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How to be a host leader: Approaching leadership in new way using the familiar techniques of hosting

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# How to be a host leader

## *Approaching leadership in new way using the familiar techniques of hosting*

Mark McKergow



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### What do we do, as hosts?

At a high level, we might look at hosting as being about setting context, giving protection and enabling community. Hosts are usually the ones who step forward with an idea, an offer or a possibility. A host is always a context setter – providing an environment or space into which others will come. The others may be invited to change the space and participate in it, but the host is the first to have the opportunity to set things up. This is a very powerful position when used with skill – for example, governments are always keen to host summit meetings or talks, as they know that there will be opportunities to influence discussions in ways which are simply not open to the other participants.

Hosts offer protection – at some level – in that they take some of the responsibility for providing shelter, food and warmth. Hosts have a duty to protect their guests (even if the threat nowadays is generally much less than it was in the past). Even in dangerous situations, however, the armed forces still hold fast the importance of officers providing for the troops in their charge.

Hosts enable community – by gathering people under one roof, they bring them together, help them face troubles jointly rather than separately and draw on each other for skills, strengths and support. And above all, hosts are fluid and flexible in their work and attention. They are continually stepping forward and back, nudging where needed and letting things flow.

### But I am not a host! What can I do?

The wonderful thing about metaphors is that they can inform our behavior in whatever situation we find ourselves rather than constraining us into certain contexts. People often say to us, “I inherited my team when I took over the job! How can I be a Host Leader?”

We do not have to be in a hosting position to let hosting inform what we do – to act like a host, and thereby transform relationships around us. Even if the team members were there to begin with, we can start to think of ourselves as the host and the others as guests – and see what happens.

One startling example of this comes from one of the great leaders of the twentieth century, Nelson Mandela. Shortly after he was imprisoned on the feared Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town, Mandela was visited by his (white) lawyer George Bizos. Even under conditions of extreme subjugation, Mandela was able to act like a host. Bizos recalls the meeting:

On my first visit, in the middle of winter, he was brought to the consulting room where I was waiting. There were eight warders with him, two in front, two at the back, two on each side. Prisoners do not usually set the pace at which they move with their warders. But it was quite

obvious that he was – from the open van that they came [in], right up to the little verandah of the consulting rooms. And I stepped down, past the two in front, and embraced him, said, “Hello.” He returned the greeting [and] immediately asked, “How’s Zami?” which is, how are the children? And he then pulled himself back, and said, “George, I’m sorry, I have not introduced you to my guard of honor.” And then proceeded to introduce each one of the warders by name. Now, the warders were absolutely amazed. I think that this was the first time that they saw a white man and particularly a lawyer, I suppose, coming and embracing a black man, but they were absolutely stunned, and they actually behaved like a guard of honor. They respectfully shook my hand. (Carlin, 1999)

Mandela was able to take the lead, even when he was the prisoner surrounded by eight guards. This is the power of the host–guest relationship – it is very deeply ingrained, and we are all so used to it that often we do not notice it happening but simply play our parts. The details of how you do it will depend on your own culture, your own contexts and your own preferences.

### What does it mean to lead?

The art of leading was never easy – and it seems to be getting harder all the time. Communication is faster, connection is greater, markets are global and whatever action we take is part of a great onrushing whirl of conversation and innovation. In this world, what does it mean to lead? People can get all the information they need (apparently from whatever perspective they want) at the touch of a button. They can interact with whomever they want. So, the classical view of a leader as someone who simply issues information and direction is obsolete.

Host leadership offers an alternative. Leadership seems to put the focus on the leader. We think this is a mistake. Leading is about a relationship – between the leader and the others. The word “followers” is not a great term for those people. It takes two to have a relationship – but the leader is only one person. Host leadership is about building relationships – at work, in the community, in society, at home – to engage others. This engagement is the key ingredient that leads to increased performance and results.

### Leadership as engagement

In the old days of mass production, everyone had something to do, and as long as they did it, all would be fine; the system would fit together and products would emerge. These kinds of workplaces involved taking engagement out of the equation: one person could easily be replaced by another, and so engagement did not really matter.

As the twentieth century wore on, it became increasingly clear that engagement was what really counted. If people are engaged – aware, committed, involved, taking action, participating in an ever-changing landscape – they both get more and give more. There is plenty of reliable research on this; the famous “black box” studies led by Professor John Purcell of the University of Bath (Purcell *et al.*, 2003) are a good example. Purcell and his colleagues spent over six years looking at UK companies renowned for their employees’ high performance. Purcell’s group found that even in organizations with excellent human resource policies and practices, and an attractive “big idea” mission that drew people in, the main difference in performance actually came from the relationship between line managers and staff. This was the “black box” that made the difference. Engagement is the key element – without it, everything else is at risk.

Matters are even more stark when organizations and communities are facing “wicked” problems (Grint, 2010). In contrast to “tame” problems which have analyzable and clear solutions, wicked problems have uncertain boundaries and wide-ranging interconnections. The relationship between cause and effect is not clear: does the chicken or the egg come first? Many of the issues facing organizations and society are becoming increasingly wicked – climate change, developing new business models, global poverty, the banking

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system, the economy. These are questions which do not easily fit into a single department and have no clear stopping point – a time when all will be done and dusted.

In such situations, a simple analysis will not yield lasting progress. Engagement is key – getting people together to work on the issues becomes the first priority, rather than expecting an instant answer. British leadership researcher Grint (2010) sums it up.

Wicked problems require a transfer of authority from the individual to the collective because only collective engagement can hope to address the problem. The uncertainty involved in wicked problems implies that leadership, as I am defining it, is not a science but an art – the art of engaging a community in facing up to complex collective problems.

The fact that the world, and consequently the challenges of leadership, is becoming more unpredictable is not in doubt. In the years after 9/11, even the US Army War College noted for a conservative and hierarchical approach, began to focus on a VUCA future – Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex and Ambiguous (Stiehm and Townsend, 2002). A VUCA world demands agility of response, adaptativeness to utilize emerging situations and a mix of clarity (about where we are trying to go) and flexibility in how we get there.

*Host leadership is a natural way to take a leading position, in a manner that draws in others. This builds engagement, leading to performance and results.*

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