Following SELF

How leaders can stop defending
and start living their own higher cause

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Leaders who acknowledge mistakes, take personal responsibility and act swiftly to make corrections are generally regarded as heroic. Their willingness to open the door to new information – however uncomfortable that may be – gains credibility for themselves and their organizations. From the Tylenol scare and Exxon spill of the '80's, to the demise of Washington Mutual, Toyota's stuck accelerators and BP's gulf spill today, how leaders handle problems and mistakes determines long-term reputation, personally and organizationally. Yet to become open and accessible, to overcome defensiveness in the moment when bad things are happening, is no small task. It takes a certain level of self-knowledge, empathy, and strength of character. How can this be achieved?

The wisdom of the ages would say such strength is grounded not only in a genuine dedication to goals larger than any individual or enterprise, but also

on an inner acknowledgment of the dual edge of leadership itself: creating any meaningful change in the world requires a concurrent dedication to inner personal growth, development, and change as well.

As J. Krishnamurti, the philosopher, asked in a lecture about ending violence in the world, "Is this problem of violence out there or here? Do you want to solve the problem in the outside world or are you questioning violence itself as it is in you?"[i] To begin with, he is saying, we must acknowledge that we hold in ourselves the very problems we say we want to solve. Before we can begin to change anything "out there," we have to overcome our own fundamental defensiveness about learning what's "in here."

This is where the first real awakening can take place in our own leadership – our own impact and intentionality in creating a better world. If we can acknowledge and appreciate the unconsciousness of our own patterns, if we can see their psychological, familial, and social roots, then we also know we collude in making our world exactly what it is – and is not. We know that *leading* is the mechanism by which change occurs, and we also become grounded in the understanding that leading change begins with self. In this light, if the fundamental cause of defensiveness is resistance to learning something about ourselves, the cure is found in *following* a larger aspect of our own that supercedes the defensiveness.

I call this aspect, Self, capital "S." This implies a distinction between the more selfish, self-absorbed, and fragile aspects of who we are and the better, higher qualities we hold within us. For example, when we display our vulnerability with others through an apology for a mistake, we are sharing Self by intentionally putting aside a more self-protective or conceited self.

Capital "S" Self connotes a variety of things:

- Awakening to qualities or values that supercede the dynamics of self-protection and ego.

- The ability to accept and appreciate others, and to experience compassion for self and others.

- The capacity to distinguish and act upon personal integrity in situations where boundaries are needed

- The capacity to allow in new information, even when that is painfully inconsistent with a preferred self-image.

- A process of personal and social redemption, wholeness, and reconciliation.

- Access to courage, authenticity – and forgiveness.

- A unique path that must be discovered one's own; a path that also touches on what is universal.

When these qualities are *not* present, the dynamics of self-oriented (small "s"), defensive leadership are frequently encountered. Again and again in the business world, we see how leaders fail by walling out the very information they most need to address crucial challenges, including information about their own actions (or reactions). Good people leave because of this failure, reputations are ruined, businesses fold, and sometimes, as with the banking problems that led to the current recession, the leaders' denial can have catastrophic results; all because of a tendency to turn a blind eye to the reality that must be faced, the discovery that we are conspirators in the problems we say we want to solve.

Why Understanding Defensiveness is Important to Leading

Defensiveness is really a universal problem. It involves any circumstances of potential *embarrassment, shame* or interpersonal *threat* -- everything from engaging in a product debate that suddenly becomes personal to absorbing criticism about how a project decision was made. Chris Argyris[ii] of Harvard, who is generally considered the master of understanding organizational and personal "defensive routines" and "undiscussables" made it clear that these threats and embarrassing situations impair our capacities for genuine learning, adaptation, and real productivity.

It is also just as clear that all of us are prone in the course of our everyday working relationships to occasionally face moments when we feel we need to protect ourselves, save face, or to stand our ground – rightly or wrongly. It is precisely in these moments that we initiate what might be called our defensive strategies. Yet, if we can learn to grow past these strategies, becoming more accessible, non-defensive leaders, rich benefits await. Amy Edmondson's research[iii] over the last twenty years shows that teams astoundingly can learn up to *ten times faster* when leaders genuinely welcome feedback about problems and mistakes, including the ones they have caused. In turn, faster learning and higher levels of openness mean adaptation and innovation come more easily.

My own work with trust and fear-based systems[iv] has convinced me, in line with Argyris's and Edmondson's work, that leaders' personal defensiveness also deeply influences organizational culture. It is especially important that people in leadership roles understand their defensive behaviors are more than a personal issue. How individual leaders respond to stresses, especially interpersonal ones, can become the culture of entire teams, if not entire workplaces. Our reputation for blowing up or for hiding, for blaming the messenger or making people pay, influences the tone and texture of all our

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interactions. Our defensive strategies can activate deeper and older "default settings" of business culture, including a widespread fear of repercussions and behavioral patterns of silence and cover-ups that make – and keep -- workplaces dysfunctional.

The locus of change, therefore, is first and foremost to change the consciousness and behavior of specific leaders – *us* – to help ourselves consistently use open, receptive approaches, even under stress. We are, after all, the people who must show through our words and actions that we are not afraid to explore, accept responsibility, and move past our own defensive styles. In so doing, we model a workplace of flexible change, powerful, adaptable decisions, and empowering relationships. By modeling how we follow Self, capital "S," we help others move out of their own self-interests and defending behaviors.

In a sense, one definition of genuine leadership is exactly this movement -- from defending to courageous honesty and vulnerability. Everything else risks negative perceptions: "fake," "guarded," "manipulative," stonewalling," "in denial," "domineering," "autocratic," and a horde of other derogatory terms – small "s" all the way.

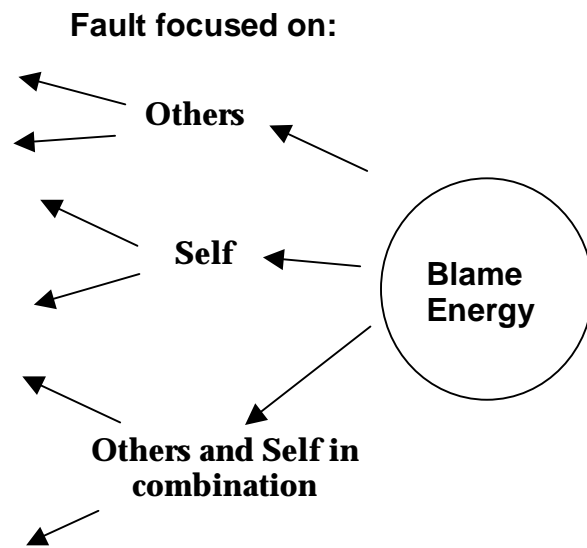**The Purpose of Defense -- and the Energy Behind It**

The self-protective strategies we display may be well known to us or they may be inadvertent and unconscious. But whether we can name them or not, when we uncover the layers, we are likely to find their one central purpose is *to avert risks and threats to our sense of personal identity.* Universally, our defensive strategies protect who we believe ourselves to be, or want to be. Unfortunately, this protection can become more important to us than the leadership work we are called to do. But if, in the moment, when we are able to put aside our self protectiveness in favor of truth, our leadership becomes that

much more credible and powerful.

Recently, for example, in a room of about a hundred managers, I witnessed the senior Human Resources executive for a mid-sized organization describe the cost of his own failure to speak up about an important staffing decision. The scenario, he said, involved "the tide of the organization going in one direction" – toward hiring a particular candidate for a high-level vacancy -- and his own feeling of not being able to buck that tide despite deep misgivings about the person selected. The consequences of his decision not to speak up, he explained, turned out to be a disaster for the organization, causing people embarrassment, frustration and anger. After a few weeks the mistake in selection became obvious and the newly appointed executive was quickly but painfully separated. You could have heard a pin drop as the HR executive explained his private doubts and his decision to contain his real opinions. He spoke of his inaction before the selection with regret and a sense of learning, but without self-abnegating criticism or the need to pass off his silence through blame of others, such as the CEO or the terminated executive. If we all felt stronger as a result of his brave reflections in front of the group it was because, I believe, we recognized ourselves in him; all the times we, too, have not spoken up about something we knew was wrong. You might not think that a story about a mistake could be inspiring, but told openly, without blame, justification, or judgment of others, and as an example of personal learning at a deep level, that is exactly what it was.

Behind many of our defensive strategies is exactly that energy of blame – defined as the need to find fault. The diagram below depicts how defensiveness manifests in many behaviors and is expressed with an emphasis on blaming others, self, or some combination of the two. We need to keep in mind that this a shorthand form for a very complex internal process.

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│     Sample Defensive Strategies          │
│                                          │
│  • Hiding problems or hiding             │
│    from problems                         │
│  • Blowing up; angry reactions           │
│  • Becoming indirect or                  │
│    indecisive                            │
│  • Take a belligerent, debating,         │
│    or challenging stand instead          │
│    of listening                          │
│  • Alleging that others caused           │
│    the problems                          │
│  • Seeing oneself as a victim            │
│  • Becoming paralyzed                    │
│  • Becoming cold, neutral, or            │
│    "objective"                           │
│  • Sarcasm or making sideways            │
│  • Many others…                          │
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Fault focused on:

Others

Self

Others and Self in combination

Blame Energy

Within our organizations, blaming, subtle or overt, can be rampant, and if recent research proves true, is both contagious and has a distinctive relationship to self-worth[v]. The energy of blame may be fundamentally self-protective but in impact is coercive, controlling and hurtful. We cannot always tell whether the behaviors blame drives are defensive or aggressive. In this sense, it is not too far-fetched to say that blame is a form of interpersonal or psychological violence, as opposed to physical violence. When we think of name-calling, for example, and especially when the names involve racial slurs, we hear and feel these insults as being virtually as damaging as a physical attack. Blame uses a similar *energy of attack*, turned outward or inward. Our defensive strategies are used to both express and counteract the pain blame causes.

The challenge is in not becoming caught up in either blaming others or self-blame. Blaming others takes an infinite variety of forms, from ego-driven contempt for another's character and motives to a more passive, but no less angry, sense of victimization. Similarly, self-blame runs the full gamut from intense self-criticism and excessive guilt to a sense of helplessness, futility,

and underestimation. If blaming others sets up castle-like walls between armies at war, self-blame washes away all boundaries in a fog of self-induced ego punishment.

