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Commentary on Chapter One

The notion of the leader as generalist is a hardy perennial in my writings. But modern societies give such high marks for specialized excellence that the highest degrees awarded by our universities are for deep research in the narrowest fields of expertise. To many people, therefore, the word *generalist* still connotes sloppy or superficial thinking, unthinking or uninformed action.

Chester Barnard, a corporate CEO who became a public official in the state of New Jersey, provided in *The Functions of the Executive* (1938) one of the earliest systematic theories about leadership in the modern era. Yet even he made fun of his own trouble in describing it. “When I have been asked: ‘What do you do?’ I have been unable to reply intelligibly.” A leader, he argued, often takes ideas about what to do and how to lead from the very people he leads: “This sometimes gives the impression that he is a rather stupid fellow . . . and a filcher of ideas. In a measure this is correct. He has to be stupid enough to listen a great deal. . . . If he used only his own ideas he would be like . . . a one-man orchestra, rather than a good conductor, who is a very high type of leader.”

The intuition and instinct to “connect the dots,” to understand “the intervals between the notes,” to focus on the interconnections among specialties and disciplines, to stir experts together to serve a general purpose, is not awarded higher education’s highest degree for a good reason: these have to be learned mostly by doing. The art of getting it all together is, well, an art.

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The Get-It-All-Together Profession

Paradox of Participation

There was a time, celebrated in song and story, when leadership was entrusted to people called *leaders*. Their numbers were tiny, their information scarce, their expertise primitive, the range of their options narrow, the reach of their power marginal, the scale of their actions limited. But they were at least presumed to be "in charge."

In those days it was possible to believe that policy was actually made by people others called *policymakers*. The policymaking few made broad decisions, it was said (and even taught in schools). A much larger group of unsung experts, civil servants, and employees converted these principles into practices. The obligation of most people was to comply with the regulations, pay the taxes and prices established by the few, and acquiesce in the seizure of power by divine right, coup d'état, corporate takeover, or elections sometimes bought or stolen.

In Aristotle's Athens, Confucius's China, Cicero's Rome, Charlemagne's Europe, and Jefferson's Virginia, the educated and affluent few did the social planning and made the destiny decisions that made the difference between war and peace, poverty and prosperity, individual freedom and collective coercion, minority rights and majority rule. The mostly uneducated "lower orders" of slaves, servants, peasants, workers, and merchants—and most women—

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were not expected and did not expect to join in the elegant conversations about policy. In those vertical, pyramidal societies, dogma, doctrine, and dictation were the natural style of leadership.

Somewhere along the way in the colorful story of people getting things done, the collection of processes we now call modernization made the vertical society obsolete. Man-as-manager had to learn how to manage the complexity that man-as-scientist-and-engineer and man-as-educator were making both possible and necessary. In a world of intercontinental conflict, gigantic cities, congested living, and large and fragile systems of all kinds, the traditional modes of leadership, featuring "recommendations up, orders down," simply did not work very well. Nobody could be fully in charge of anything, and the horizontal society was born.

The key to the management of complexity was the division of labor. The benefits of modernization were available only to societies that educated most of their people to function as specialists in a division-of-labor economy. Thus there came to pass, late in the second millennium A.D., slaveless societies that responded to a technological imperative by giving citizenship to all their people and legislating education as an entitlement for all their citizens. Thomas Jefferson foresaw this macrotrend as early as 1813. "An insurrection has . . . begun," he wrote to John Adams, "of science, talents, and courage, against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt." He was spending his postpresidential years building the University of Virginia and promoting education and scholarship from his Monticello home.

When every man, and now every woman too, is entitled to earn through education an admission ticket to active citizenship, when leadership is not the province of a few hundred noblemen, a few thousand big landholders and shareholders, but is shared among an aristocracy of achievement numbering in the millions, decision making is done not by a club but by a crowd. So the core issue of executive leadership is a paradox of participation: *How do you get everybody in on the act and still get some action?*

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Leading by Doing

If the get-it-all-together people used to be born to rank and wealth, now they are mostly made—and self-made—by competition and competence. This is true not only in the United States. Today, in all but a rapidly dwindling number of still-traditional societies, men and women become leaders by what they *do*.

Even among authoritarian regimes, the nations still governed by extended families (Saudi Arabia, and some of the Emirates in the Persian Gulf) are greatly outnumbered by those ruled by self-appointed tyrants who got where they are by elbowing their way to power (often by coup d'état), and usually to personal prosperity as well. The closest thing to a ruling class is to be found these days in totalitarian regimes; in each of them, a small group of people who have fought their way up the bureaucratic ladder maneuver for power and preferment and, when they get to the top, achieve only a precarious lifetime tenure—sometimes shortened by sudden death.

In the United States and the other industrial democracies in the Atlantic Community and the Pacific Basin, the aristocracy of achievement is now growing in size and pervasive in function. These people are usually leaders because they want to be—often assisted, selected, promoted, or adopted as protégés by earlier achievers. (None of us, of course, can lead in everything we touch; all of us are followers in most of our life and work.)

People may be leaders in public or private employ, but that distinction is increasingly indistinct in our mixed economy. They may be leaders in politics or business or agriculture or labor or law or education or scientific research or journalism or religion or community issues; some swing from branch to branch in the forest of occupations; some specialize in advocacy or lobbying on policy issues ranging from abortion rights to the municipal zoo. They may be in the establishment or in the antiestablishment. Their writ, conferred or chosen, may run to community affairs, to national decisions or global issues, to a whole multinational industry or to a

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narrower but deeper slice of life and work: a single firm, a local agency, a neighborhood.

