Essay Title

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**Abstract**

Good leadership that can sustain organizations through a changing and shifting environment requires self-awareness. However, self-awareness is much more than simply finding a reflection that provides honest feedback. History is replete with leadership presented with truth, and then acting on that truth in an effective and/or immoral manner. The only clear solution is to listen quietly to the small, still voice and then to reflect on what it means for the organization’s future. It may take a meek heart and mind to hear the still, quiet voice, otherwise, our own pomposity wrapped up in our proud distinctions can get in the way of hearing the Mirror, “which does not lie.”

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**Introduction**

The Brothers Grimm fairy tale is well known. In Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the Queen of the land keeps a special mirror in her chambers. Her vanity is so great that when she asks, “Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of them all?” she expects that the Mirror will respond with “My queen, you are the fairest in the land.” The Mirror, of course, never lies. But one day, the Mirror responds that Snow White is the fairest of them all and in jealous anger, the Queen hatches a plan to kill Snow White (Disney & Hand, 1937). Beyond the morality lesson of the dangers of vanity, the deeper lesson for leaders is represented by the Mirror.

We are surrounded by mirrors in our every day lives. We look into them to ensure that we are presentable for our jobs, friends, loved ones, or simply to go out into the public eye. While taking thought regarding personal appearance is a part of self-esteem, excessive self-admiration is vain. More importantly, the mirrors we need are the ones that do not lie. If your hair is not combed or a button is missing, the mirror must tell you. Identifying this mirror of truth is a first step towards sustainable good leadership in complex systems comprised of people.

What the mirror will not tell you is how you should act. For leaders and those aspiring to be a leader, mirrors can significantly hamper your ability to lead others effectively in change activities. Scharmer (2015) calls these mirrors a blind spot, “the place within or around us where our attention and intention originate” (p. 6). For the evil Queen of Snow White, this was the Mirror; for the rest of us, it is something else that represents our personal mirror. Finding that representation poses a difficult challenge because leaders can deceive themselves into believing that they have a good grasp of their own “blind spot,” because the mirror doesn’t lie; when in fact, it is the ineffective and/or unethical decision and action taken from what the mirror tells us that represents the true understanding of the blind spot (Kellerman, 2005). Therefore, leaders must first identify their own mirror and then understand that, while it is important for the mirror to tell the truth, it is even more important to decide and act effectively and ethically to what the mirror is saying.

**Finding the Mirror**

Self-awareness is fundamental in leadership at any level. The adage by Aristotle is “know thyself.” Easy to quote but hard to accomplish in practice: finding one’s mirror is a challenge. It must tell the truth and only the truth; it cannot lie. Even the Queen’s Mirror could not lie; it was not telling the Queen what it believed that she wanted to hear; it was telling the truth. Bolman & Deal (2008) discuss human resource leaders that are visible and accessible and that spend time with workers and managers. Mirvis & Ayas (2008) offer spiritual development for leaders where the mirror is deep within themselves and where journeys of self-discovery allow the emergence of the true reflection of self. Allio (2007) offers advice ranging from listening to the views of others to increased self-awareness. These all represent mirrors that can reflect an image back to the leader. Finally, there is even corporate advice from Batstone (2008) that urges business leaders to seek their mirror in brand reputation: integrity and principle lead to a corporate soul and possession of one is a clear path to good leadership.

These authors have provided a wide range of excellent advice on leadership. Leaders need to seek mirrors to reflect an image that is truthful. Therein lies the rub: how do we know whether our selected mirror is telling the truth or is only partially truthful? How can we determine if there is a warp in the reflection? A spiritual journey of self-discovery sounds lovely; but it is not necessarily connected to the reality of where one must lead. It can tell you about yourself, but only in the context of the place where you are self-discovering. Listening to the views of others is great advice and can provide a useful mirror to a leader; unless the views of others are self-serving, competitive with each other, or worse, sycophantic. Scharmer (2015) emphasizes the need to have an open heart to truly understand the perspective of others, but this is a skill that few have. The dangers of self-deception are even greater, as shown by the old grade school game of “telephone” where students sit in a circle and whisper a message to one another. By the time it gets back to the originator, the message has been changed and altered so much that it is barely recognizable. People—leaders especially—hear what they think they hear as opposed to hearing what is really said. The Mirror of Listening, therefore, may not be lying, but it may not be telling the whole truth. Even a journey of spiritual self-discovery can be deceiving: no one can fool ourselves like ourselves. As Barbara Tuchman (1984) offers in her classic The March of Folly: “Although the structure of human thought is based on logical procedure from premise to conclusion, it is not proof against the frailties and the passions” (p. 380).

Leaders must seek mirrors to inform them of truth; we all need a Mirror that “does not lie.” Yet finding one that speaks truth remains elusive for many leaders, and it is hard to determine the blind spot - the place within us where intentions originate (Scharmer, 2015), if we lack the ability (or willingness) to determine if our own mirrors are warped or true.

