

The Spirit of LEADERSHIP



**Liberating the Leader
in Each of Us**

HARRISON OWEN

An Excerpt From

*The Spirit of LEADERSHIP:
Liberating The Leader in Each of Us*

by Harrison Owen

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PREFACE

This book was written in 1989 and originally published by Abbott Publishing in 1990. It is amazing to me how much has happened to our world and our species since that time. But despite the almost cataclysmic changes that have occurred, I believe that the essential message of the book remains valid: we are in the midst of transformation, and leadership, along with everything else in our lives, has become or must become something quite different from what it has been.

Thanks to Steve Piersanti and all the good folks at Berrett-Koehler, this book is now available more broadly. I hope that you, as part of that broader audience, will enjoy reading it even as others apparently have enjoyed it before you. For myself, preparing the manuscript has been a remarkable experience in revisiting some old places and seeing them with new eyes.

HARRISON OWEN
Potomac, Maryland
January 1999

Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

Where have all the leaders gone?" That could well be the song for the last part of the twentieth century. In the national press, scarcely a day passes without extended discussion of the lack of political leadership and the apparent inability of the major political parties to raise up anyone who remotely looks the part.

Corporate America is in little better shape. The strong, charismatic, decisive leader of yesteryear has seemingly been replaced by colorless men. Bold strokes have given way to defensive strategies, aimed less at defining the future than at preserving the past.

Indeed, to the extent that heroes and leaders of the people still populate the planet—at least the U.S. portion of the planet—as likely as not, they appear to be rogues: the corporate raiders and other folks who live by the Darwinian law of survival. Brandishing their leveraged buyouts, they add another notch to their guns.

As we sing our song and look for leaders, we find vast numbers of willing guides and commentators. Books and courses on leaders and leadership seem to have risen in inverse proportion to our perception of available talent. We are counseled on how to take charge, be assertive, and don the charismatic cloak, and other surefire methods for slaying dragons and summoning popular

support. But for all the courses and training time, it seems that the refrain is still to be sung, “Where have all the leaders gone?”

The current crisis in leadership is genuine, but its cause may be more a matter of our perception. There is no question that leaders of the kind we have always known are in short supply. We might ask whether something has gone wrong with the genetic pool such that *Homo sapiens* no longer possesses the capacity to lead. Or could it be that the times have changed and leadership “as it used to be” is no longer appropriate?

Here is my theory. As the structures of our world and the conditions of certainty have yielded to an avalanche of change, the extent of our longing for stable, definitive leadership has been exceeded only by the impossibility of finding it. The fault lies not with leadership but rather with ourselves and our expectations. In the old days, leaders were supposed to make sense of chaos, to make certainty of doubt, and to create positive action plans for the resolution of imponderable paradoxes. Good leaders straightened things out. Should chaos rear its ugly head, the leader was expected to restore normality immediately.

But there’s the rub. Chaos is now considered normal, paradoxes cannot be resolved, and certainty is possible only to the level of high probability. Leadership that attempts to deliver in terms of fixing any of this can only fail. And that is exactly what is happening.

Have the Leaders Really Gone?

Now, suppose we were to twist things around a bit, even at the risk of charges of Pollyannaism. As strange as our world appears at the moment, and despite all the obvious risks now present, isn’t it quite remarkable that we appear to be muddling through as well as we are? To the extent that leadership is necessary to survival, perhaps leadership is not as absent as we have thought.

The list of impending disasters, potential and actual, is long: nuclear holocaust, acid rain, holes in the ozone layer, overpopulation, famine, chemical wastes, the greenhouse effect, omnipresent carcinogens, and a variety of other planetary catastrophes. At the level of the marketplace, we confront such difficulties as financial collapse, monumental national debt, plant closings, downsizing, restructuring, takeovers, and the elimination of entire industries. Were one given to pessimism, there is enough material here to legitimize a massive state of depression. Yet for all that is going wrong, will go wrong, or could go wrong, the fact remains that we seem to be making it, one way or another. Much like Mark Twain said, we may remark that the report of our imminent demise is premature. And to the extent that leadership is now, as always, necessary for our survival, one might suspect that it is still present somehow.

