Preface

Welcome, my readers.

*Why am I writing about leadership, again?* Use of ‘again’ is a possible problem for you, I know it. Perhaps for you it’s a first encounter with my insistent discourse on the subject of leadership. Maybe you’ve no tiredness for the subject itself and will peruse here a bit further. If the language isn’t turgid and the ideas insightful of course. Better still if you are a returnee; you hold no aversion to hearing of leadership from me, again! As a returning reader you’ve come to expect of me, too. There will definitely be a high jinx or two interlaced with absolute dead-pan and an occasionally thought-worthy phrase or turning. So, curiosity brings you back to me. Poor kitty, that.

That introductory paragraph is both silently confessional and openly declarative. I presume to know what some of you are thinking, perhaps even feeling. I do/not project a tone of arrogant egotism in describing what your experiences might be. But was the ‘you’ singular or plural in its use when you read it? You didn’t take it personally, did you? There’s also an affected conversational tone with a touch of familiar humor. That’s my commentary on the obvious bits. We now agree that there’s more going on in that introduction than what is outwardly said. It’s also a foreshadowing of what will come; a mimicry of communication theory, and a magnification of the quandaries of embracing leadership’s intentional purposes. Finally, by an act of presumption, I have subjected our relationship as reader(s) and author to several other, here unstated, liabilities. What are they? Herein lies a rub.

By now you might be asking, What’s Trent’s intended purpose here? Reader confusion! That’s the possibility of an unintended consequence in his objective, maybe. I would retort, if indeed I could, with these three questions: How important is it to know your audience, as both leader and author? Is a reader a follower and an author a leader, then? By use of these literal words and their formal sentences, I am physically leading you forward into new conceptual space. Navigation enabling a group’s owning new ideas is a leadership commonplace. No one needs leading in the familiar territory of home turf or the realm of what they
already think, right? Oftentimes the exceptional qualities of the ordinary are lost to those seeing routinely. Is leadership, then, always a role play scenario within an unspecified narrative sharing a common trope of navigation in physical and conceptual realms? Meaning you can’t always tell the narrative of leading but you can universally tell the story of leadership. Or is it really this: You can’t tell the universal narrative of leading but you can universally recognize the myth of leadership.

There’s a high probability I’m losing a significant portion of you, my audience/readers, at this juncture. By asking confusing questions, by utilization of analogy in the language of a discipline perhaps foreign to you, and by apparently being both obtuse and terse, I’m losing my followers here. And, you’ve not even gotten through a protracted introduction to reach the middle of this narrative. But I knew I’d lose some of you. There’s an intended audience here. Are you one of them? They are not those taking reading incentive from judging how good are the pictures with this post. Leaders oftentimes run possible scenarios and anticipate outcomes for their decisions, words and actions. Why is the presumption or anticipation of another’s response a uniformly dangerous activity? Like authors, leaders must consistently reflect on a single adage when it comes to predicting the audience’s or another’s response: ‘I don’t know, what I don’t know.’

Effective authors, okay the well published ones, always speak to a specified audience, some of whom are perhaps also their followers. There’s no use in trying to engage the genuinely disinterested but what of the unknowingly ignorant, the adjacently oblivious? Leaders are expected to reach out to these two typecast characters found in all organizations. To be plainly unknowing isn’t the same as it is to be consciously resisting, is it? And, as we know resistors are by circumstance both followers and an audience within the larger one sometimes populated by other stereotypes with unique personalities: voyageur innovators, adventurous followers, the joyously domesticated and entrenched, and the historically entitled, the provocateur trickster who morphs occasionally into the organization’s version of the sociopath. Each is an individual person and each plays a role in defining organizational culture.

Like a character in search of an author (Originally there were six if I accurately recollect.), leaders must be aware of roles followers play and changes in audience positionality sometimes reflecting complete role inversions. Leaders must also
contend with disinterested audiences, their followers’ ignorance to opportunity, and the protection of status quo or the stability of place or practice that stifles the possibility of imagining differently. How audiences/followers interact with their leader and each other is another source of potential confusion and conflict.