It is these excesses and the energy of attack behind them that are the fundamental problems. Healthy leaders do have defenses and are fully capable of assigning responsibility to others and to themselves. But, as with the HR executive, they do it with a sense of proportion and fairness, based on reflection not blame. The "boundaries" that effective leaders apply establish the limits of that responsibility and they are rarely made of Teflon. They are firm, but they also have openings. They do not allow for totally open ground nor do they create closed fortresses. Such leaders have values, limits, directions, and ideals, and they are also open to new ideas, perspectives, and feedback – even when it involves potentially embarrassing or threatening information. They are able to assess their own collusion in the problems and are able to replace naturally defensive reactions with insight and open communication.

In this paper, I present a method for uncovering and building awareness of our own defensive strategies and how we handle the problem of being "at fault," and then go further to suggest how leaders can begin a process of genuine accessibility, including implications for personal leadership transformation and group dynamics. On one hand, because this information is about the workplace, the payoffs are in building effective, productive organizational cultures. On the other, the payoffs are also about personal fulfillment and living the effective lives we are meant to live.

Self-Diagnostics

Beginning to find out more about our own defensive styles is a good first step. Most of us already have a fair amount of information about our defensive structures simply as a result of past experience. We've been through enough

conflicts and emotional situations. "Implicit Leadership Theory,"[vi] the notion that we all hold a leadership standard within ourselves, can help us examine exactly how we protect ourselves. The following exercises tend to work best if you do them one at a time and do not read ahead.

Your leadership theory

Our implicit leadership theories can be said to have two parts: a vision, representing our views of the positive aspects of leaders, and an anti-vision, our views of the negative aspects of leaders. Let's look at yours in more detail.

Very quickly, off the top of your head, identify the traits and characteristics of "good leaders," however you wish to define that phrase. List them on the next page in the space provided. See if you can name at least ten. There are no right or wrong answers, just *your* answers. Take no more than a couple of minutes to do this.

Characteristics of Good Leaders

Now, once you've created this list move on to another list. For this one, identify the traits and characteristics of "bad leaders." Do NOT refer back to your previous list for good leaders and then simply write down the opposites. Instead, think from a fresh perspective. What traits and characteristics would make for the type of leader you would never want to be?

Characteristics of Bad Leaders

These two lists represent a first cut of your own implicit leadership theory. That is, they express your internal standard for how you view both yourself and others as a leader. When you make judgments about someone's good or bad leadership, it will likely line up with the words and phrases you've just listed.

There is no right or wrong here, just your own views and standards. This is not about an objective truth; it's about your own subjective (but powerful) estimations.

Light and Dark

Go back to your list of Good Leaders traits for a moment. Look down the list and circle the one word or phrase that describes your best leadership strength or gift – a quality that you sense about yourself and are proud of. Don't be modest! This area will be referred to as your "light side."

Now move to your Bad Leader's list. Here, too, circle a word or phrase, but this time identify a quality you see in yourself and are not at all proud of. In fact, when you notice this quality "leaking" out of you, you may feel some embarrassment or shame. This area will be referred to as your "dark side." This term can imply, along with your feelings of embarrassment or shame, a certain unconsciousness about this aspect of your personality.

The words that you have circled on the Good and Bad Leaders lists tell you something about your defensive style. But before getting into that, there is a little more work to do.

Below, you will find two blank wheel diagrams. In the middle of the first circle, the "Dark Side" diagram, write the word or phrase you circled from your Bad Leader list. Simply copy the words. These words are now called, the "label."

Please note: If you have used words such as "Defensive" or "Blaming" as the dark side label, replace them with alternative terms that are more specific of how defensiveness and blaming occur for you, such as "Judgmental," "Accusatory," "Attacking," "Avoiding." Etc.

Around the circle are a set of "spokes." Fill in each spoke with a different behavioral pattern that you associate with the label. For example, your *label* might be "Thoughtless." A *spoke* could be, "Leave door shut on my office." Each spoke identifies one of the ways the label is expressed.

Try to make your spokes as behavioral as possible. "Behavioral" is like a video tape; what you can see or hear. A behavioral pattern means things you do, say or notice about yourself that happen repeatedly. A leader who labeled his dark side diagram with the word, "angry," listed a behavior observable by others for one of his spokes, "insults and put downs." He also rightly included a "video-tape" of what was happening internally for him, "sense of confusion and panic." Including both "outside" and "inside" on his videotape gave him a comprehensive look in the mirror. See Appendix 1 on page 55 for an example.

Dark Side
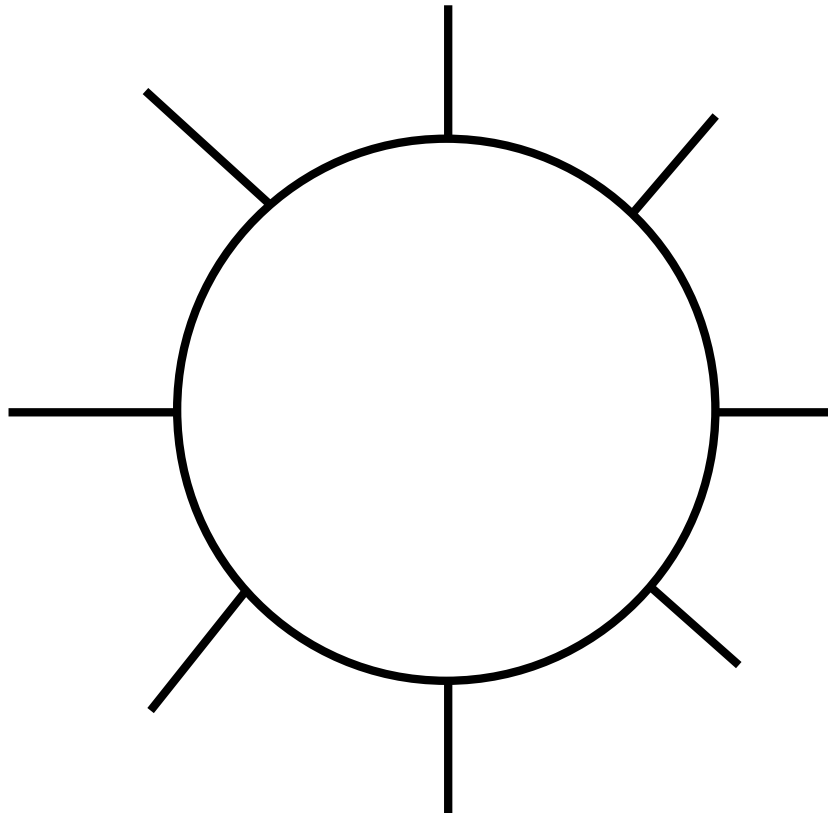
Please complete your diagram before reading further.

The Dark Side diagram reports the part of your defensive style that defines *how* you get defensive: *what you tend to do* to defend yourself. It shows what a primary defensive strategy looks like. There are likely to be other strategies, too, -- other wheels -- some of which might well be only partly conscious. A person might even use a cluster of strategies, rather than just one or two. Different strategies might be activated in different contexts, such as at work and with superiors, at home with family, and so forth. Now switch over to the wheel diagram labeled Light Side.   Label this diagram with the word or phrase you circled from your Good Leaders list. Then, as with the Dark Side diagram, fill in behavioral patterns that you associate with your label.

Light Side

Please complete your diagram before reading further.

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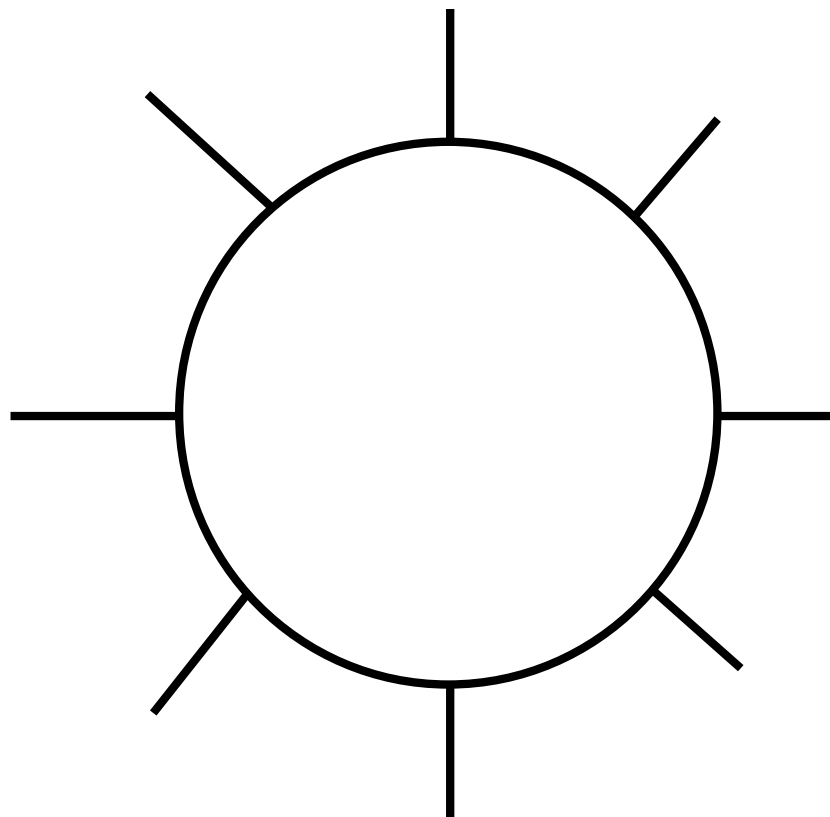
The light side diagram shows an example of *one important thing you might get defensive about.* Typically, we assume that we are defensive about our weaknesses being too visibly seen and criticized, but this is only partially true. We can also be defensive – and at times *much more* defensive -- about areas that we consider our most important strengths. The reason for this is that we tend to build essential aspects of our self-concept and self-esteem from our views of where we are effective, right, and good. If I believe I am not very good at negotiations, hearing about that may pain me, but I'm not likely to try to defend to the death my assertion of that skill. But if I believe instead that I am an especially good negotiator, and stake my reputation (and maybe career) on it, attacking my effectiveness is likely to elicit some form of defensive response. After all, if I am not effective, right, or good in the very areas I supposed I was, what in fact am I? How can I trust myself, my own judgments and consciousness?