Obviously *Homo sapiens*, and indeed the small planet Earth, could cease to exist tomorrow morning, or sooner. But that has always been true, if not for reasons of our own stupidity, then because of some aberrant asteroid. Yet for several billion years planet Earth and its passengers have survived, one might say prospered. Contrary to every prediction of disaster to date, we are still here. What on Earth, we may ask, is going on? What would we be doing if we thought what we were doing made sense?

What on Earth Is Going On?

We are doing what we've always done: we are transforming. In one way or another, with or without our permission, we are headed down the path we have always been meant to follow—toward the fulfillment of our human potential. There is, of course, no guarantee that we are finally going to make it.

The process of transformation is not always pleasant; indeed, it can be downright terrifying. For transformation means that the

old forms of our existence are blown apart and put aside, creating open space within which a new expression of us may emerge. For those who have found their meaning exclusively in the forms and structures of life, the experience is actually beyond terror, for it appears that life itself is about to cease. And in truth, life as it was does come to an end. That is chaos, but it may also be the nutrient seedbed from which new life will emerge.

And what of leadership? Two versions of the leadership tale are currently told. The first version is one we have been telling for some time, in which the few, or even “The One,” have all the answers, and therefore the power, to protect us from chaos. Because of their strength, we learn, or are forced, to do *the right thing* that will ensure the preservation of life as we have come to expect it. Order and stability are the fruits of our obedience, and a full belly, a full garage, and lifetime employment are the anticipated rewards. And when, at a time such as now, order and stability are mostly apparent in their absence, we look around for some suitable object of blame. That blame object is not far away: there is a lack of leadership. If that were not true, so goes the story, things would obviously be better than they are. Perhaps.

But there is another story, in which leadership is not the exclusive property of the few or The One. Questions, not answers, predominate, and the right thing is no *thing* at all. In this story, there is no lack of leadership, but rather the emergent presence of a very different sort of leadership. It is new, really there, and really effective. Leadership under the conditions of transformation is a collective and constantly redistributed function, and not the private property of the few or The One. The role of leadership is to engage in the quest (to pose the question) for the realization of human potential. And the goal of leadership is not the establishment of some perfect state (the right thing), but rather the heightened quality of the journey itself. The secret is out. We are all leaders, and there are plenty of us—at least according to this story.

A Word About Storytelling and the Teller of This Tale

Stories and the telling of them have, until quite recently, occupied a place of honor in society. But somehow we became infatuated with the facts, nothing but the facts, and stories are sometimes notably short on such vital details. As for storytellers, they are simply not to be trusted with the task of presenting reality with starkest objectivity. All of these allegations and suspicions are true with regard to this book. It is a story and I am a storyteller.

There is, however, a possibly deeper way of looking at the enterprise of storytelling. The intent is not so much to render “the Truth” in literal, factual detail, but rather to create the conditions under which the Truth may be perceived. Storytelling, in short, is a collaborative undertaking between the teller of the tale and the hearer (or in this case, the reader). When the storyteller does the job well, he or she creates an environment in which the Truth appears, less by the massive assemblage of fact and logical argument than by creating a resonant field wherein the hearer’s imagination and life experience may grow and in this case call forth a useful understanding of leadership. So, if you are anticipating a careful review of all the available literature, combined with a detailed analysis of the pertinent facts—past, present, and future—you will do well to stop right where you are. This book is not for you.

On the other hand, if you are willing to engage with me in a quest of sorts, to explore some possibly strange spaces and places, we may together develop an understanding of leadership that is powerful and effective for the present day. There are no guarantees, of course, and you will have to judge the extent to which I live up to the standards of the storyteller’s trade. But that is the intent. As I said, I am a storyteller. You may determine whether I am a good one.

Of course there are sources for this tale, and the thoughts of others have had their impact, which I will acknowledge as appropriate. But at the end of the day, I alone take responsibility for the integrity of my tale (for better or worse).