There are touchstones and flash points in every organization as well as unpublished text easily translated into cultural identifiers. A leader must be sensitive to all these. Acquiring this sensitivity takes effort. Lack of predictability, once referenced in leadership skills inventories as a ‘high tolerance for ambiguity’, is the only constant. Leaders must consistently reconfirm what they know or presume of their audiences, test for prevailing opinions within them, and verify what locals hold to be facts or alternates to them! Inquisitiveness is an essential quality for all leaders. Perhaps this is why so many return to discussion of leadership itself.

Knowing when to question, when to listen, and when to shut down dialogue itself are essential leadership skills. Leaders need to be adept at the art of steering dialogue. It’s a form of navigation, not Machiavellian indoctrination. Consequently it is wise to ask, and to know, what is the character of a leader’s discourse? This means questioning, not interrogation. The inquisitor can command answers upon pain of death; the detective trips the culprit by cycling similar queries to uncover lies. The jurist might pretend to seek fact by questions of audience. All are reading people in other ways, too. Did you know the same can be done with written text? There’s always talking taking place between lines. A challenge, of course, is that active listening is most commonly reduced to hearing what is audible. Sure some wise sage has already reminded us to interpret the silences in our verbal exchanges.

The pause/comma in delivery can be devastatingly dramatic in potential meaning. When in nature the absence of sound can be a screaming warning of imminent danger. Leaders should be drawn not only to the chorus but to organizational silence. They must demonstrate curiosity, through both public query and private reflection, for the social complexities muting dialogue or inspiring cacophony.

Language use can be an indicator of many overt and subtle attributes of individuals and organizations. We are easily drawn to privileged dialects, and we also humiliate others for using them. And, when clothes once defined the man,
the public could read him by his shoes alone. Not enough leaders spend time examining, assessing and knowing the language of common parle within their organizations. I’m not referencing use of acronyms or acceptance of expletives in daily routines. I am alluding to other verbal cues and language short-cuts indicating an organization’s self-projection and its self-apprehension of its work. Language reveals an organization’s capacity to include, to be transparent, honest and respectful. A leader needs to be able to tune in to language that increases productivity and excise from use that which does not. This language analysis will require amplification strategies once completed.

Disruptive communication strategies and cognitive baffles can be used to eliminate the negative language diminishing any organization. Change the language, and you can change the atmosphere identifying organizational culture. You are already familiar with the popularized dictum, ‘Culture outs change.’ So, now add another archetypal phrase to your quantum truths: ‘Language outs culture.’ Changing the language use of an organization is to transform its culture. As Peter Senge said, “People don’t resist change. They resist being changed.”

So, if you change how people speak, i.e. establish the language for doing business, you can also change what employees think and drive desired employee behavior. The same can be said of readers? Reading outside of your comfort zone can do what to your perspective? This fact is recognizable across many disciplines and diverse professions. Leaders understand that introducing new ideas or processes requires careful considerations of language. They prepare adoption strategies when introducing new vocabulary. They anticipate temporary remorse and lingering anger when naming new taboo words/practices. Leaders have the responsivity for authorizing language and protecting the organization’s lexicon.

This relationship between vocabulary, leadership and culture is seldom explored, at least at the self-conscious level within organizations. I can’t remember there being a leadership vocabulary day in any of my most recent 35 years of work. But I have been known to unintentionally drive my colleagues to use their dictionaries occasionally! The relationship between words and a sense of individual and cultural being has been a subject of philosophical exploration for some time, but it is not broadly addressed by leadership gurus. Is the subject thought to be
beyond ordinary interest or is it too narrowly focused to have any practical application?

I say, no. And, here’s why.