In effect, when a strength is attacked, a person can be more easily demolished. This dynamic is as true for individuals as it is for institutions. If an organization projects itself as "world class" in some area, but is found to have flaws, the natural tendency is not to admit the problem but cover it up and defend, defend, defend. The recent debacle with Toyota's quality problem with stuck accelerators is a case in point. Similarly, as individuals, when we find that some aspect of an assumed strength is in doubt, we often will do everything we can to avoid facing the facts of the situation. For leaders, due to our exposure and power, that potential defensiveness will only be exacerbated. As the phrase goes, "the bigger they are, the harder they fall". By extension, the higher the stakes and the more rigid the defensive style, the harder they fall, as well.

What is particularly provocative about this notion of defensiveness and strengths is that it greatly expands the discussion about playing to peoples' strong points rather than their weaknesses. From my experiences with conflict management, I would say that what often makes conflict so painful is the attack

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on strengths and the inner response of people to defend not only against others but also against a seed of doubt within themselves. Perhaps it is that very seed that fosters our continued growth and perhaps it also implicitly reminds us that all our self-concepts are ultimately flawed. Like all aspects of creation, we, too, including our most fundamental ideas of ourselves, are imperfect.

Your Own Defensive Style

Putting the two diagrams together mirrors back defensive style. For instance:

- When my *honesty* (Light Side) is attacked, I become *mean* (Dark Side).
- When my *intelligence* is challenged, I become *cynical*.
- When my skill as a *team builder* is undermined, I become *self-sabotaging*.
- When my *genuineness* is criticized, I become *indirect*.
- When my *decision-making* is threatened, I become *demanding*.

The spokes on the two diagrams offer an array of potential defensive moves. Considering only the first instance above, "When my *honesty* is attacked, I become *mean*," a number of possible scenarios might play out.

For example, one behavioral pattern a person may use to express her honesty (label) is "not side-stepping the issue." (spoke) One behavioral pattern she uses to express her meanness (label) is "publicly ridiculing others' ideas." (spoke) This potentially means that if someone suggested she was side-stepping an issue – heard as an attack on her honesty -- she might express her "meanness" by ridiculing the ideas of the individual who made that suggestion.

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Ouch! Reviewing the different behavioral patterns on the wheel diagram can provide you with some insight about how your own defensiveness actually plays out. You may find yourself recalling instances in your life where exactly one or another of these routines has been expressed.

Keep in mind that the central purpose of our defensive strategies is self-protection. They protect us from having to deal with awkward, uncomfortable, embarrassing or threatening situations that are implicitly or explicitly felt as an attack on our self-designed identities. That might seem ironic because, diagnosed in this way, it is also easy to see how our defensive behaviors actually look aggressive, thereby fostering and reinforcing conflicts. The protection is often at best only *short-term.* Like an aspirin offering only meager relief from a migraine, we use the defensive behavior to address situations that require larger, more effective medicine.

Triggers of Defensiveness

The actual response time – from challenge of the strength to start-up of the defensive routine – may be a few seconds or less, and it is within this tiny window that self-intervention, if it is to be successful, must occur. Even when we become conscious of the challenge in the moment, we may feel at a certain point that defense is essential and actually a bit out of our control. We simply behave, and then find ourselves experiencing another kind of defensive system later, one that attempts to dampen, rationalize, or justify our earlier behavior. We talk to ourselves about why we did what we did, how the other person is wrong, and so on, assuaging a variety of emotions such as fear, anger, self-disappointment or guilt. These reactions, sometimes connected to activation of a more ancient part of the brain, seem to be more or less automatic and emotional in nature.

We can learn more about the reactions by "running the film in slow motion." They tend to follow a predictable pattern:

1. My reactions begin with an observation of someone else…
2. that is quickly judged to be an interpersonal threat…
3. to my sense of my identity.
4. I then experience strong emotions -- I am *hijacked* --
5. in turn driving a reaction to protect myself through defensive behavior.

At each of these stages, we have an opportunity to evaluate and learn – and potentially to interrupt the reaction. Here is a further description of each step:

1. **Other person's behavior:** The behavior I observe in someone else may or may not be intentional on his or her part. Many conflicts come out of situations where someone's behavior is unconscious to him or her. None of us have perfect self-knowledge. So instead of thinking about a person or people, think about the kinds of behaviors that "set you off" or "push your buttons." Perhaps it is dominant or domineering; perhaps patronizing; perhaps an indirect statement with apparent innuendo or no more than a word of feedback that is felt as personal criticism.

What are some of the behaviors that almost automatically get under your skin?

2. **Judgments of interpersonal threat**. The sense of threat that is triggered by another person's behaviors often stem from our judgments about the motives behind this behavior. Our judgment may be right or wrong, but it exists virtually simultaneously with experiencing the other's conduct. Sometimes the judgment is based on past experience going back to one's family of origin. It is easy to *project* motives or characteristics onto another person who exhibits the same behavior an early caregiver once did. If a parent ignored a child in order to punish her, for example, she could easily interpret someone else's similar behavior later in life as having the same motive – and she might be right or entirely wrong. A father's patronizing tone of voice with a small child forever after may create a negative judgment (such as an intent to dominate) about anyone who exhibits this trait.

What do these triggering behaviors that you identified above mean to you? What motives by others do they suggest?

3. **Experience of risk**. What is threatened is often a positive aspect of a person's self-concept, including core values, things a person likes about him/herself or sees as strengths. Typically, this hurts or scares us and we may experience something like an inner panic or shakiness. Suddenly it is possible that a *falseness or faultiness of the self*-concept will become exposed. Perhaps a core value is not being lived up to. Perhaps what I like about myself is actually something wrong, and the strength – the light side --

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isn't really a strength at all. The sensation of risk to self-concept can be the tiniest instant but it is an instant when one "looks into the terrors of the abyss."

What is at risk for you? What strong or absolute beliefs about yourself are in jeopardy? (Your light side wheel diagram may help you identify some of these.)

4. **Emotional reaction**. As a result of this unstable moment, strong emotions surface activating our defensive behaviors. These feelings are often larger and more intense than we are able to manage or quell. They may include frustration, anger, embarrassment, being offended or hurt, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame or other emotions, often experienced in combination with one another as an instant of pain or panic or both. These emotions are directly linked to the behaviors that trigger us at stage 1 through our perceptions of what they mean at step 2. In addition, they may become *circular* in the sense that experiencing them, because they are negative and we have been conditioned to control them, can lead to more of the emotion. I am embarrassed. I see I am embarrassed and this makes me even more embarrassed. I am angry. I see I am angry and this makes me angrier. Etc.

What are some of these large emotions for you? Are they amplified when you notice them?

5. **Defensive behavior.** The product of all these micro-stages when unchecked is the eruption of behavior used to defend oneself, what might be seen on the "video-tape" of reactions. This would include all kinds of "dark side" behaviors and impacts on others, some of which may not be altogether conscious.

What are some of the behaviors that you see yourself express when you are feeling these large emotions?

Accepting that some behaviors or their impacts are unconscious can lead to powerful insights, while denial that anything is out of awareness has a tendency to reinforce the defensive strategy. What <u>unconscious behaviors</u> or <u>impacts on others</u> do you suspect are operating when you feel those large emotions?

The samples on the following page may help you respond to some of these questions.

Examples

Behaviors That Cause Me to Become Defensive: (My Patterns)

1. Other person's behavior	2. My negative judgments about the other person and that person's motives	3. What is at risk for me? What strong or absolute beliefs are in jeopardy? (See Light Side Diagram)	4. My charged feelings that come from these judgments and risks	5. My defensive behavior that results from these feelings (See Dark Side Diagram)
Examples				
Patronizing tone of voice	*Want to punish me, lord it over me*	*My sense that I'm a good person and don't deserve to be punished*	*Anger*	*Try to discredit what the other person is saying* *Unconscious: other person could feel ridiculed*
Give me feedback in front of others about a mistake I've made	*Trying to dominate me and "win" in the relationship*	*Other people might see me as imperfect, wrong or incompetent.*	*Embarrassment*	*Politely apologize publicly; sabotage the person behind the scenes* *Unconscious: escalate mistrust*

Critical to this process playing out is the instantaneous and charged emotional reaction at Step 4. It is the opening of an internal slip point, a momentary loss of intra-personal control. A person is literally no longer fully in charge of him- or herself in an entirely conscious and intentional way and literally becomes (at least partially) a *reaction*. Sometimes we are highly aware of this point. It is usually uncomfortable and disquieting – something has taken over from us and, in retrospect, we feel we were *hijacked*. Sometimes we may be less aware of this process. The rational mind continues with its responses and justifications, but another aspect of us is also at work. This unconscious form of hijacking is the source of powerful blind spots in our conduct. Those who are, for whatever reason, out of touch with their emotions, may *think* they are containing their defensive behavior but they are deceiving no one but themselves.

The underlying emotions that hijack us – I call them *core emotions* -- vary according to background and upbringing. Typically, these are emotions, or combinations of them, that we never quite learned to manage as a child, and often for good reason. Someone who was repeatedly shamed may revolt (be hijacked) at the very first twinge of shame. The reaction may be far larger than the incident in the present moment actually warrants. A defensive *behavior*, such as sudden shouting, may be entirely obvious to both the person reacting and those nearby. But the *emotion* behind it – such as unmanaged shame – may or may not be clear at all. To complicate matters, defensive behaviors can vary a great deal and be quite individual. For example, for someone whose judgment was constantly questioned, the process of being hijacked may be expressed quite differently; perhaps by going into a seemingly inevitable state of brooding or self-doubt that takes several hours to unfold. While the defense mechanisms may vary, it is the underlying "too big to be managed" emotions that must be understood because it is these emotions that lead to *incomplete awareness* of actions. Certainly I may see that I have become upset and angry or that I am worrying. But in the moment I *live* these emotions. I act my feelings out – and

they seem to have a life of their own. What I may *not* be able to see nearly as well is the *impact* of my behavior on others while my feelings are in play in this way. I become slightly or wholly out of touch with the effects of what I am doing. And this, too, is a defense mechanism. I do not have to see how what I am doing to defend myself is actually out of step with my positive, "in control," and ethical view of who I am. There is a great deal of room for blame of others and self to slip by unconsciously in the process of acting out.

