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## ***The Future of Leadership***

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Leadership is a social process and, like any social process, to remain relevant, it must reflect the society in which it occurs. Leadership must keep up with the times, so to speak. That presents a serious dilemma, because our most popular and widespread leadership models, situational and transformational leadership included, were developed to help us understand and improve our practice of leadership in an industrial era. However, our society and its needs are changing, and consequently, so are the needs of our institutions and organizations. The inevitable shift in the nature of the workforce demands that leaders and the very concept of leadership adapt accordingly. That is, if leadership is to remain a socially relevant concept.

In the early 21st Century, we will understand leadership to be:

- ❖ More than good management. While competent management remains essential to organizational effectiveness, it is a function distinct from leadership and serves a different purpose.
- ❖ Dispersed, collaborative, situational and provisional. Leadership is, and will be, a process in which leaders and followers engage together. In contemporary organizations, leadership increasingly depends on influence relationships and a shared power environment. In the future, effective leadership will rely less on individual leader behavior, and more on mutual influence. Leadership is all about influence, and the reality of leadership is that supervisors influence subordinates, subordinates influence supervisors, and peers influence each other. The challenge is to transcend self-interest, attend to mutual purpose, and achieve the common good.

Why should we think of leadership this way? First, consider that many scholars agree, and the evidence is all around us, that we are leaving that industrial era and transitioning into a knowledge or information society. In this emerging era, knowledge is becoming a raw material, the means of doing much of our economy's work, and a commodity that we create, buy, sell, and trade. Consequently all our institutions, are responding to the trend, and "knowledge workers" are beginning to dominate our society.

Not that I'm dominating society, but take me for an example. I often describe myself as a nearly worn-out firefighter with an interest in people and organizations. However, for most of the last ten years, I've stayed busy, mostly kept out of trouble, and made a modest living by consulting and helping people learn stuff. I don't make anything to sell; except for a few times a year, I don't put any fire out or light anything on fire; and I'm not restoring fire to its natural role on the landscape as many of Wildfire's readers are. All I have to offer is the knowledge and experience I possess, and what ability I have to bring that knowledge and experience to bear on other people's problems. In short, I've become a knowledge worker. What's more astounding than the fact that I could become a knowledge worker; is that I've managed to do so from places like Moran, Wyoming; Washburn, Wisconsin and Wisdom, Montana. Like most knowledge workers, my ability to do what I do depends on technology and my, somewhat limited, ability to use that technology. I think that many Wildfire readers, if they were to reflect on their jobs, would realize that they are participating in this trend as well, particularly if they've been in the business for more than 15 years. What you know has likely become at least as important as what you can do.

Thirty years ago, a very large part of the American workforce made steel and cars or manufactured clothing, shoes and durable goods. About 30% of workers belonged to labor unions. If you worked for General Motors, and GM decided to eliminate your job, you couldn't make a go on your own. First of all, making cars is a capital-intensive business; it takes a lot of money. Part of that money bought steel, aluminum, and other raw materials; and those took up a lot of space. Second, that machine you ran, you couldn't take that with you. Finally, you didn't really know how to make a car. You installed the transmission and hooked it up to the driveline, you didn't have the whole process. So, when you walked out the door, GM still had the capital, the raw materials, and the means of production.

Fast-forward 30 years. Only a small portion of our workforce is engaged in heavy industry (less than 13% of American workers belong to labor unions) and new knowledge, information and technology industries employ millions of Americans. The raw material used by these organizations rests between the ears of their employees. The means of production exists at the interface between their fingertips and a keyboard, and they complete whole processes not only from start to finish, but beyond, to innovation. Sure, they need the company's computer and software, but in most cases you could buy the same computer at Costco and the software is either commercially available or the employee wrote it. When a knowledge worker walks out the door of today's organizations they take the raw materials, the means of production, and the entire process with them. Consequently, people can leave their employer and

put their talents to work on their own; and people are doing so, in great number. A social trend has been born, and no longer does quitting your job or changing careers seem strange or particularly risky in American society.

I'd like to share a story a little closer to home for Wildfire readers. A few years ago, I was teaching in L-380 classes at the Joint Apprenticeship Academy in Sacramento. We were conducting classes both simultaneously and back-to-back for several weeks. It was an interesting time to be there because, as it was told to me, the last of the early MEL hires were completing their Academies, and the first of, what I call, the "MEL recruits" were coming through. On the first week my partner and I had a class comprised of people who had been seasonal employees for some time, had intended to make fire a career, and the National Fire Plan had provided them their big break. The following week, we had a class of the new generation, and I was astounded by the contrast between their introductions and those we had heard just the week before. A significant portion of the class introduced themselves along the lines of "I was an elementary ed teacher and was fighting fire in the summer for because it was a fun and exciting way to make extra money. Teaching 5th grade wasn't really what I had expected, and I had just been accepted to graduate school and had decided to go back. One day the FMO approached me and told me they had these permanent jobs open and that they wanted me to put in. So, I put grad school on hold and here I am." A significant number of people in class indicated that, while they were currently pursuing fire careers with their agencies, they possessed other skills, other interests, and alternate careers. Consider three additional factors:

1. The demographics of your agency. Baby Boomers will begin to retire in droves over the next three years. Assuming fire agencies can fill the gap, in the near future your agency's employees will be primarily from Generations X and Y. It's safe to assume that, by 2008, much of your workforce will have been born after 1980, and their attitudes will differ significantly from those of the Baby Boomers.
2. By 2010 (only 5 years from now) there will be a labor shortage in this country of 10 million people. Competition for employees will be fierce.
3. Due to an explosion of knowledge and innovation, over the next 20 years, entire careers and industries will emerge that do not exist today. Some futurists speculate that most of today's young children will work in jobs that don't yet exist. Remember, if you were born before 1960, the personal computing, software, Internet service

provision, E commerce, and wireless communication industries did not exist when you were in high school.

The leadership implications are enormous. The nature of the incoming agency workforce can best be described as young, well-educated, confident, and having options. They will ask “why?” They will expect to be involved in decisions that affect them, expect their supervisors to listen to them, and will count on having influence. Old, industrial era models of leadership just won’t cut it anymore.

## ***Biography***

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