Are you familiar with the disruptive writing strategies of Gertrude Stein, the typology tactics of Charles Olson’s charting the geography of language, or the phenomenology of being created in language itself (quite a few Frenchmen and Germans to be acknowledged there)? You might likely say no, but having read this far you now have rudimentary skills to recognize these strategies, tactics, and intentional ontology. You are now other than just your previous unread self; you have a new group belonging. You are now what is known as an unconscious competent. At this juncture, ‘you don’t know, what you know.’

Leadership can be viewed as an abstract epistemological construct as well as a measurable assessment of applied knowledge and skill. Perhaps you fall to the latter category of leadership enthusiasts. There is applied learning on the other side as well. Accessibility to a common language with precise vocabulary highlights the cognitive dissonance barring academia from the real world! Fortunately, there are some stories that can be told by many different voices and in innumerable places while sharing a single trope.

For some heady individuals, like Stein, Olson, Whitehead and several unintelligible Germans, it is human nature to create a sense of individual being in language. They wish to acquire existence that cannot be otherwise achieved without discovering then embracing an ontological lexicon. So, too, is this true for leadership theorists. For those individuals, leadership is never far removed from the immutable politics of the language used to define and discuss it. Why is leadership seldom addressed as a political construction defined by valorized states of being established as language? Ask that ringer of a question while paying for your morning milk. I dare you.

Yet, we all know that leaders must always choose their words wisely, no? Leaders are conventionally perceived as being what they say. So, it logically follows that what they say is uniformly perceived by all. We know this desire to be a frustrating one. Leaders must have a more heighten sense of their individual
ontological being in language than those that follow them. Why? Because the audience seldom has an accurate memory of the leader’s intentions, let alone its own responses to and behaviors towards it. Unlike the leader, the audience has no immediate self-reflexivity, no internal voice of reminder or caution. What does this last statement tell us of these two categories of people and the politics defining apprehensions of accountability and leadership?

What is first perceived as being obtuse is not always pedantic. Too often obtuse is applied to what is normally complex and therefore unfamiliar in ordinary conversation. Clarity comes with process. So, a return to the beginning is now once again necessary. Why AM I writing about leadership, again? By my earlier oblique admission to being one of them, it is because language itself compels me to do it. And for this purpose I absolutely need you. What is an author without a reader? I am very thankful to have you here as a reader. Funny how you read my words, silently with your own voice. It’s like I’m putting words into your mouth, and thoughts into your head, isn’t it? From this distance, I wonder what else is in there, on your mind.

I do appreciate your feedback, comments and insights. But, honestly, not always. What arrogance, eh? What I mean, however, is that contemporaneous verbal exchange would be more enlivening, if not rewarding. But writing’s only audible parley is sensible in the silent-movie dialogism explained by combining intention, semiotic and reader response theories. This polyphonic discourse is never explored in book of the month club writing on leadership; never. Why? Complexity. Is it another esoteric discovery lacking applied practice? There’s the barrier again. Language use.

To self-discover polyphony, you’d have to ‘listen’ for this otherwise muted dialogue, evident even here and now, by application of another more sophisticated interpretative paradigm. It’s kind of like you are hearing a verbal exchange belonging to others but its emanating from your reading between my lines here. ‘What the … is Trent talking about?’, isn’t what you should be hearing now! But it likely is, and only perseverance will see you forward to another revelation. The silent-to-you whispers intonate something else. It’s a big reveal: form and content are always talking with each other and are implicitly dividing one another’s meaning into multiples of possibility. The one isn’t the other as you
might have previously been lead to believe. What does this revelation tell us about the discourse of leadership theory itself?

Can we truly dialogue on leadership without addressing the inscrutable fact we are literally writing or talking about leadership while simultaneously thinking about leadership within prequalified ways? *Leadership isn’t only defined by the presence of a series of role responsibilities, generic abilities or life experiences. Leadership is also an existential expression of an individual’s working to become a replete self, a whole person, and sometimes in language itself.*

In any written text there is an exchange occurring between what is being said, call it the narrative, and the how of its being both communicated, e.g. form and the meaning of meaning in semiotic theory, and the political reception/interception anticipated by application of yet another’s dialogic imagination. When I write, *leadership*, you and I are automatically predisposed to thinking certain things about it, we are programmed to make specific qualifications and conditions on its meaning, and we are guaranteed to affirm generally held cultural assumptions validated in language. Here’s an example of where revelation excises something from your own ‘you don’t know, what you don’t know.’