In sum, the pattern is this: A preferred strength (aspect of self-definition) is questioned and comes into doubt. I feel large emotions that can hijack me out of a sense of emotional control. I become less conscious in that very moment as to the impact of my own behaviors.

Responding to Core Emotions

Because the core emotions drive behavior, the better they are understood, the more power we have to intervene with them and with our defensive reactions. They are key to halting the process of being hijacked.

Typically, we use one or more *un*constructive strategies to deal with these emotions.

- *We act them out.* We directly enable and even justify the negative behaviors. For example, a person displays a burst of anger and then is done with the reaction. Unfortunately, although the reaction is relatively short, it may have much longer term effects on relationships – effects the person exhibiting the anger can be mystified about. "Everybody knows I blow up, but it's over when it's over. I don't hold a grudge." Leaders I've worked with who show this behavior can be quite surprised at how deeply and how long others have been affected by their displays.

- *We turn the core emotions sideways*. We express them, but not in a direct form. Our intent is to show our pain in a mannered but pointed way. For example, a person expresses a darkly cynical perspective, voices a "gotcha," or implies contempt for another. This may have an even greater impact on relationships – precisely because it is *not* explosive.

- *We brood the emotions to death.* This strategy involves rethinking and reliving a situation repeatedly in order to re-examine the causes of the hijacked state. While this has certain advantages in controlling the direct expression of a negative emotion, the result can be a very noticeable state of personal depression or anxiety. The charge is very gradually released in the way a dam's floodgates regulate the release of storm water.

- *We sublimate the emotions in negative ways.* This strategy is exactly the opposite of the first one. Instead of expressing the unmanaged emotion, we pour the energy back into an "underground reservoir." This is precisely the "I'll hold a grudge" approach, one that leads to later undermining of others and revenge. A colleague who worked with community building projects called this "cold anger," a term he contrasted with the "hot anger" of the first strategy.

- *We pretend to be unaffected.* This strategy involves making feeling unconscious or, strictly speaking, unimportant. In a grand cover-up of our sense of damage from the negative emotions, we simply disallow their presence. "No, I'm not angry" we might say blandly, but suddenly find an opportunity to cry, have a car accident, or get drunk. In effect, the emotions have gone into the underground reservoir (and in fact are still active) but we've pulled down the bricks to the door of the reservoir and claim we've never seen it.

The tactics above may be combined into hybrids that fit a particular individual and situation. In general, the list above is arranged from fast depletion of the emotional energy to slow depletion. None of these tactics is ever really effective for handling the core emotions. Each takes its toll on the person who is hijacked and often has a direct and negative effect on those around him or her.

Exercise
Looking over the list, what would you say are your own most prevalent unconstructive strategies?

What toll do these strategies take on you? On others?

The most common *constructive* strategy to deal with negative core emotions is to talk them out in a supportive environment. The entire reactive cycle or parts of it become conversations about situations, other people, and ourselves, as we work through our discomfort. Sometimes we attempt to use those closest to us – family members and friends – to accomplish this work, and this can help.

However, we all know this can also create a burden for those who must support us, and in the end, we must come to an inner sense of peace on our own.

To begin with, there are steps that any of us can take during and after a defensive exchange to begin to neutralize and interrupt defensiveness. These are not the whole answer. There are other layers of work to be done, but they are a good starting point.

When you experience your own defensiveness, you can:

1. **Acknowledge the moment of hijacking to yourself, checking the process.** This is a personal, inner acknowledgement that you have left solid ground and are operating from within a position of threat and shock. You will need to shift focus. Take a moment and at least one deep breath. What's most important at this moment is the reality of your own distress, not responding. Calm down as much as possible, and move outside yourself to *really listen to both yourself and to the other person*.

2. **Acknowledge your core emotions – what are they?** This names the emotions that drive your defensive reactions. Sometimes, it is important to acknowledge this to the other person(s), but mostly it's important to name them to yourself and begin to *hold* them, rather than allowing them to compel action or expression. Is it embarrassment? Shame? Hurt? Disappointment in self. Avoid words like "frustration" which are codes for deeper feelings. If you can name it, then to use the phrase of the great Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh[vii], you must learn to "hold it like a baby" – essentially caring for yourself and providing self-solace.

3. **Listen to the other person's full perspective.** *Explore.* Ask questions about what you are not clear about. Probe to get all the information you need. This is part of the search for the truth and for reality. Specifically

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look in those areas where you are missing knowledge, where you think you know but may not, where it's possible you have been blind or are making assumptions, including assumptions about others' real feelings or motives. Ask the questions, in particular, that will make it easy for others to give you their personal feedback openly and honestly. In the moment, this may feel like it is giving others unfair advantage. Keep in mind the need for fairness can sound like a good personal boundary but under stress can also show up as simply another layered defensive structure. In truth, by welcoming this information, even when you sense some unfairness, you build others' respect for you, the person behind your defenses.

4. **Step back: separate useful information from raw data – become a witness to yourself.** Step back and buy time in the moment. If appropriate say, "I need to think about this for a moment (or longer)." Then, if you can, acknowledge to yourself what you are defending. What aspect of who you are is at risk? Talk to yourself about what strength or value that is especially dear to you is at stake and what you get by trying to "win." Is it that you are "right?" Is your "competence" or your "knowledge" on the line? Is it your view of yourself as "a good person." Are you concerned you will lose others' "respect" or not feel "appreciated?"

   Ask yourself, "What am I learning?" Remind yourself that no one is entirely congruent, that you can accept yourself in spite of whatever comes forward, and that all self-concepts are ultimately flawed, limiting, and so much "straw for the fire." Establish an internal witness and positive internal guide to help you evaluate your reactions to the information being shared. Simply watching in this way often forestalls additional reactivity.

5. **Check your projections onto the other person. Make neutral or positive assumptions about the other person's intentions and stay**

clear of fault-finding. Remove yourself from a position of blaming others, taking retaliatory action against them, or negatively assessing their motives. Check the five micro-stages of defensiveness to make sure that you are not "putting someone else's face" onto the messenger.

6. **Reflect on the experience later for personal learning.** Provide yourself with affirmations and kudos for learning as you reflect on what has happened. Remind yourself of your strengths, gifts, talents, capabilities, and your *intentions*.

7. **Decide on what action by you, if any, needs to follow.** This could include "rediscussion" and dialogue, asking for further feedback, an apology, a thank you, assertively making your needs known, letting go of a conversation or relationship, or countless other actions that are based on your sense of integrity and what is appropriate for the situation.

These techniques can keep us more grounded when our buttons have been punched. But in the end they work only as well as a person is genuinely drawn to move past a defensive posture in a more complete and compelling way, not just to interrupt the process but to move toward the real ground of personal learning. This is another way of saying, to "follow Self." Without this deeper movement, the focus remains on preventing attack and protecting an identity from the experience of being at fault when attacks occur.

The Assumption of Responsibility and the Beginning of Transformation

The energy of blame -- assessing who is at fault – can be thought of as a kind of "super-emotion," potentially a highly *unmanaged* element of both our inner and outer worlds. Organizationally, looking into conflicts between teams, departments, members of a supply chain, managers and employees, and most

commonly between colleagues, it is often easy to see how ongoing conflict, mistrust and defensiveness are products of reciprocal blame. Often we hope that the others will simply listen, hear the problems, and acknowledge their role in the challenges of working together. But when that acknowledgement doesn't appear to come, when there is "baggage" in the system, when the co-worker or the leader doesn't come forward with agreement that his or her behavior has been problematic, when there are no apologies or attempts at shared ownership or reconciliation -- when forgiveness is absent -- then all the dynamics discussed so far develop as habits, routines, and even rituals of the workplace. For better or worse, we are at the center of it all, both contributing members and victims of the situation.

The origin of the word, fault, is itself a clue to understanding. Fault comes via Middle English and Old French from Latin, *fallere*, to deceive. And *deceive* brings to mind both whatever is visible but not true and what is invisible but actually true. Fault, it seems, must be "sorted out," "assigned" and "accepted." It is by nature contentious and slippery. It requires a court of law, outer or inner. And, from a more psychological perspective, it has exactly the quality of what is unknown to self, a self-deception, for which one is responsible. This is what *really* hijacks us. Who wouldn't be afraid of grappling with such an awesome thing, *this flaw of unconscious responsibility* for the very problems and differences that cause ourselves and others pain? To be found at fault means that our strengths, those things we cherish about ourselves and hold most dear, the very pillars of our self-concept and self esteem, our very sense of awareness and consciousness are self-deceiving – and this is an intolerable state. Faced with our unconscious faults, how can we do anything but defend?

And how can any of us truly move past this state to higher ground?

Many times in my career I have watched people do just that. And it has always been the case that somehow self is sacrificed to Self in the process.

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What was selfish or self-interested or petty was sacrificed to what was nobler, larger, and more important in the scheme of things. Several stories come to mind:

- I recall a work group where negative perceptions of one another's motives was killing the capacity of group members to make decisions together. But one of the members, not the formal leader, came forward to acknowledge his own role. "I believe you all see me as an empire builder," he began, "and the truth is you are right – I have been one. Let me explain how and why I adopted that role…" I will always recall how others suddenly shifted their perspectives. "You knew we thought that about you?" one asked in shock. "Yes," the first individual replied, "I did, but I did not feel ready to talk about it. Today I am."

- I remember a corporate leader was given some hard feedback about his remarks at a meeting by one of his employees, African American. "You could have been viewed as racist based on what you said," was the feedback. Instead of discounting or explaining, the leader asked for more information, and with the employee's permission also publicly told the story of getting this feedback at the next all-staff meeting in front of a group of two hundred people. The employee, the leader said, was a hero of the organization. "This is what I want," the leader said, "this is the kind of culture I'd like to see and it starts everywhere and especially with me." Then the leader invited everyone else to give him feedback, as well. Had he ever offended others because of things he'd said, especially things that might have been heard as discriminatory? Several people came forward after that meeting to share their experiences with him, and many others congratulated him on his courage.