The primary source for this story is my own experience, which it may be relevant to share briefly. I am an Anglican (Episcopalian) priest, although it was never my intent to be a parish priest. I was going to be an academic with a fundamental focus on the myth and ritual of the ancient Near East, combined with a fascination with the process of creation as it danced between order and chaos. Season well with a heavy dose of epistemology, the study of how we know, and you have the ingredients for a very esoteric career. But life has a funny way of not working out as you planned. In fact, I have pursued all of these passions for almost forty years, but rarely in the academic environment I had expected.

The halls of the academy gave way to the streets when the civil rights movement erupted in the 1960s. My avocation became a job when I became the executive director of the Adams-Morgan Community Council, a large community action program in Washington, D.C. That job was followed by a stint in West Africa as associate director of Peace Corps/Liberia, doing pretty much the same thing. Upon returning to the United States I became enmeshed in the world of health care as director of a health care infrastructure development program for Long Island, New York. Relatively senior positions with the National Institutes of Health and the Veterans Administration completed my stay in the health care field and also provided my last honest jobs. From 1979 until the present moment I have been—for lack of a better word—a consultant, albeit president of H. H. Owen and Company.

H.H.O. and Company is an enormous operation consisting of me in all roles, with able assistance from my wife, Ethelyn, and our children (occasionally and usually under duress). There has never been a business plan, and marketing efforts have been miserable to nonexistent. In fact, I've never really understood what

business I've been in until it has happened. Clarity on the nature of my business is still elusive, but it has definitely been a wonderful ride!

It all began as I sat beneath a cottonwood tree. How is that for the commencement of a tale? In the moment, I felt a profound connection, not only to the tree but also to the earth from which it grew and the sky toward which it pointed—and to the people and places of the earth: organizations and families, nations and businesses, dogs, cats, and all the wild creatures connected by and through what I could only call *Spirit* with a capital S. The experience was hardly rational and definitely on the scary side. But there it was.

From that day until this, I do not know what Spirit is, and I feel little inclination for precise definition. Perhaps this is laziness, but it feels more like questions of possibility and necessity. No definition seems to work very well, and in the final analysis precise definition is really not needed. Spirit is one of those “things” you know when you run into it, and you know when it is not there. Words fail, as they probably should. Mystery seems to be an essential precondition for the appreciation of Spirit.

It occurred to me at the time that such experiences could well appear weird to many, and something of a mental health hazard to more than a few. Over the years I have been somewhat comforted to find that other folks apparently suffer from similar aberrations. Perhaps there had not been a cottonwood tree in their experience, but it turns out that encounters with Spirit are pretty commonplace. Indeed, I have discovered that from the loading dock to the boardroom, everybody knows when Spirit is up, and also when Spirit has disappeared. Wonderful things seem to happen when Spirit is present, and in its absence nothing much seems to take its place. No amount of money, technology, or brilliant ideas seems to make a difference when Spirit has gone over the hill. Call it lack of inspiration if you like, and *inspiration* after all means to be inspirited.

So, I would guess that my business is all about Spirit. That being the case, it will not surprise you to learn that for me Spirit is the most important thing.

When it comes to leadership, the connection with Spirit is essential. Leadership in the absence of Spirit just does not make it. And Spirit simply refuses to play by somebody else's rules, as in "command and control." It goes its own way, thank you very much. So leadership with Spirit, or spirited leadership, must be something else, having little to do with positional power and authority, which were once considered essential for those who would call themselves leaders.

The connection between leadership and Spirit is much more than an intellectual proposition for me, although it is certainly that. Fundamentally, it is a matter of experience and, if you will, necessity. Although it is true that I have held positions with at least the appearance of formal power and authority attached, I can honestly say that I have never accomplished anything of significance through the use of such authority. There always seemed to be a better and, in many ways, simpler way, which I can call only the way of Spirit. In recent years, this better, simpler way has been the only way. There has quite simply been nothing else available. Formal positional authority does not exist for me, and yet I would like to think that I have manifested leadership in several areas—Organization Transformation and Open Space Technology, to name two—and that the results have been useful.