This socio-political conditioning of our knowing leadership is more precisely explained by M.M. Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia. Just so you know it isn’t original to me! But did you know you possessed a dialogic imagination? Remember putting on your thinking cap as a child? The activity of examining the dialogic imagination is like that symbolic gesture of engaging in deeper thinking than normally found in daily routine. *Leaders routinely ask themselves a variation of this question: What makes me think it is this, has to be this, or couldn’t ever be other than this or even that? Leaders routinely ask what defines perception of the present in order to propose a vision of the probable future.* The dialogic imagination makes this leadership activity possible, and very probable. As you will see in my forthcoming exemplar explaining water leadership theory, the conceptual paradigm is as complex as it is informative.

What’s my intention, here, then? To introduce and explain water leadership theory or engage in a metanarrative explaining how my very own discourse on same has been predetermined by my own dialogic imagination? I’d say you can’t verily have one without the other. My dialogic imagination has been informed by
the writings and teachings of both philosophers, academics, social critics, and of more critical importance here my awareness of island culture and seminal life experience with a seagull. Is there more to my intention? Well, I would hope to reflect in a mimetic sort of way how anecdote and idea become more powerful when they tug and pull at each other’s innards.

As a public identifier ‘leader’ rarely provides insight into the complexity of character. Here, I’ve given you enough information to read my projected self-presence as the conceptual self. Are all the facts of that self historically verifiable? Probably not. My perception of living can’t be documented by another nor do I need another’s validation of it to make it real. Have the facts of conceptual biography been embellished, emboldened for effect? How often are a leader’s intentions correctly read? What should leaders recognize when it comes to their intentional communication?

*Leaders need to put energy into managing the meaning of their narratives with full self-awareness of the quantifiable room for interpretative error, judgement, and aversion.* Effective leaders are conscious of others’ readings of their spoken and written words, as well as their body language. It’s a commonplace to witness an aspiring leader demonstrate our universally held inability to control meaning. Meaning cannot be fixed into place or controlled; the assumption that meaning is residual causes errors of judgement and squanders energy. Meaning finds solidity and constancy of purpose only when it is discovered not delivered. Meaning is more durable when has been ferreted out by application of effort and energy, too. Here, then, I am lying the framework for your discovery of my awareness of how water-based leadership works.

So, after this cumbersome apostrophe on the meaning of leadership, now let’s move on to a complete answer to the question inciting the preceding metanarrative. *Why is Trent writing about leadership, again? ‘It’s because it never gets boring, right?’* You my newest, hereafter author-muted, interlocutor might have chimed back. That is had this been an actual dialogue, not a not so colloquially spoken monologue. The discourse of leadership can be riddled with acronym and stunted by plain language discourse posing as conversation between equals on a pathway to discovery. We’ll have none of that business here, will we? *Leaders understand the incipient inequality defining relationships within their*
environments. They insure that that inequality is protected and that it transforms according to organizational need. Effective leadership can simultaneously engender and out a false egalitarianism.

No, the reason I’m back to exploring leadership isn’t devilish preoccupation with being turgid or a given propensity to meander off topic but simply because I was furtively asked THAT question-sequence again: ‘Dr. Keough, can we talk? I’m doing a doctorate on leadership. I’d like to ask a few questions of you (and 30 other CEOs), please. What’s your leadership, style?’ I have myself inserted the comma setting pause, yes. Truthfully, there was no break in her voice.