- In a group training session, the issue of feedback came up. The head of the Marketing Department shared openly that she knew there were views

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of her department that were a problem for the company. She asked if the group would be willing to help her understand the criticisms. "Could we take a few minutes away from the training to do this *live*?" Others were a little hesitant to dive in, but finally the Director of Engineering and others spoke up, sharing their perceptions of the Marketing Department. "Okay, that's important information about my department," she commented at one point, but then went deeper. "And what would you say has been my role in the problems personally? How have I contributed?" Asked directly in this way, the Engineering Director shared directly his concerns about her abrasiveness and insensitivity to the Engineering Department's production concerns. "You set us up to fail with impossible promises to customers and then you and your department come across as holier than thou when there are problems." The Marketing Director immediately apologized for her own and her staff's conduct and thanked everyone for taking the risk to share with her. She committed to shifting her own behavior and helping her staff develop better collaboration skills. This open, vulnerable approach helped her quickly regain credibility with her colleagues.

At times when I share such stories, people roll their eyes. They say: "It's not like that where I work" or "This isn't realistic." And yet, these things did happen. What they involve is a transformation, a reversal, a very human movement from self-defense and/or self-blame to the assumption of responsibility. Moving from blame to responsibility sounds, at least at the outset, like a relatively simple thing. But in fact it requires a major shift of psychological and social space. We must as leaders take the very space of blame and fault-finding, of being-at-fault and -- occupying it without simply becoming a target for the pain and frustration of others -- show that it can be made the ground of wisdom, connection, and change. This is transformation, and it is a very human, very humbling art.

- I also think of the new leader of a public department that had been beset for years with morale problems. One day the new leader sat down with

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one of the teams to discuss their issues. He listened carefully but at a certain point the leader lifted his hand and ask people to stop discussing for a moment what was quickly becoming an enormous list of complaints. "It's evident to me that no one has taken responsibility for these problems… so I will," he said quietly, "and right now. As head of this organization, I will make decisions. I don't expect everyone to be pleased with all of them. But we have to turn things around and the only way is for us to share in the responsibility for that, beginning at the top." He then began listing his own personal action steps for addressing what he felt were the most important complaints. Within a few moments, others began to join in with their own list of "responsible actions."

How we address the state of being-at-fault, how we cut through the blame, is critical. It is not a state we can escape because it appears to reside at the level of a "root file" of the human being. Yet unless we become highly aware of it and address it in some form the core emotions will continue to hijack us. What we *can* do is understand this file, its origins and impacts on our lives, and how easy it is to be pushed into it and to push others and ourselves there, as well. We can let that knowledge transform us, taking the threads of the darker core emotions we feel and weaving them into the lighter fabric of a higher sense of responsibility, vulnerability, openness, and learning.

This transformational process is never easy. It requires, to use metaphors from the ancient Viking myth of Odin, a mysterious process of personal transformation, of self-redemption and regeneration. In the myth, Odin, a god or shaman later deified, undertakes a quest to gain something of value for mankind. This leads to a self-imposed ordeal of hanging upside down from a tree for nine days and nights without food or drink and pierced by his own sword – a feeling that from an existential standpoint is not unlike the sense of being-at-fault, the target of self-imposed blame.

"Down to the deepest depths I peered

I know I hung on that windy tree,

Swung there for nine long nights

Wounded by my own blade

Bloodied for Odin

Myself an offering to myself

Bound to the tree

That no man knows

Wither the roots of it ran."

"Well-being I won

And wisdom, too.

From a word to a word

I was led to a word.

From a deed to another deed.[viii]

The tree that Odin hangs from is Yggdrasil (pronounced 'Yag-drill), symbolizing the Tree of Life and also the larger Self. In coded form, the Odin myth says we must voluntarily sacrifice a lower form of consciousness for a higher one in order to gain transcendence. If our efforts are to avoid this journey, we are doomed to stay as we are and continue to suffer the antagonisms and defenses that we were conditioned to expect. We find nothing "of value" for mankind.

The wisdom won by Odin appears to be a form of deep reliance on the universals of life and its processes, enabling him to *follow*, trusting the words and the deeds *as they appear.* Having passed through this process of sacrifice, Odin can surrender to what comes forth of its own and has its own order. It is no surprise that in the moment of insight he finds and gathers up the runes, the magical stones that through divination help bridge human experience with the natural order.

One of the biggest challenges as we "hang from the tree" is being persistent in our capacity to appreciate. We must learn to see the good and the positive in ourselves, and also the dark and not-so-good, making visible at least to ourselves our lack of personal congruence. As they say, there is gold to be found on this perspective but not instantly. First, there is a passage through discouragement, self-deception and pain. That's the nature of being "at fault:" exactly this passage, including recognitions that seem humbling if not downright humiliating, of personal weakness or moral failure. Am I actually capable of trying to dominate others? Am I using my stubbornness to manipulate? Have I hurt myself and others by lying? Have I betrayed others? My self? Is it true that I have to be right? Am I criticizing myself and constantly searching for my own flaws as a form of escapism from real-life responsibilities? Do I self-sabotage in order to get my revenge on others? These questions, whatever they may be, all need their answers. They are the "trees" of life from which we must learn to hang awhile before wisdom and insight are revealed.

What all the stories in this section have in common is the willingness of their protagonist leaders to do exactly that, to move beyond blame, to sacrifice ego for something nobler, to see and to acknowledge their participation in the problems and own their responsibility. They are not worried about what others are doing or not doing, how much responsibility they are taking or not taking. They are not focused on making sure others are "accountable" (as Peter Scholtes[ix] used to say, "accountability is a fifty-cent word for blame"). They are not taking sides in the daily battles of who is doing what to whom. They are focused instead on their own self-knowledge, their search or congruence, and their own non-defensive right actions in the face of thorny circumstances – and circumstances are often thorny.

Exercise

Considering your own experiences of blame and responsibility, when have you observed others making this shift?

When have you observed yourself making it? How did that happen?

From your standpoint, what must be "sacrificed" in order to discover and follow "Self"?

The "I'm Responsible, You are Not" Dilemma

Before moving farther, it is wise to acknowledge that blame can be quite a subtle creature and act in disguise. It can be tempting to believe, for example, that we are the *responsible* ones acting from a higher Self while others are the ones with the problem. I've encountered leaders from CEO's to front line staff who live in the constant belief that others simply are not as responsible as they are. (On their light side diagram they would use the word "Responsible" as their label). We all have some of this energy, which can give a sense of superiority because we think we are following Self. But this is definitely the territory of the small "s" self.

In some ways this may be the most difficult part of the struggle. We see our virtuous qualities and count them differently from the virtues of others. When there are problems we feel our own need to fix them and have a sense of obligation. But what may be truly happening is much less glorious. We are simply reinforcing – a close cousin of defending -- a concept of who we are, especially those self-defined strengths that could potentially be demolished.

This dynamic becomes especially slippery we begin to believe that we can see others blaming but do not yet see how our own patterns of blame also being enacted. For example, I worked with a CEO once who wanted me to help him open up communications within the top group of managers. Meetings, he said, felt tense, constrained, and people didn't share what they were doing with one another. They certainly didn't question one another or bounce around ideas in an open, collaborative, nonjudgmental way. As I worked to help him decide how to approach this problem, I talked with each of his senior vice presidents, people he had personally picked for these top executive roles over the years. They all liked the idea of more open communications but each independently voiced concern that the CEO himself was part of the problem. In particular, they expressed fear of his unpredictable blow-ups and tantrums in which he shouted

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at them and publicly demeaned and insulted them for their failures. When I attempted to share this information with the CEO, he expressed utter dismay that "there was so much blaming going on – they all seem to be blaming one another." Soon thereafter he had an assistant send me a certified letter telling me the project would take too long, quickly and completely ending my participation as a consultant. It seems clear to me the information I shared had hijacked him. He had become angrily defensive, defending himself and his identity, his tendency to believe in his superiority to blame while operating as a contributing part of the problem.

The message from this story is that it ultimately doesn't help to take on any word, including the word "responsible," as a means of following Self. It can simply become one more thing to become defensive about. It also doesn't help to blame the blamers or to see oneself above the dynamics of mutual defensiveness. All words placed on the light side diagram are potentially of the self, not Self. Chris Argyris understood this point implicitly. Near the opening of one of his books[x], he tells how he presented information about a conflict to a group of students, asking them to diagnose what was going on. He then observed how the interpretations of the students, had they been directly shared with participants in the conflict, would have only exacerbated their defensiveness.

This message for leaders is that we must be vigilant on a meta-level (what Argyris called "double-loop learning"). Our defensiveness is like two mirrors reflecting one another – an infinite regression of tactics hidden under the belief we are rising above them. Transcendence is not that easy. Hence the need to "hang on the tree."

In particular our disguised defensiveness is often directly related in our apparent causes and stated values – "better management," "efficiency," "accountability," "competence," "fairness," "engagement," "integrity," "quality," "treating people well." These words and ideas become our postures of

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righteousness, what we stand for – another close cousin of defensiveness. We can be absolutely sure we see the right way, including the problems and weaknesses of others. But as a therapist friend of mine once commented, "When you believe you can clearly see someone else's Shadow, that's generally a good indicator you are standing in your own."

I do believe that leaders need their values and their vigilance does embrace being especially thoughtful and discerning when others' blaming energies are harming relationships within a workplace. When this is a blind spot, and it can be a severe one, all manner of team problems and organizational dysfunctions can occur.   The best advice is to hold the values as ideals, not clubs, and to set expectations for collaborative, trust-based relationships. These expectations can establish boundaries and ground rules for behavior, and, with coaching, help each person see the impact of personal behaviors, how blaming interferes with achieving the very goals they say are important. Along the way, we must constantly test our own beliefs and assumptions about individuals caught up in the game, checking our own motives. Blamers are human, too. We know that, because there is no time – ever -- when we cannot be sucked back into the problem ourselves.

I am reminded of a training session I once conducted in which a supervisor stood up to complain about the "lack of integrity of managers" in her organization, including, she said, "people in this very room." The next day, as the training continued, she brought to me some notes passed between two managers in the class. The notes were about others in the session and were sarcastic or derogatory. She had noticed the managers passing the notes among themselves, chuckling, and then throwing them away in a nearby waste basket. At a break, she retrieved the notes from the waste basket and had taken them to each of the people they were about, showing them what the managers were saying about them, before eventually bringing the notes to me as proof of the manager's lack of integrity. At that moment I did not confront her about her

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own integrity, a failed opportunity perhaps. I simply asked for the notes, which she reluctantly gave me, and I continued teaching.

