

## Leader-Follower Dynamics

It is January 2008 and you are sitting in your living room with a friend watching Hillary and Barack debate. You and your friend are well-educated and politically knowledgeable. To you, Hillary comes off as calculated, clever, and cliché-ridden, while Barack seems genuine, thoughtful and articulate. Your friend thinks that Hillary is smart, courageous, and determined and finds Barack pedantic, vague, and soft. Not only do you and your friend have divergent impressions, you are both convinced of their validity. Argument would be useless.

How can this be? You are looking at exactly the same data and you are both justified in regarding yourselves as objective, rational people. Objective, rational people can disagree about issues, but we are not talking about issues, but rather perceptions of a leader's character.

In recent issues of the *Thoughtletter*, I enumerated eight personal characteristics relevant to leadership and promised to elaborate upon them. They were 1) Embodiment of group aspirations and ideals; 2) long future time-span; 3) enterprise-orientation rather than person-orientation; 4) exercise of authority without self-inflation, hostility or guilt; 5) acceptance of responsibility without perfectionistic self-blame; 6) ability to delegate and supervise in a generative manner; 7) ability to repair injured

relationships; 8) perspective informed by a reading of history and a sense of humor.

### *Personifying Group Ideals*

The first of these is at issue in the above vignette. How does a leader come to be seen as personifying a group's aspirations and ideals? First, it helps if this is substantially true. For example, it appears unarguably to be the case that Barack is thoughtful and Hillary determined. If thoughtfulness is high among a group's ideals, the group takes that aspect of Barack's personality and wraps it around the entirety. A group of Clinton supporters may do the same thing with determination in assessing her personality.

### *Transference Projections Towards Leaders*

In reality, both personalities are multi-faceted. Even a moment's dispassionate thought is sufficient to remind us that Barack, too, is highly determined and Hillary is very thoughtful. To make thoughtfulness Barack's distinguishing characteristic and determination Hillary's requires psychological work on the part of followers. They do this work with unconscious projections; followers transfer feelings about important adults from childhood to the adult leaders of today. This *transference* operates without the knowledge of the transferer and transference is

always, in some degree, ambivalent.

One of Freud's earliest discoveries was that this happens in psychotherapy and that without a positive transference from patient to therapist, little can be accomplished. While he found transference to be an aid, he also learned that it could sink the ship; the ambivalent nature of the transference, he came to warn, meant that it had to be handled like an unstable chemical.

In psychotherapy, there is nowhere else for the negative, hostile part of the transference to go other than towards the doctor; unless, abetted by a poorly trained psychotherapist, the patient acts out the negative transference outside the consulting room toward parents, siblings, employers, spouses, partners and the like. These sorts of acting out produce drama and crises, which the all-good therapist can use to advise the patient on how better to deal with the inadequate and ill-motivated people who surround him. This sort of collusion, usually unwitting, is common.

### *Splitting of Ambivalence Towards Leaders*

In American political life, the two party system perfects splitting of the transference. In idealizing a leader--making the part of his or her personality we value most its entirety-- the negative part of our ambivalence is split off and projected into his or her opponent. In this manner, our attachment to the leaders we like is intensified and their

superiority to those we do not like is enhanced not only by *projection* but also by *splitting*.

### *Regression*

As unconscious mental mechanisms, splitting and projection are well known to psychotherapists who treat the mentally ill. They are characteristic psychological mechanisms in borderline and schizophrenic patients. They are also typical of very young children. Transference relations of followers to leaders can stimulate *regression* to such primitive states of mind.

Henry Adams famously said, "Politics have always been the systematic organization of hatreds." Where else do otherwise rational adults allow themselves such extremes of passionate partiality, where opinion becomes knowledge and sentiment a guide? Where else but in our relations with leaders—and in romance and war—do we react so childishly?

### *Emotional Feedback Loops Between Leaders and Followers*

Emotions between followers and leaders do not run only one way. What followers project, leaders *internalize*. And, processes of *internalization* are as unconscious and irrational as are those of projection and splitting. Anyone who has taught seminars or worked with juries has experienced this. One group makes you smart, another one makes you stupid. In one group, your jokes are funny, in another insulting. In front of the first group, one's knowledge, memory and imagination are enhanced. For reasons that often precede you and

arise from their feelings about each other or the leadership of the organization that has required them to attend, this group has adopted a positive transference towards you. In a meeting with a different, dyspeptic group, you find your IQ drops, memory shorts, and imagination dries up.