So much for having my direct line open to the public! After listening to her description of a dissertation thesis, I respectfully but apparently too quickly declined my participation. Awkward silence. Why not? Yes, she is brave enough to ask. I tell her. I’m not participating in any MORE doctoral research studies. I think I’ve already made a fulsome contribution to grad student confusion over the years. But thank-you for asking me, I (insincerely) say, and good luck (as I couldn’t care less what happens) in your studies. Did she feel the parenthetical anger, rudeness, the faux genuineness? The parentheses were never said or even then thought at the time. Wonder what she thought of my intention, though? It’s all pretty much fiction based on nominal fact this piece. Click.

Inspiration comes from the strangest places, no? If I had kept her contact, I would now email or call to say thank you for inspiring me here! Hey, there’s a research project in follow-up inspired by refusals to participate. What I’ve done, however, is made a future referral possible. When next I get asked, I’ll refer the soon to be good Dr. to this article, with the caveat never to ask me a question on its content.

Sadly but truthfully spoken the question, 'What is leadership?,' has become trivialized for me. The idea that anyone’s self-revelation brings practical insights to others is a fallacy of leadership theory. Or is it the off-shoot of belief in great person theory? Study enough about them and you’ll eventually see what defines them? We have foisted this one upon aspirational leaders, and certainly graduate students in general. The underlying notion is that data can reveal the defining characteristics of leadership. Too often, however, the data comes from leaders who have never embraced a definitive discomfort. There is disconnection in the reconciliation of honest confession with idealized self-projection and that
imposed on the self by others. Being named as a leader is to have another identify an egotism I share with selected others! We are the unequals, maybe? Put a group of CEOs or postsecondary Presidents into a single room and watch the politics of inequality reveal itself. They'll self-divide power based on what factors?

The egotism of immutable belief in self is found in all leaders. And, this egotism admittedly exists in my character because I’ve written, spoken, and taught theory of leadership while posing as an authority on the subject. By whose definition am I expert? Perhaps I might qualify as a conscious competent? That compliment might be withheld by both myself and others on certain days. My practice of working in a leadership position and talking and writing about leadership doesn’t itself guarantee I have anything more legitimate to offer or meaningful to say. That authority to speak on leadership is given to me by whom? The grad student? CEO title? Ultimately the authority of leadership can be mistaken for leadership ability. Others always bestow the power to lead by voluntarily following; the reality is individuals receiving it might not be leaders themselves.

I do appear to believe in my own authority, don’t I? I have used knowledge of others’ typologies to validate my self-claimed authority by instructing on leadership--without really, really believing any of it. In fact, a lot of it I consider weak-minded pop-culture quick fix fluff. This attitude of judgement comes from the self-serving notion that I know better than they do! Call it the academic’s disposition, my leadership egotism, if you will. In actual truth I might not always know better, but I am confident that I sometimes know more! Better said, I believe I have a larger discourse tool box, one useful to explore leadership in both its theory and its practice, than some others. Leaders must be able to demonstrate passion to persevere when challenged by physical, emotional, psychological, conceptual, or spiritual obstacles, barriers or situations. This quality is best acquired from first-hand experience of overcoming complex adversity, not the result of blind stubbornness. Which experiences leave indomitable impacts and resonating learning on leadership styles?

Leadership theory is a discourse within an academic discipline made problematic by a complex admixture of for-profit authors, pure theorists (the academics), did-it now I’m eligible to to-teach it clinical practitioners (non-tenured university lecturers from business or government), executive education students (individuals
seeking applied learning to address real time problems), and quick fix gurus who pander to the weak-minded who are themselves in search of followers or adoration. These types seldom mix well in the category of making definitive statements on leadership, meaning ones we could take to the bank and uniformly get hard returns! The exception is the rule when it comes to successful ‘leadership for dummies’ treatises: And so it begins, here, again.

‘Trent, what’s your leadership, style? Leadership and style are different; leadership has generic attributes; and, style is always circumstantial, localized to one, if not just a fleeting fad. Style is a word inaccurate to explicate the chameleon quality of leadership. To be chameleon is to adaptable, but true to self while flexible to circumstance. Effective leaders all share this chameleon trait. Of course this is but one of my at-the-ready pat answers. I intend on taking the inquisitor onward to explore the impacts of nature, nurture, auto/biography, language, situational and ideological theories on the essentials of leadership.