**The Mirror Speaks Truth: Now What?**

Rejecting a truth in favor of one’s own ambitions and desires is the greatest pitfall of any leader. As the Queen discovered, Snow White was the one fairest of them all – and the Mirror did not lie - Truth. Her next actions, while exposing her immoral and unethical character, also demonstrated her lack of presencing which prevented her from creating a new future (Scharmer, 2015). Snow White represented the future, as informed by the Mirror, and rather than seek to understand, learn, and embrace this new future, the Queen attempted to destroy it in favor of the status quo where she continued to reign supreme. She ended up destroying herself (Disney & Hand, 1937). While much of our daily work is not near as dramatic as this, there are plenty of places to see where “truth” from a good mirror does not necessarily lead to good decisions and actions by the leader. A great example of this is provided by Gallos (2008) in her example of how Robert Wood, second in charge at Montgomery Ward in the 1920s, provided a mirror to his boss depicting population shifts from rural to urban areas. This meant that the Mirror was informing Montgomery Ward that “the one fairest of all” would no longer be found in the catalog business. Wood’s boss rejected this and Wood took his Mirror to Sears instead. If finding a mirror that does not lie is at the heart of self-awareness, then the second part of the leadership journey is to correctly decide what to do with that truth.

Scharmer (2015) provides a conceptual roadmap that can discipline a leader’s mind to visualize how to understand the changing environment, identify the goal, and visualize how to move the changing environment more positively towards the goal. This is different from leaders “solving” a problem: Wood recognized that there were no problems to solve within the census data of 1920 – it was simply a mirror of truth. Instead, he recognized the goal of the business and, simply attempted to move the current system of Montgomery Ward customers, competitors, suppliers, and distributors into a better position – the emerging future demanded it (Gallos, 2008).

This idea of looking past problems is difficult for leadership. Leaders, after all, affect positive change (Gallos, 2008). But change does not mean that the problem was solved or that there was even a problem to solve. Change represents simply moving the current situation into a better position regarding the future. This can only be done by finding and listening to a good Mirror that speaks truth; and disciplining the mind on what to do with what the mirror has informed you. If Snow White is the one “fairest of them all,” then what should that mean for the system regarding the future? The Queen rejected the future in favor of the past, as did the CEO of Montgomery Ward.

**Relevance in Present Role**

All of us can either listen to the mirror of truth or be a mirror of truth to someone else. In my work within the education field, I am not in a position of leadership. I am, however, in the position of being a truthful mirror. This recognizes the distinguished words delivered to the Naval War College convocation of 1903, by Stephen B. Luce, the founder of the U.S. Naval War College:

All that the College can do; all that it professes to do, is to invite officers to come to it; and to offer them every facility for pursuing the study of the highest branches of their profession. All here, faculty and class alike, occupy the same plane, without distinction of age, rank, or assumption of superior attainments. All are pursuing one and the same end-the advancement of their profession (Hayes & Hattendorf, p. 37).

This shared vision allows two things: truthful mirrors and common goals. Without either, Luce’s vision of academic advancement of a profession cannot be positively affected. The challenge, of course, is that the War College has many students, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders that do not feel that they occupy the same plane without distinction: this is a warped mirror. A full professor is proud of her rank – and rightly so. Yet setting these distinctions aside to recognize what the mirror is presenting is difficult, as Scharmer (2015) himself describes in Theory U. The Queen of Snow White could not do it and attempted to destroy the future in favor of a past where her distinction remained inviolate. Is it possible for persons of distinction to set these distinctions aside? I am not so sure. While critiquing the Julius Caesars and Douglas MacArthurs of history, we continue to act as if we wish we were them. Cecile B. DeMille portrayed Moses as a thundering, impressive leader who delivered God’s pronouncements and judgements and who faced down the Pharaoh of Egypt (DeMille, 1957). Yet the Old Testament describes Moses as “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3 KJV). We look at the accomplishments of leaders and assume that they must be impressive to lead; we overlook that meekness can affect change, and sustain it, better than thundering proclamations. Perhaps this is best illustrated by Ulysses S. Grant, Commander of the victorious Union Armies and later, the 18th President of the United States. Upon being summoned to Washington, D.C. by President Lincoln in the early spring of 1864, he checked into the hotel with his young son. No one – not the clerk, the people in the lobby, or anyone on the street recognized Grant (who had dominated newspaper headlines for 2 years previously and had just been appointed to the senior position in the Army). He simply looked unimpressive.

Leadership often manifests itself in unimpressive and meek bodies. Perhaps their ability to lead is because by setting aside trappings and titles of distinction, they are better able to select truthful mirrors and then decide and act based on a more disciplined vision, unencumbered by Tuchman’s (1984) frailties and passions.

**Conclusions**

Leaders must first identify their own mirror, visualize how to move the current system closer to the future, and then decide and act effectively and ethically. Bombast and theater can inspire organizations to move, but the change may not be sustainable since the initial inspiration relies more on passion than reason. Rejecting the truth about the future dooms the organization to the past, which is no longer survivable undercurrent conditions, and is self-destructive. Surrounding oneself with warped mirrors simply tells the leader that all is well when all is *not* well. The only clear solution is to listen quietly to the small, still voice and then to reflect on what it means for the organization’s future. It may take a meek heart and mind to hear the still, quiet voice, otherwise, our own pomposity wrapped up in our proud distinctions can get in the way of hearing the Mirror, “which does not lie.”

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