Organization Transformation

The world of the early 1980s was a curious one indeed. Simultaneously we were visited by Ronald Reagan, Marilyn Ferguson, John Naisbitt, and Tom Peters. Not that these folks did it all by themselves, but they were representative. Reagan gave us a tough-guy conservative in the White House; Ferguson introduced the New Age; Naisbitt pointed out that the world was doing very

strange things, which he called *transformation*; and Peters told great stories about something we had almost lost sight of—excellence. For me and a handful of close friends and colleagues, the times were pregnant indeed.

In our part of the world we had noticed that the organizations with which we worked, typically as consultants, were behaving in a very odd manner. Instead of following nice, orderly developmental patterns, they seemed to be taking discontinuous jumps. It was pretty messy and often painful for everybody involved.

A friend, David Belleisle (then at Martin Marrieta), and I compared notes, and six months' dialogue convinced us that a major part of our personal difficulty was that we were looking at a new (for us) reality through old eyes. We expected development (as in Organization Development), but what we were witnessing was transformation, and frankly we did not have a clue to what was really going on.

Our ignorance precipitated an effort to sketch out a phenomenology of transformation in organizations, and in the spring of 1982 we presented a paper at a regional meeting of the Organization Development Network. The wisdom of hindsight shows clearly that this was a very rough effort, but it created a spark—especially a small throwaway comment at the conclusion, in which I said something like “Organization Development has been an extraordinarily useful approach until now, but it would seem that in the days of the Third Wave¹ we may need a different way of looking at things, which we would call Organization Transformation. Frankly, we have no clear idea what this new approach might look like,² but if any of you are interested in figuring it out, please let us know.”

To be honest, I anticipated no response. How wrong I was. One year later, 250 people from all over the world showed up for the First International Symposium on Organization Transformation (OT1). We had no official sponsorship, primarily because we did not think we could get it and did not have the interest and

energy to try. In 1998 we convened OT16, which now takes place in multiple locations in the United States and Europe. There is still no official sponsorship—indeed, there are no continuing organization, membership, or bylaws, or even a bank account. The impact, however, has definitely been more than nothing. The once-ethereal words *Organization Transformation* can now be found with regularity in such mainstream publications as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. It is possible to receive a degree in Organization Transformation, although I am not quite sure why one would want to do that. Last but not least, I have discovered that the IBM Consulting Group has a special practice that they call Organization Transformation, and they are not alone. Things are surely different than they were in 1982.

And what does all this have to do with leadership and Spirit? Everything, I think. Without a shred of formal authority and no organizational backing, a very small group of folks opened some new space in which the Spirit of a much larger group of folks showed up. The results speak for themselves. That is what I call *leadership*.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology (OST) is, at the very least, a deceptively simple approach to better, more productive meetings in which groups of from five to one thousand people quickly self-organize to deal effectively with complex issues in a very short time.³ The genesis of OST had little to do with careful design and a complete review of the available literature. It happened when, at the conclusion of OT1, it became clear to me and most other folks who attended that the really exciting stuff had all happened during the coffee breaks. Because I had devoted a year, almost full-time, to endless committee meetings designed to arrange all the details of speakers and panels, this realization came as something of a

shock. Clearly what everybody truly liked was the one thing I'd had nothing to do with. There had to be a better way.

Inspiration for the better way came from my experience in Liberia, West Africa, particularly in a small town called Balamah. In Balamah, and traditional villages everywhere, everything of importance takes place in a circle. The elders meet in a circle, disputes are settled in a circle, the people dance in a circle, the villages are constructed in a circle (roughly), and there is always an open space in the center. My thought was, if we could invite meeting participants to gather in a circle, amazing things might happen. Add a few simple elements, such as a bulletin board (to identify issues for discussion) and a marketplace (in which to arrange the details of time and space), and perhaps all that planning I had suffered through could be eliminated.