This incident to me summarizes the whole problem of blaming and defending and the blind spots they spawn. In my mind's eye I envision the supervisor placing the words "acting with integrity" as the label of her light side wheel diagram – although I wasn't using these diagrams at the time. I can see her filling in the dark side label as "critical" or "judgmental," although "hypocritical" would be much more like it. I can also imagine confronting her and it quickly becoming personal. "Well, it's up to you as the facilitator to see this bad stuff happening in session and call them on it! You're letting the managers get away with murder!" I could have easily been dragged in. As it was, the incident in my class turned out to be the tip of the iceberg. There were, without my knowing, lawsuits going on in the background involving the supervisor and the managers who had been passing the notes. When I did speak with the supervisor later, what I learned was that she felt she had very few options in her work and her career – and she was in a lot of interpersonal pain. Even later I learned that as a result of the difficulties she had transferred to another part of the organization located in different state.

Perhaps, just so, no one ever really escapes blaming or defending, even by moving away. It still goes on within us. When attacked we will respond, and our responses become an attack, on ourselves or others. But we *can* move forward, I believe, and especially if we can do it by seeing self as fundamentally a *lesson* to be learned and surpassed, a lesson in which both our light and dark sides play important parts. They are, after all, closely tied to one another. *What* we defend and *how* we defend are simply two sides of the same coin. The more we know of ourselves, the less righteous we can become, the more open, less defensive and more dedicated to a larger picture of what it means to be a leader.

We begin to detach from the entire defensive process by learning to trust

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in "the words" and "the deeds" that appear before us. If we can accept, yes, that we can make mistakes, even bad ones, and that we can fall prey to our capacity to defend – something that we abhor but see about ourselves -- we become capable of a deeper trust in the patterns of the universe and new action. Certainly we continue to feel the old reactions, but we can learn to *learn*. We can apologize. We can seek forgiveness. We can move on. As well, we may be able to help someone else who makes mistakes, including those that are specifically *about us*, without rancor or indignation. We can offer forgiveness. We can move on. And what we may be able to do as well is reach out to connect with the real human beings on the other side of a wall that need not be there at all.

Exercise
When have you personally fallen prey to the "I'm responsible, you are not" dilemma? What is your answer to avoiding this pitfall?

Becoming Accessible Through Self-Inquiry

Becoming accessible, non-defensive, open and congruent are ultimately about much more than overcoming defensiveness. That is a good first step – and a continuing one, since no one entirely transcends old patterns. But true openness involves an outright *invitation* to others to provide feedback and using of this information as a pathway to connect with the Self we are meant to follow.

An invitation, by its very nature, cannot be forced. The current fad in using 360 degree leadership assessments[xi] is based on the assumption that simply as a product of giving feedback to people they will want to improve, whether they are personally asking at a deep level for this information or not.

In my work with leadership clients over the past twenty years, I have not found that this was the case. To the contrary, simply getting disconfirming data and feedback, stuff that doesn't correspond to our views of ourselves, may lead to reinforcing defensive strategies, sometimes at secondary levels of defense (such as a normally upbeat person shutting down, getting depressed, or becoming overtly retaliatory and self-justifying). I suggest data is useful only insofar as people genuinely decide to let it be useful to them. Having worked with many clients who for whatever reasons are in trouble with their credibility, it is clear that the differentiator in using any process is whether or not a person *wants* the feedback as a means to improve and release potentials. In a sense, like Odin, the "ordeal" of getting and using disconfirming information will be of value only when it is truly "self-imposed."

360 assessments, in particular, can be problematic. Although they have been widely accepted as part of institutional leadership or management development programs, they can be harsh, relatively involuntary, even coercive. Moreover, such assessments have the problem of anonymity, often making accurate or thorough communication impossible about the impact of a person's behavior. Finally, the rating scales that are used, while potentially valid, may have little to do with behavioral patterns that a person is genuinely interested in learning about. They are a device, an expert system, which in this case is both a strength, in terms of objectivity, but a weakness in terms of trust and actual capacity to penetrate a person's defensive processes.

While these assessments do have their place, there are other ways for us to begin our own journeys toward openness and accessibility. One of these is

simply to ask ourselves powerful, self-defined questions – and then go ask for help answering these questions.

The best questions come out of our deepest desires to create something of value in the world, to literally change the world in some positive way. So it is often important to define this vision before the question comes. With teams, for example, it may be in terms of the kind of relationships people would ultimately like to have with one another. With individuals, especially those who want to create good (most of us), it is often helpful to define that good in concrete terms, even if the end product does not feel entirely concrete. "I want to create a company that makes peoples' lives easier." "I want to be an artist." (And from a skilled engineer/scientist): "I want to bring love into the world."

Many of us have never given ourselves a chance to even consider this question, first putting aside both our light and dark sides, and then asking: what real difference do I want to make?

The next step is to open a profound self-inquiry around what has to take place *internally* to achieve the *external result.* Such an inquiry implicitly asks us to transcend an older identity and to replace it with a new one. Instead of defending an identity, we offer ourselves the opportunity to live a larger life. "If you want to create a company that helps make peoples' lives easier, what do you need to learn *about* yourself or learn *for* yourself?" The answer will be as variable as the asker. The answers are not in the how, or in what products will be sold, that's only a small part of it. Instead, such questions as the following may arise:

> "How do I find my true self-confidence?"
> "How do I fully live my vision?"
> "How do I trust my imagination?"
> "How do I trust my decisions?"
> "Where do I find joy?"

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These are five examples from an infinite array of possible questions, questions from self to Self that stand behind an important project in the world. Insofar as these questions go unasked, the wheel diagrams are more likely to activate as the effort to "make it happen" (e.g., improve relationships, create a company) unfolds. By comparison, the interior questions appeal to us, offer themselves as needing to be answered now or later in order to fully realize our leadership potentials.

Typically, they have no easy intellectual answers. They are not about techniques, tricks, manipulations, ways to look good in order to come out effectively on the survey. They are themselves voluntary explorations requiring openness and vulnerability, "self-imposed ordeals" in miniature. They must be lived and breathed and perhaps for a long time, possibly years. They find their responses in how we live through them or grow beyond them.

I would emphasize, however, that for real, meaningful growth to occur, the questions must be right: genuine, open, and having emotional power for the asker. They must be positively stated (A question such as "Why can't I…" is likely to only yield a barrier as an answer). And they cannot be about how to manage others. Questions such as, "How do I influence and change others?" or "How do I hold others accountable for their actions?" or "How do I gain followers?" are still at the level of gaining external results, more than actually following Self. Often these questions can be converted simply by moving the "target" closer to home.

"How do I influence and change *myself?*"
"How do I hold myself accountable? What is my own real accountability?"
"How do I become my own best follower?"

To answer these questions we can do many things: meditate (especially in nature or utilizing a spiritual practice, such as walking labyrinths[xii]), read broadly,

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search the internet, create art related to the question, attend workshops and learning events, join or lead groups – and, pre-eminently, ask others for feedback at an open and personal level. Work of this kind turns the kind of strategy employed by 360 procedures into a personal quest for self-knowledge, a psychological turn that in and of itself begins to reduce defensiveness. We rely less on our strengths, with their risk of attack, and more on what the universe is providing.   We increase our native curiosity about what it means to be alive, about the nature of being human, about relationships, art, experience, the larger questions that have always been before us because they are before everybody. This is not indulgent navel gazing; it is the essence of how we make ourselves open – even to difficult information. We *choose* to get new information above and beyond the edges of an older, smaller identity. We follow Self.

Then, when things happen – arguments, problems, mistakes, defensive reactions, we have a context in which to inquire: what does this have to do with our own most important self-questions? The issue has a context. This is the meaning of sacrificing a lower level of consciousness for a higher one. What happens to us, often synchronistically, we connect to our *growth*. This gives us a new way to see the times we have been hijacked emotionally as a process of potential learning and development, intentionally selected to help us cross the boundaries of an old, too-small self toward something better. When negative stuff happens, we are clear, as a matter of faith, that it has appeared as an opportunity to learn.

Many years ago, two psychologists, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham invented a simple framework that, naming it after themselves, they called the *Johari Window.*[xiii] The model successfully illustrates relationships in terms of awareness, defining areas of trust and common understanding, blind spots, façades, and a hidden or unknown area in which neither a person knows themselves nor do others know them. This fourth area, the Unknown is the realm of pure potential. Through the kind of rich self-inquiry just described, a

person will necessarily face their blind spots (what others know about a person that he/she does not yet know about him/herself) and also face the façades he/she is presenting to the world. Pursuing the Unknown is our way through the pain of learning and taking responsibility toward self-knowledge and wisdom. And wisdom, make no mistake, is the ultimate cure for defensiveness.

Exercises

What changes or projects do you want to bring to the world?

What must you learn about yourself or for yourself in order for these projects or changes to be fulfilled? What is your most important leadership question?

What will you do to answer this question about yourself?

Transformation of Interpersonal Conflict

Thus far I have shared a view of defensiveness and the process of individual leadership learning. This view has implications for the development of teams, as well, and for shifts in workplace cultures. As I begin to bring this paper to completion, I want to share some of these implications, including a personal story about how the notion of following Self initially emerged for me. My hope is that these words will trigger your own thinking about challenges that we face as leaders today and mark out some territory where change is vital.

Healthy teams involve some level of difference, tension and conflict. But not all difference, tension, and conflict is healthy. Conflicts involving trust between people arise when one person's defensive actions trigger the defensive actions and blaming energy of another, and this in turn re-trigger's the first person's patterns. A cycle of mistrust envelops the two participants, with each person's behavior, especially its unaware side, setting off a continuing and predictable set of behavioral patterns between the parties.

Caught in such mistrusts we wonder why they continue, since they do not seem to have much apparent social value. The effort to explain to ourselves why we are in such a cycle, why we *need to be* in one, results in judgments about ourselves and about others, and also sometimes about human nature itself. Each judgment can serve as a form of punishment or revenge, but to the party expressing this explanation, it may seem very much like insight:

"Patty is really an insecure person. That's why she's operating in such a superior way."

