

Leadership changing hands

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Recently I've been reflecting on how leadership 'changes hands'. It is a theme I've visited with my clients over the years, and I've returned to it because of an experience during one of [Wendy Palmer's](#) retreats, which took place in May, near Southampton.

One of Wendy's exercises explores leadership and followership. From a handshake between two people, one steps and turns to stand in a leadership position beside the other, who becomes a follower. The leader extends their hands in front of them, palm upward. The follower's hand remains in contact and rests, palm down, on the leader's palm. The leader centres and steps out, modelling purposeful and aligned intention, while including the follower in their awareness. The follower also moves from centre, in service to supporting the leadership of the other person. The pair move together towards a shared objective, even though it may only be the leader who knows the intended destination.

Having established a model of good leadership and followership, and having practised a clear movement to change roles, pairs are encouraged to 'play,' and to explore what happens when:

- the leader is overly-concerned about the follower - who is in charge here?!; or
- when the follower resists or withdraws support.

In exploring these different modes of being in leadership and followership, we learn a lot about ourselves. I learn, for instance, that I prefer to lead rather than to follow, and that when I follow, if I am not mindful, I tend to act as a back-seat driver, trying to lead from behind.

So, on the May retreat, my partner was a fellow Leadership Embodiment teacher. We had trained together for 18 months and knew each other's patterns and tendencies quite well. After our handshake, my colleague stepped into the leadership position and moved forward. I decided to be a model follower, wherever my leader took me. We had a whole garden to explore! I centred and gave my full presence to my leader, making good contact with his hand.

After visiting a couple of 'places,' my leader paused, looking at a small pond with a fountain. I stood patiently beside him to see what was needed here, what was important? Time passed. My leader let his hand drop to his side. I remained resolute in my intention to be a good follower, whatever was required, even though I now felt somewhat uncomfortable. We seemed to be stalled. Standing with my hand *in* his hand, side by side, felt much more personal than placing my hand *on* his when he

had forward intention. More time passed. I centred to master my discomfort and waited patiently: I would trust my leader.

Eventually, my partner raised his hands again, resuming the leadership 'form' that Wendy had given us. He set off and, after a short while, initiated the movement that put me clearly into the leadership position. He had, quite literally, 'handed' me the leadership role. He became the follower, and I centred and moved forward in the aligned leadership form.

After an exercise, Wendy's practice for retreats is for the group to sit in meditation before debriefing. This creates space and allows the body to process. In the debrief, I outlined my experience at the pond. My partner's response was revealing. He said: 'I had got bored with leading and, it being you, I thought if I just stopped, you would take over!' He became frustrated by my inaction, and eventually realised he would have to initiate further movement himself. The irony is, of course, if I had been true to my habitual self, I *would* have taken over! But I was being mindful and aware, and he had not communicated clearly, and so I was waiting patiently for his next action.

All of this was in my mind when I did a similar exercise with a team who want to change the leadership model in their small organisation. Leadership, until now, has rested clearly on the shoulders of the founder of the organisation. In preparing for a sustainable future, the team want to move to a more 'collective' model of leadership. They want to be more of a partnership organisation than a founder-led organisation. For me, this raises interesting questions about the nature of shared leadership: is there truly such a thing? If so, how does it work? I recall an article by Charles Handy where he asked a member of a rowing eight: who is the leader? The coach, the captain, the cox, and the stroke each lead different aspects of a rowing campaign. None is 'the leader.'

This reflects my experience of sharing leadership, which is informed by my work with leadership conversations. One of the frameworks I use was developed by David Kantor, who undertook research which showed that a healthy conversation contains elements he calls **move**, **follow**, **oppose** and **bystand**. A move provides direction in a conversation; a follow builds and supports; an oppose questions or challenges, and a bystand offers or invites perspective. Each of these intentions (direction, support, challenge, and perspective) is an act of leadership in a conversation¹. If you question the idea of 'following' as leadership, consider servant leadership (perhaps embodied by Samwise Gamgee in the Lord of the Rings), or take a look at this 3 minute [TED talk](#), which gives a humorous 'embodied' take on the leadership role of followership.

¹ For more on leadership conversations see my book, 'Pause for Breath'

To explore the nature of 'shared' leadership, consider a simple thought experiment. Imagine two people going for a walk, side by side. On the face of it, this is a perfect example of joint leadership. However, if you ask how they came to be walking together, you would most likely find that one proposed the walk (made a move) and the other agreed (followed). Perhaps a third person was also present, who questioned the wisdom of going for a walk (which might be an oppose, or a bystand, depending on their intention), and did not join the walk (an oppose). The walk, the route, and the time will have been proposed, and perhaps adjusted, before being agreed. Leadership (albeit of different kinds) has changed hands, possibly several times, to establish the conditions for walking together.

In this 'friendly' conversation, the shifts between move, follow, oppose and bystand are informal and subtle. They don't need to be anything else. However, my retreat experience suggests that sometimes we need to communicate a change of roles more clearly and directly. When my partner 'assumed' that I would know that he wanted me to lead, we stalled. He had not communicated clearly enough, according to the convention, or 'language,' that had been established in that 'system.'

My proposition (or move) is: to share leadership in a system, we have to acknowledge different forms of leadership, and to understand, collectively, how leadership will change hands.

Sport offers a range of potential models for leadership changing hands, which we might use to stimulate thinking for leadership in organisations. Some 'conventions' are literal, linear, and tightly regulated, such as handing over a baton in a relay race. Others are part 'structural' and part responsive, such as in doubles tennis, where each partner takes turns to serve, but once the ball is in play, leadership changes hands in response to circumstances. Team games offer more complex models of, perhaps, 'distributed' leadership: the person with the ball or puck is the most obvious 'leader' in any moment, but others are taking leadership decisions 'off the ball,' and moving into space to support the current leadership, and the shared goal of winning.

So, if you intend to share leadership in a partnership or team, you might ask:

- How will we know who is leading in any moment?
- How will leadership move between team members?
- How will we communicate, through language, action, or gesture, that leadership is changing hands?

Amanda Ridings, executive coach and author of 'Pause for Breath: bringing the practices of mindfulness and dialogue to leadership conversations.'