Subsequent experience around the world has demonstrated that the folks of Balamah had it right. Hundreds of thousands of people from every walk of life and from every continent on the planet have met in Open Space. And it always seems to work. Amazing things do happen.

For purposes of the discussion of leadership and Spirit, two lessons have been important. The first lesson has been the rapid dissemination of OST, and the second has been the role of the facilitator.

THE SPREAD OF OST

OST has always been an organizational orphan. Institutional sponsorship has been zero, and nothing approaching a marketing plan, to say nothing of the necessary financial resources to support such a thing, has ever existed. But in a very short time, OST has gone around the world.

Had all of this been run as a proper business, with franchises and some form of central control, the current operation would

certainly have achieved multimillion-dollar status. Every year a dozen or so training programs are offered in the United States, Canada, and Europe, with seven hundred current graduates. Add in one thousand to three thousand additional practitioners (rough estimate) whose formal introduction to the process may have been as a participant, or perhaps reading the book, and you have a fairly major operation. It all began in Balamah, and some would say that I am responsible for the lot.

To deny my pride in the accomplishment to date would be foolish, but none of it occurred as some textbooks on leadership and management dictate. Centralized control, positional power, formal communication, and tight organizational structure have never been part of the picture. Indeed, any sense of control that I might once have thought I possessed has long since disappeared. From the beginning this has been an out-of-control operation, which (in my judgment) is precisely why it has succeeded so handsomely.

Seen from the inside, my role as leader has been nothing more than to open space so that Spirit can show up. And the Spirit of a lot of folks has indeed shown up, producing a global collaborative effort as all of us have sought to understand and enhance the amazing things that are happening in Open Space. I am clear that OST is not in any sense my property. It is free for the taking, and many people have done just that. Nor is it my invention, for literally thousands of people have had a significant hand in its development. Actually, if anybody deserves all the credit, it is the good people of Balamah. After all, they were there first.

THE OPEN SPACE FACILITATOR

Ever since the first Open Space, which occurred in 1985, each event has become a natural laboratory in which to observe the remarkable potential of humankind coming into fullness. Amaz-

ing things do happen, with regularity. Complex designs for multimillion-dollar projects that were estimated to take ten months get done in two days. Deeply conflicted groups find a way to commonality, resulting in substantive resolution of long-standing difficulties, and more. As surprising as such outcomes may be, the manner in which they are achieved is even more surprising. Absolutely no up-front planning takes place, yet a complex meeting agenda appears in less than an hour. No training of participants ever happens, and yet they demonstratively function well as self-managed work teams. Most remarkably, no facilitator intervenes in any session; indeed, with the exception of a brief appearance at the very beginning, the facilitator is most notable by his or her absence.

The strange behavior of the Open Space facilitator is definitely an anomaly, at least a far as current group process management practice is concerned, but I believe there may be more going on here than meets the eye. In fact, the Open Space facilitator does two, but only two, very important things. He or she *opens space* and then *holds space*.

Opening space occurs at the beginning when the theme is announced and the participants are invited to identify all of the issues and opportunities of concern to them that they would care to address during the course of the gathering. Rarely does this activity take longer than fifteen to twenty minutes, and it is followed by what sometimes turns into a major rush as participants crowd the central open space to announce their individual areas of concern, and to post on the wall of the conference room—which quickly becomes the community bulletin board—the subject, time, and place of their sessions. I am not quite sure how you would characterize such a happening, but for me, standing in the center of the circle, it is quite clear that Spirit has shown up.

The second function of the facilitator, holding space, starts the moment the people move to claim the space. The observable role

of the facilitator quickly passes from single speaker standing in the center of the circle to “microphone stand”—holding the microphone so that the participants can make their announcements. And when the announcements have all been made and the sessions have been posted, there is nothing more for the facilitator to do. In my case, I leave the room, and very often I go and take a nap.