Perhaps the most effective leaders do share a chameleon-like quality determined by their sense of self working in fellowship with others and shared circumstances. Adaptability it might otherwise be called. On more than one occasion this ability to adapt has been an asset for success for me; but, it’s not a universal truth either. More often, there’s an ism and ideological focus, even a pivot or catch-point offered to explain a leadership style given to service, to transformation, to effectiveness, to consensus, to authenticity, to emotional intelligence, to the next-you name it. Revelation of commitment to true identity is hardly ever mentioned, is it?

Analysis of the why and how of leadership runs the gamut of possibility, and as you will see here shortly, improbability (?), too. Needless to say, I’ve never claimed my discourse on leadership was original to me. Leader's must recognize that appropriation of a discipline’s knowledge invariably means synthesis of others’ originality on same. Name an effective leader who isn’t guilty of synergistic plagiarism! I’m the case in point; the problem is I can’t often distinguish if I took the idea from another more cogent being or if the idea itself inspired in the lexicon of the discipline a gross appropriation of another’s unique wisdom. Nevertheless, true leaders are always careful to credit others, especially for their seminal offerings or brilliant one-time, one-liner, one-hit-wonders! Leaders’ differing approaches to demanding originality from their followers can
be off-putting for those inclined to permit others to think for them. Often it is the leader who does the hardest thinking for his followers. Is this egotism speaking again?

It is rare to find a leader who doesn't seek out originality which is commonly mistaken for innovation. The two are different and reflect different capacities. For example, leaders recognize that most individuals don’t want to think, let alone think deeply. Most people wish to live the ease of purposeful life without diving too deeply into the meaning of life, let alone the meaning of leadership. Leaders know that ordinary life exists only in the bumpy shallows of humanity’s fullest potential for meaningful living. When leading a dive into possibility or when articulating the Atlantis of an intentional future state, the leader must actually know the depth tolerance of his followers. Depth tolerance encapsulates knowledge of a group's openness to change, perception of current reality, entitlement expectations, charitable disposition, and internal challengers to leadership. Leaders can come to symbolize means to an ill-defined meaningful existence or contradictory means to meaningful life. When this moment occurs you conventionally hear of employee morale issues, organizational dysfunction and atrophy, and loss of leadership authority.

As a leader I wish to think, not just live existentially or exclusively in physical subsistence. I am what might be called a thought leader, then? But, I too, here must bow to my predecessors for both imitating their thoughts and copying their processes. Leadership is a social construction known to positively evolve through plagiarism, war, civil discourse, and cult following. Must we first announce the death of leadership prior to being able to comfortably validate its telling attributes? We cannot underestimate the symbolic power of ritualistic killing to inspire contemplation. Announcing the death of God definitely caused a resurgence in religious validation of the meaning of purposeful living. So it also went when death notices were issued for the reader and author.

We should at the least post the obituary for the originality of the leader. Perhaps it might inspire reflection upon its foundation in leadership characteristics. Yet, leaders are uniformly unoriginal to their peers; but, then ask, who might the peer of a leader actually be? Is the follower essential to the leader’s existence or just
her success? Can anyone individual shepherd consensus-based decision-making? Isn’t the very notion of individual leadership in consensus building an oxymoron itself? So, herein lies the answer to these false conundrums. Leaders are comfortable asking unanswerable questions to which THEY have definitive answers. And, they are compelled by their very natures to convince you to believe their improbable answers to self-shaped koans.

Is there universal truth in the italicized comments? Let’s begin here where all leadership discourse began, in biography and autobiography. Stories told by oneself and stories told of others about one’s self either individually or collectively; ironically the story of us all is normally told by only one. For my own water leadership narrative, I’ll only touch the points relative to my discourse here today. We’ll leave the unspoken details to untold future archeologists!