not by virtue of one person “telling” another to do something. Such an unfolding may be *initiated* by a particular individual (e.g. Pam): but neither is that individual “assigned” the leadership role ahead of time; nor does the movement of leadership belong solely to her. Rather, it is a co-created activity that belongs as much to the system as it does to this or that individual.

This is probably not perfect, but it is a step along the way. It’s good enough for now.

Ok. So now let’s turn toward a deeper dive into the nature of this thing we’re calling sensemaking and to the key leadership activity I call *deliberate sensemaking*.

## *Deliberate Sensemaking*

In the new model of leadership, sensemaking takes center stage: The actions we generate and the results those actions produce are understood as inseparable from the conversations, agreements and interactions—as well as the underlying assumptions, beliefs & theories--from which those actions and results arise.

As such, leadership happens when someone initiates a move—whether in terms of conversation or action—that “points the way,” to paraphrase Peter Senge, toward a new, more powerful, more complex, more generative form of sensemaking. Such a move will inevitably either break the mold of a current sensemaking orthodoxy; or it will bring awareness and scrutiny to a current sensemaking orthodoxy and to the poverty of the kinds of possibilities it is capable of generating.

Either way, such a move transforms the sensemaking landscape, empowering and enabling people toward radically new action and outcomes.

I've given a name to such a move: I call it *deliberate sensemaking*. It is “deliberate” in the sense that it intentionally reveals some aspect of our current, orthodox sensemaking—of which we are ordinarily unaware—in order to generate sensemaking categories and practices that are more capable in the face of the complexity of the situations in front us. To the degree we foreground an aspect of our current, orthodox sensemaking that otherwise lives in the background, we create new possibilities for deliberate action that would simply not be possible otherwise.

I consider the activation of a moment of *deliberate sensemaking* to be a genuine leadership move, within the context of a Quantum/Complexity model of leadership. When Pam disclosed her grudge with Carl to the team (as opposed, by the way, to her doing so in a private 1-on-1 with Carl), she initiated a move that had the potential of helping the team to evolve to a new level of overall capability. That she also made this move in a co-creative manner (as opposed to being unilateral—e.g. “blaming” Carl) generated a powerful moment of *deliberate sensemaking*, moving the team's sensemaking practice beyond the realm of orthodoxy. In so doing, she helped the team move into a new possibility for disclosive interaction and, from there, a new level of performance more generally.

This all happened without the need for formal leadership, without the need of formal “intervention”. It happened when someone was willing to take a risk, and to exercise some degree of what I would call sensemaking *intelligence*.

Sensemaking forms the very medium in which leadership in a VUCA world can happen. In Part II of this series, we will take a deeper dive into the parameters which define sensemaking, and explore the specific qualities that distinguish *deliberate sensemaking*. Then, we will reveal the design elements that, when brought together, form the environment that is necessary for the emergence of this thing we're calling *deliberate sensemaking*.