"I've never been good at dealing with conflict. I panic. I'm not smart enough to figure out what to say in the moment so I always run away."

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"The reason they are acting that way is their lack of skill."

All of these hypotheses and assumptions are what one personal development firm (*Excellence Seminars* in Canada[xiv]) calls "unworkable positions" because they keep us from fully being present and participating in the relationship. They tend to be extreme statements and therefore reductions of who others are and who we are, too. Breaking through the conflict begins with reviewing and rewriting these unworkable positions into more realistic statements about the relationship.

"Patty may be expressing herself in a superior way, but that's not the whole story. I've also seen her operate in very generous and selfless ways."

"I have dealt with *some* conflicts in the past productively, although recently I've been worried about this one conflict that has resurfaced."

"Perhaps lack of skill is one element of what's going on, but the truth is I don't really know why they are acting the way they are."

Revoking the exaggerated qualities of our hypotheses can lead to the recognition of our actual part in the problems, in turn driving a revised view of our responsibilities and new behavior that contradicts the negative patterns in play.

Conflicts applied to whole teams reproduce these same effects but in much more complex ways. Appendix 2 on Page 56 shows a team locked up in defensive behavior. The light side is unused while team members trigger one another's dark side personas.

When Person A feels her problem solving skills have been attacked, she becomes more judgmental of others. In turn her judgmental approach causes Person B (who happens to be her boss) to become more abstract and critical.

This not only reinforces his conflict with her, causing her to become even more judgmental, it also causes Person C to become more withdrawn, reinforcing the ongoing interpersonal difficulties between Person A and Person C. Meanwhile, these exchanges are causing Person D to become increasingly strident and abrasive, in turn triggering Person E to take things too personally and Person F to withdraw into his dark side of being "a wimp." The chain reactions play themselves out in a million different ways.

Team members feel stuck and dysfunctional, and in truth they usually cannot come to accord about much of anything in the midst of such dynamics. The meetings degenerate, sometimes quickly, sometimes more gradually over time as negative beliefs about one another become deeply rooted and the level of open, vulnerable and courageous disclosure by anyone dwindles to next to nothing. Since people may agree on their negative assumptions about each other, not just as individuals but as factions and sub-groups, the problems can quickly become reinforced. People do not see how they are keeping the conflict alive, not only through their own individual defenses but also by their participation in a faction's group-think.

Group conflict starts to end when people let go of their hypotheses about one another and recognize the mutual triggers of defensiveness in play. Assembling a diagram similar to the one in Appendix 2 and talking through everyone's defensive strategies and issues (the circle diagrams) may be a start. But the real change often begins when a leader demonstrates a willingness to follow Self explicitly. He or she might start by stating a genuine vision for the team, establishing some baseline expectations for how people should treat each other and then – in line with everything presented here – actively open him- or herself vulnerably to feedback from the group. "Am I living up to what I say is important to me?"

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This request for feedback, if comes across as genuine self-inquiry intended to help the group, can begin a chain reaction of opening and responding, of others' presenting their own visions, ground rules and requests for feedback. The leader models openness, incompleteness, vulnerability – an invitation to others to join in the process in order to gain a deeper mutual understanding. In turn this can lead to new insights about the genesis of the conflicts. If people do not respond to these invitations, remaining defensive and critical, the team may continue to fail, inevitably leading to a change in leadership or membership or both. It is good to keep in mind that the best developmental experiences, in terms of the growth of individuals and teams, are those that happen when people share themselves and ask for one another's assistance *voluntarily* and without peer pressure.

If the dialogue is successful, a new sense of teamwork and workplace community will arise naturally, and with a sense of healing, as people stop trying to fix others and instead ask for feedback and focus on the work they need to do themselves. Such moments can lead to remarkable breakthroughs.

The breakthroughs happen best when team members all begin to name and share their own most important leadership questions, using the group as a platform (and later, home base) for shared personal development. In effect, members augment the natural team purpose of shared work by offering explicit help to each other in the quest to answer these questions. In my experience, a remarkable number of the questions have something to do with self-esteem. Sharing the questions may not be the first thing that needs to happen in a team or that can happen, but when it does, based on members' own deepening desires to learn rather than tell, the energy changes in a profound way – from defending and fixing to growing and becoming. From growing and becoming it can move to shared leading.

Exercise

What light and dark patterns have you noticed in teams you've led or participated in? What specific triggering have you seen? When have you been involved? What impacts did it have on you and on others?

Have you ever been in a group where a process of reconciliation or healing occurred? How did that happen? What enabled people to move to that work?

What was the leader's role? What did he/she do, if anything, to foster reconciliation or healing?

The Further Path

The outcomes of personal and team development work usually represent a fundamental reframing of people and relationships. Vulnerability becomes valued rather than dismissed or debased, and it ceases to be a fearful or uncomfortable state. In this context, and as the work of personal and team growth unfolds, it becomes ever clearer how different people start in very different places on their individual journeys.

As leaders we begin to deeply appreciate how our own and others' defenses are the result of conditioning, and we want to understand that conditioning in more detail. I recall a manager speaking out to his peers about their perceptions that he was hard on his employees. Suddenly, he was sharing the story of his own childhood, about the abuse he had suffered from his step-father, the poverty he had grown up with, his early choice to join the military as an escape from the always possible violence of his teenage years. "So when people come to me sometimes with complaints about this place, as if it is hard to work here, I react. Their concerns – honestly – don't feel that important to me." And after a pause, "It's something I'm going to have to work on." His disclosure was a gift to the group. We just took it in, understanding him better, and thanked him. This is where this man had come from. It was clear he knew where he had to go.

We are formed from experiences that vary from the savageries of growing up in the face of war, discrimination, poverty, abuse and psychological damage to situations of apparent safety, privilege, comfort and even luxury. As we learn more about each other we see how history, ethnicity, race, sexuality, family, religion, education, physiology, economic class and income and other factors powerfully influence how we have come to see others and see ourselves. We see with keener empathy and a sense of interdependence and discernment. And we cannot help but notice how our own defensive structures have been in part

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built by the social factions to which we belong. Defensiveness is a social phenomenon, not just a personal one. Great leaders have always known this and have seen it for what it is, part of the challenge of the human spirit to move from control, violence and inequity to more open, supportive and just societies.

A spiritual aspect of leadership begins to open through such discoveries, an aspect that comes from acknowledging and accepting how our human connectedness is directly related to our diversity and underlying sense of *dis*connection. Our very defensiveness with one another compels a deeper understanding of the places we can and must come together, and how pre-eminently these places are part of a spiritual experience of the world. You do not need to see yourself as particularly spiritual or religious in order to understand what I am getting at. A story will explain this.

Many years ago, but only a few after I started my consulting practice, I found that I was feeling quite depressed. A number of things had happened. Although I was a published author and successful in many contexts, stress and failure in my work also haunted me, and there were related economic pressures. I was also experiencing emotional distance in my marriage along with the steep learning curve of being a father to young children. Luckily, with a friend, I had recently founded a workshop that gave me an opportunity to meditatively examine the challenges I was facing. In the course of offering the workshop I discovered I was actually asking myself a pretty important and very basic question: "What is the real meaning of my work?"

Given the stresses I was personally experiencing, and also attended by a sense of futility, I did not really expect to find an answer. But one nevertheless occurred – it "came to me," and it was relatively simple. The thought arose that I was not the change agent I thought I was. I was an agent but not of change itself. That, it suddenly occurred, came from someplace else. And this someplace else was actually silence, and more than silence, beauty and

timelessness, as well. I sat back stunned by these thoughts. I had placed myself in the role of leading others but I was not grounded at all in what was leading me. Insofar as I was able to share or be a conduit for silence, beauty, and timelessness, change might occur for others and for their structures (organizations, teams), but I would not be causing it, these qualities would. Suddenly -- and then gradually over time, again and again -- I found I was learning that my job was to get out of the way; that I was not meant to block what was a naturally occurring process that only in part, sometimes only in a very small way, was coming through me.

One could say this was a discovery of a more spiritual self. I choose not to worry too much about the names. As they say in the Buddhist world, "Once the fish is caught, you can throw the net away."

In representing the notion of "following Self" in this way, there is always risk of criticism, of a certain belief that the category of discovery being described has no real utility in the world. That criticism is, from my standpoint and as someone who has worked now for over forty years in American organizations, our ultimate defense against our own soft sides and vulnerabilities, and at tremendous cost to our organizations and the people who make them up. American business culture, at its default setting, tends toward a position of invulnerability. Because the spiritual has been trampled, our culture reflects and continues to help create a fundamentally defensive social milieu, a culture too often based on negative beliefs, blaming, and winning conflicts, a culture that teaches that defending, aggressing, and competing are good things, and with the rationalization that they somehow drive people to do their best and achieve more, as enhancements to productivity and shareholder value.