Upon my return, and for the duration of the gathering, my level of doing can usually be measured in minus quantities, limited to such things as picking up trash and stray coffee cups. Open Space, after all, is an extended coffee break. But if my doing is limited, my being (present) is a full-time occupation.

My job is to preserve the safety (sanctity?) of the space so that the Spirit of the participants can keep showing up and get the job (whatever that might be) done. A technical term, *witness*, usually found in esoteric literature, captures pretty closely what transpires. It is all about supportive presence, which apparently does little but “be’s” a lot.

The concern here is not with the details of Open Space facilitation, but if your curiosity has been piqued I invite you to try a little Open Space,⁴ maybe with the help of *The User’s Guide*, mentioned in note 3. The concern is leadership and Spirit, and I sincerely believe that the experience that I and countless others have had in the role of Open Space facilitator can well be instructive, and possibly paradigmatic, of what I understand leadership to be all about. Briefly said, leadership opens the space for Spirit to show up, and then leadership keeps that space open so that the job gets done. Call it inspiration.

Coming Attractions

So much for introductions of myself and the subject matter at hand. The following itinerary outlines the journey ahead in order to give you a taste of coming attractions.

I begin in Chapter Two with a brief consideration of the current context in which leadership must function, which quite simply is our transforming world. Not long ago it appeared necessary to adduce many facts and arguments to buttress the notion that transformation is a present happening. That now seems like a total waste of time, for unless you are very insensitive or living on a different planet, the morning news should make the point.

With the context established, I take a look in Chapter Three at the new rules of leadership, rules appropriate to the very different ball game we now find ourselves playing. As it turns out, the rules are not so much new as surprising, for they are in fact the old, old rules we have always played by in the informal organization.

Chapter Four goes somewhat deeper as I address some new lessons learned from those who have always played far from the levers of formal power and authority—the disenfranchised, particularly women. Lacking a definitive study of effective female strategies under the conditions of radical disenfranchisement, I turn to close personal experiences with my mother and her friends.

Then, it is on to the heart of the matter, in Chapters Five and Six, with the perhaps outrageous suggestion that leadership in its essence is our link to the deep, primal forces symbolized by the Dragon. Somewhere in the underground we connect with the true source of Leadership—that is, Spirit.

With the proper domain of leadership identified, I then consider five functions of leadership within that domain:

- To evoke Spirit through vision (Chapter Seven)
- To grow Spirit through collective storytelling (Chapter Eight)
- To sustain Spirit through structure (Chapter Nine)
- To comfort Spirit when things fall apart (Chapter Ten)
- To raise Spirit, thereby enabling the conditions of renewal (Chapter Eleven)

Chapter Twelve brings us to the end of the tale with some concluding thoughts on the Spirit of leadership or, more particularly, the leader's Spirit. The leadership role is available to us all, and assuming that role in any circumstances in which we find ourselves may well turn out to be the defining moment (or moments) of our humanity. But it is also demanding work, not to be taken on lightly or taken without support and preparation.

NOTES

1. Alvin Toffler had just published *The Third Wave*.
2. If you are interested in where I came out in an understanding of Organization Transformation, consult my book *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations* (Potomac, Md.: Abbott, 1987).
3. For the details on what Open Space is, how to create it, and what it might mean, please consult my books *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* and *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998).
4. A brief note on Open Space and Open Space Technology: Those of you who first encountered my work through experiences with or reading about Open Space Technology may find my use of the words Open Space in this book a trifle confusing. There are many instances of open space, but virtually none of them refer to the meeting methodology. The truth of the matter is that Open Space (for me) was first something approaching a state of being, and only secondarily a way of meeting. The double usage occurred when I noticed that people meeting in the open space of Open Space Technology regularly experienced the state of being that I had called Open Space. Confusing for sure, but probably useful for all of that. If you have never heard of Open Space Technology, you won't be bothered. But if you have, you might want to look again at what is clearly

a useful way to hold meetings. There may be more going on than meets the eye. For starters, I think you will find that leadership in Open Space is the same whether in a meeting or in the open space of our lives.

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