### *A Personal Example*

In the dawn of the 2001 recession, I did a workshop on mentoring for the branch office of a mid-sized law firm. The presentation was enthusiastically received. We hit it off right away. Before long, I abandoned my power point and spoke extemporaneously. They listened to my ideas, gave serious attention to my recommendations, and laughed, weeping at my jokes.

They especially liked this one: “Associates who enjoy authentic mentor relationships are unlikely to leave their firms. So in providing them with mentors, don’t think of it as kindness. Think of it as revenge. They will end up living the same exhausting lives that you are living!”

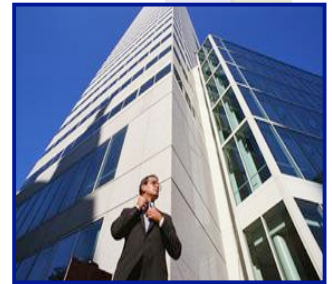
Afterwards, a senior litigator came up to me and said that I had the talent of the best courtroom lawyers, that he had listened to every word I had said and I had not missed a beat.

One week later, I made the same presentation to the main office. I began as before with my power point slides. Very quickly attorneys interrupted with hostile questions and objected to my efforts to amuse them. “Our lives are not awful!” one partner protested angrily. Soon even my slides became an inadequate aid. When I looked at them, little came to

mind. At the first break, the partner who had organized the meeting told me I was losing my audience. He was right. I felt like I was swimming in mud.

I hadn’t changed and neither had the material. It was the different states of mind—*transference dispositions*, I believe—of the two groups that were determinative. The first group was disposed to like me, the second not to. In the first group, there quickly occurred a *positive projection-positive internalization feedback loop* that made them happy and brought out the best in me; in the second, a *negative projection-negative internalization feedback loop* was quickly formed that made them angry and brought out the worst in me as a presenter. I do not know the origins of these dispositions, but I have a clue and a speculation.

In the main office, the room in which I was to make my presentation had chairs neatly arranged for the audience and a space of empty floor in front for the speaker—no podium, no table, no chair, nothing. It was as though the leader of the group-- past, present, future-- had disappeared. Indeed, during those days, the managing partner of the firm, an attorney from the home office, was frequently absent. It was rumored he was meeting with representatives of large Eastern firms to talk about mergers. The managing partner had endorsed the mentoring initiative. My authority came from him, yet he had stuck us in a room together without even a by your leave to his colleagues or to me.



“Followers transfer feelings about important adults from childhood to the adult leaders of today”

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“What followers project, leaders internalize.”

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Were the home office partners mad at him for being an absent leader about to sell them to the highest bidder in whose large firm they, too, would become merely a branch office? Were they scapegoating me for his neglect and ‘disloyalty’? If so, why hadn’t the partners in the branch office reacted that way? Perhaps they had long felt marginal, and, as the dark clouds of the recession gathered on the horizon, perhaps they had developed a manic desert island mentality, gaily enjoying their last bottle of wine and happy to have such good entertainment at the end. Was there also a manic anticipation of revenge at the likelihood that soon they would all be branch offices and their managing partner just another partner, living the same “awful” lives as the rest of them? It really had seemed to be my use of the word “revenge” in the associate mentoring joke that had brought the house down.

How does one apply insights such as these? Here is one application. Projections from followers can make a leader feel *constrained* from acting, as though assailed by the accusations of persecuted children; or, alternately, *impelled* to act, as though moved by the cries for help of needy, deserving ones. Internalizing such emotion-laden projections can erode a leader’s judgment and result in bad mistakes.

Leaders need access to their own inner lives-- wishes, fears, dreams, moods-- in order to examine them. Extremes of paralysis and impulsions are a tip off. Leaders who tend generally to swing back and forth, will find it more difficult to know when followers are manipulating their emotions. The more even-tempered will find it easier to identify the projections.

## Newly published in March 2008

This book knits together *Thoughtletters* into chapters on basic psychological processes (including personality types and scapegoating), mentoring and supervision, management principles, compensation systems, boards, and career change and retirement.

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