More accurately from my standpoint our culture has been an impediment to a more open, authentic, and courageous environments; an impediment to more self-aware, compassionate, and truly effective forms of leadership. Our
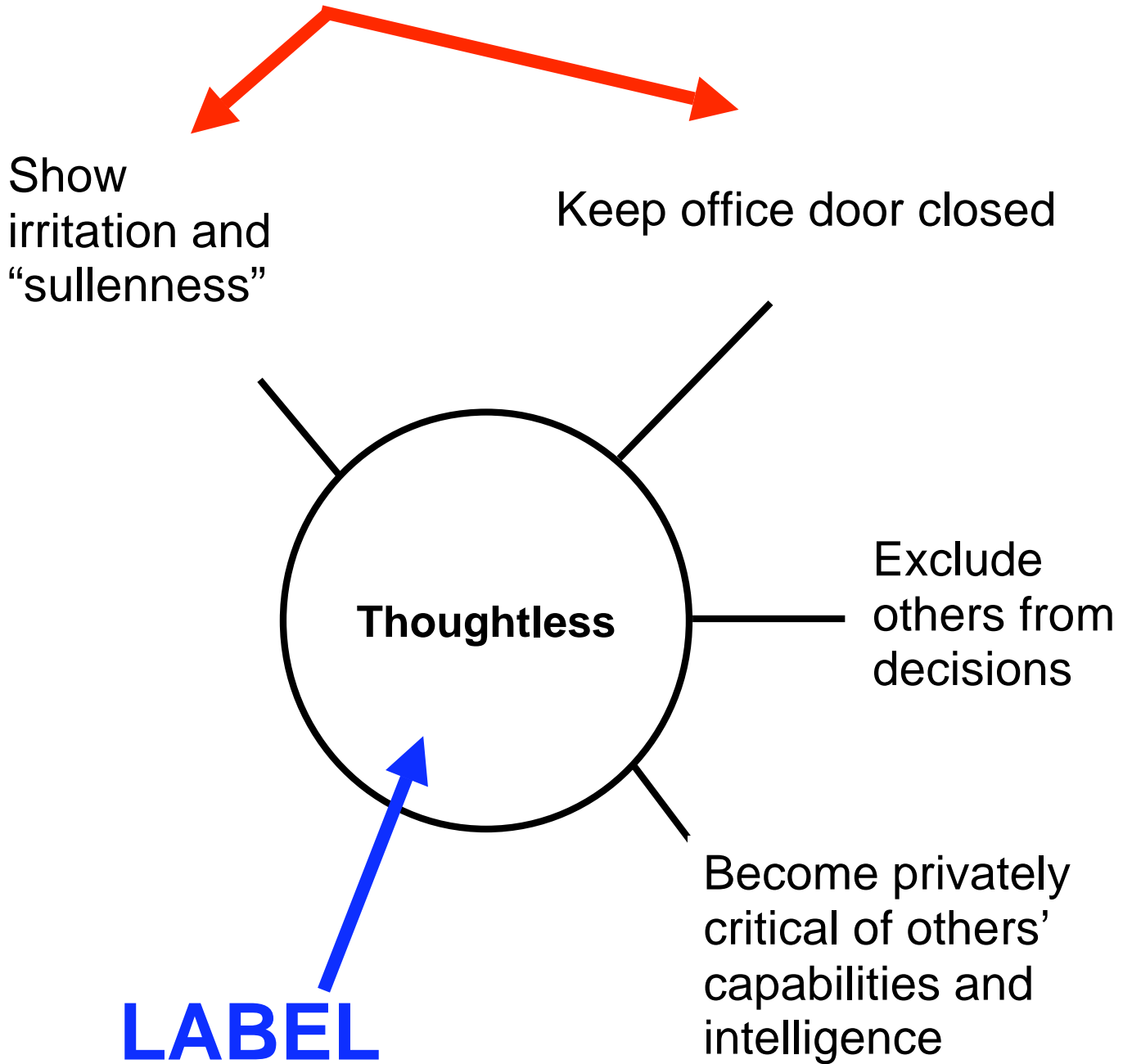
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environment implicitly encourages and rewards defensive behavior in exactly the same ways I stood in my own Shadow when I thought I might be the ultimate change agent in my work as a consultant. I followed the pattern. American business culture, like my past inner culture, has been an effort to maintain a certain ego posture, a certain small self-identity and thick skin walling out the truth of what will be. Cultures, like our views of our own identities, tend toward rigid homeostasis, and in the end, as with all human creations, they contain the seeds of their own destruction. We are our milieu. In that, there is no place to hide and no means of escape. We must stand on new ground and the act of doing so *is* leading.

If we look deeply enough into the patterns of our own defensiveness and pass through the stages of learning by asking ourselves profound questions and genuinely asking for feedback, defensiveness melts and openness comes forward. We learn what differences can be made by opening to what is coming through us. I believe that openness is ultimately – and simply -- the power of a great heart, one larger than our own, one through which tremendous beauty, and silence, and timelessness can change the world, bringing with them a priceless peace that passes understanding.
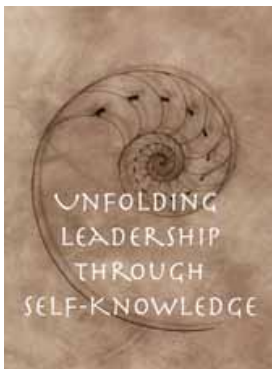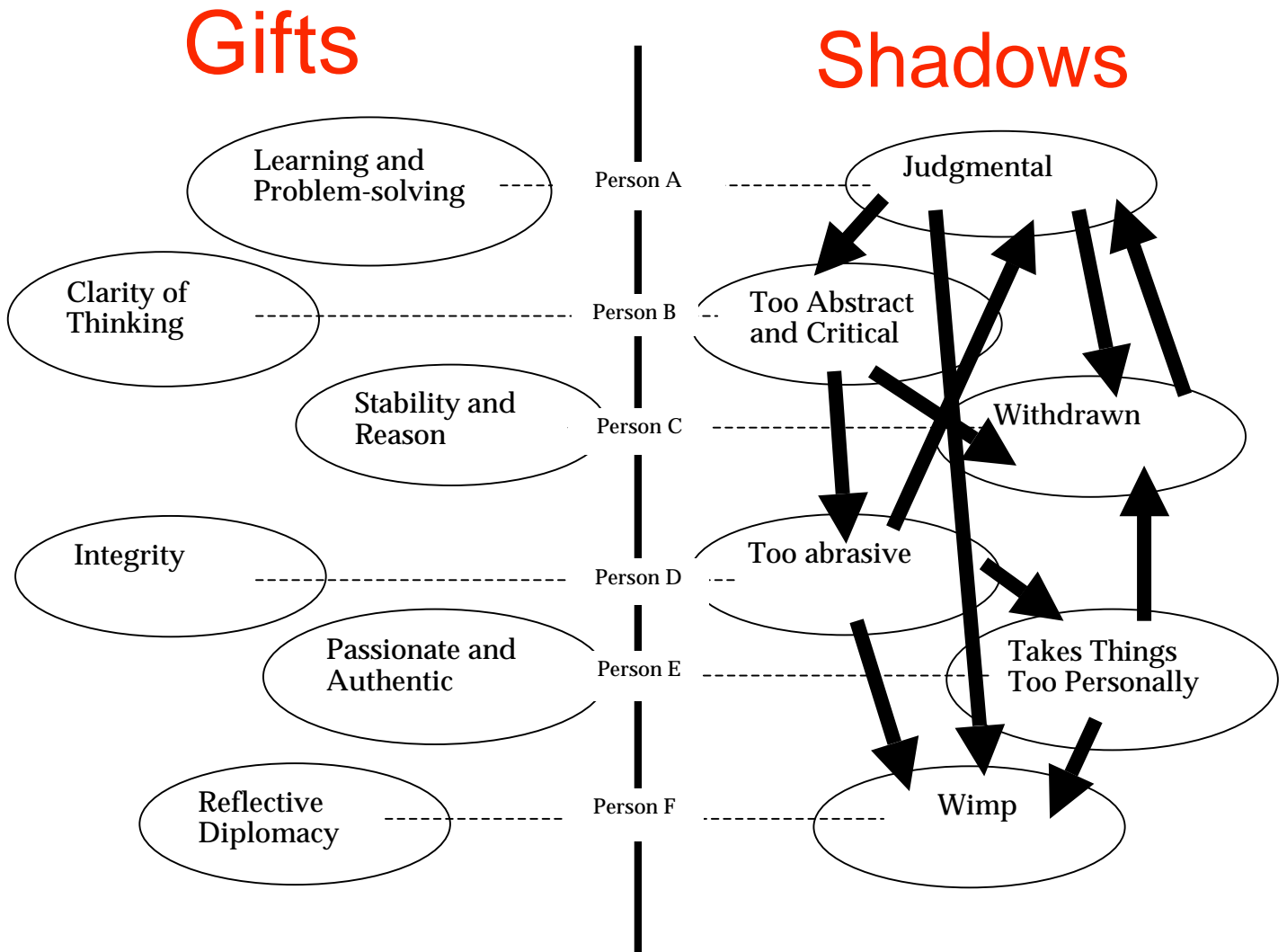
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VISIBLE BEHAVIORS

Show irritation and "sullenness"

Keep office door closed

Thoughtless

Exclude others from decisions

Become privately critical of others' capabilities and intelligence

LABEL

Team Behavior

Gifts   Shadows

Learning and Problem-solving — Person A — Judgmental

Clarity of Thinking — Person B — Too Abstract and Critical

Stability and Reason — Person C — Withdrawn

Integrity — Person D — Too abrasive

Passionate and Authentic — Person E — Takes Things Too Personally

Reflective Diplomacy — Person F — Wimp

Footnotes:

[i] J. Krishnamurti, *Freedom From the Known* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969)

[ii] Chris Argyris is James Bryant Conant professor of education and organizational behavior in the graduate schools of business and education at Harvard University. He is author of more thanthirty books and monographs and of numerous articles.

[iii] Amy Edmondson is Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard BusinessSchool. See a list of some of her papers at: http://hbswk.hbs.edu/faculty/aedmondson.html

[iv] I have co-authored two books, *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace* (San Franciso: Jossey Bass, 1991 and 1998) with Kathleen Ryan and *The Courageous Messenger* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996) with Kathleen Ryan and George Orr.

[v] See Nathanial J. Fast and Larissa Z. Tiedens, "Blame Contagion: The Automatic Transmission of Self-Serving Attributions*," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010) 97-106.

[vi] Implicit Leadership Theory represents a body of social psychology research based on the notion that people hold an implicit theory of what makes a good leader and use this theory to make judgments about others and themselves.

[vii] Thich Naht Hanh is a Buddhist teacher and author of many books in English, Vietnamese, and Chinese. His book, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) contains the advice about holding one's emotions as one would hold a baby.

[viii] This description of the Odin myth and poetic expression from the Poetic Edda (1200 AD) are taken from Kenneth Meadows book, *Rune Power* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 2002)

[ix] Peter Scholtes was an important guiding light of Deming philosophy and the quality movement, best known for his practical insights and exercises, and his books, *The Team Handbook* (Oriel, Inc., 1988) and *The Leader's Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).

[x] Chris Argyris, Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), p. 21.

[xi] 360 assessments involve gaining information about personal leadership characteristics and skills from subordinates, peers, and superiors – and potentially others, such as process partners or customers. Usually this begins with anonymous questionnaires and may include later discussions with those who provided the feedback.

[xii] For more information on labyrinths, see especially Lauren Artress, *Walking A Sacred Path* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995, 2006)

[xiii] See Joseph Luft, *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics* (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1963, 1970)

[xiv] *Excellence Seminars* may be found at: http://www.excellenceseminars.com/