I have tried several times to count the number of leaders in the United States of America. In the mid-1950s, because I was publisher of a magazine I wanted them to buy, I counted 555,000 "opinion leaders." A 1971 extrapolation of that figure came out at about a million. Seven out of ten of these were executive leaders of many kinds of organizations; this "aristocracy of achievement" was estimated in 1985 at one out of every two hundred Americans. After that I gave up: the knowledge revolution keeps multiplying the numbers of Americans who take the opportunity to lead, at one time or another, on one issue or another, in one community or another.

The galloping rate of growth of complexity means that a growth curve of the requirement for leaders (if anyone were clever enough to construct such an index) would show a steeper climb than any other growth rate in our political economy.

Attitudes of Leadership

Every person who seeks or assumes a leadership role in an information-rich society has to develop some of the aptitudes and attitudes of the generalist. Generalists have to be skeptical of inherited assumptions—because so many of them are being undermined so fast by the informatization of society.

They have to be curious about science-based technology—because those who would control it must first understand, not how it works, but what it can do for us and to us. (That's the way most of us understand an automobile: we can't fix it, but we're good at driving it.) They have to be broad in their perspective—to take account of the disappearing distinctions between public and private and between domestic and foreign. They have to be eager to pull people and ideas together—rather than split them apart. They have to be really interested in issues of fairness—because the people to be pulled together are. And they have to be self-confident enough

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to work, not out of sight in a back room, but riskily out on a limb in an increasingly open society.

You will find in these essays more emphasis on attitudes than on skills. Attitudes are the hardest part of the generalist's required learning. Survival and growth in the get-it-all-together profession, perhaps the world's most difficult line of work, requires a mindset that is, by and large, neglected in our education.

I first tried to define this mindset many years ago before a convention of city managers, because I thought they do some of the world's toughest and least rewarded work. After that I kept trying out on executive audiences and student seminars a series of draft formulations until I thought I had it about right.

Just then a book called *The One Minute Manager* hit the bestseller lists. So I tried to compress in a similar compass, for an op-ed article titled "The One Minute Leader," the generalist mindset I had been drafting and redrafting. My tongue was only half in cheek. There had to be a market niche for a learning tool that leaders, who are usually in a hurry, could absorb on the run.

Those of us who presume to take the lead in a democracy, where nobody is even supposed to be in charge, seem to need an arsenal of eight attitudes (reading time: one minute) indispensable to the management of complexity:

- First, a lively intellectual curiosity, an interest in everything—because everything really is related to everything else, and therefore to what you're trying to do, whatever it is.
- Second, a genuine interest in what other people think, and why they think that way—which means you have to be at peace with yourself for a start.
- Third, a feeling of special responsibility for envisioning a future that's different from a straight-line projection of the present. Trends are not destiny.

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- Fourth, a hunch that most risks are there not to be avoided but to be taken.
- Fifth, a mindset that crises are normal, tensions can be promising, and complexity is fun.
- Sixth, a realization that paranoia and self-pity are reserved for people who *don't* want to be leaders.
- Seventh, a sense of *personal* responsibility for the *general* outcome of your efforts.
- Eighth, a quality I call "unwarranted optimism"—the conviction that there must be some more upbeat outcome than would result from adding up all the available expert advice.

No Generalist Ladder

Generalists may start as scientists or MBAs or lawyers or union organizers or civil servants or artists, or mobilizers of feminist or ethnic groups, or citizen-advocates of a particular cause. They may be managers who (as a committee of the International City Management Association put it) know how to "lead while being led." They may even be judges who know that the law has to be molded to reflect both technological change and public opinion. There is actually no generalist ladder to leadership. Every young person starts as a specialist in something; but a rapidly growing minority of them, by accident or motivation or both, graduate into generalist leadership.

They are, with exceptions to be sure, men and women who are not preoccupied with formal power or position, or with getting their faces on TV or their names in the newspapers, people whose concern exceeds their confusion and may even preempt their egos, because they get busy and inventive doing something that hasn't been done before—and have fun doing it. But what makes them the

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shock troops of the get-it-all-together profession is, above all, their overriding concern for the *general* outcome of their efforts.

Some practicing generalists are legislators and editorial writers and other situation-as-a-whole people whose administrative responsibilities are comparatively light. But most of them are not only leaders but executives in business, government, or the independent sector—that is, people who feel the need not only to point the way to the future, but also to try to get there.

We who practice as executive leaders come in all sizes and shapes, pursue a wide variety of goals and purposes, and operate in many modes—in federal, state, and local bureaus, in big corporations, in small businesses, in academic settings, in nonprofit agencies ranging from the EXXON Education Foundation to Alcoholics Anonymous. But we are all responsible, for our own behavior and decisions, to people-in-general.

The buck doesn't stop with any of those intermediate bodies from which we derive our mandates: legislatures, stockholders, boards of directors or trustees. What Harry Truman said of the U.S. presidency is true for each of us who presumes to bring people together to make something different happen: "The buck stops here."

The Road to Leadership

If you now regard yourself as a leader or have aspirations in that direction, I can with some confidence trace your double career.

First you pick a specialty: legal services or health care, engineering or economics, accounting or architecture, production management or consumer advocacy, weaving or welding, brainwork or manual skill or some combination of the two. As you rise in your chosen field (we used to say "rise like cream in a milk bottle," but homogenized milk in an opaque carton has spiked that metaphor), you find yourself drawn into broader supervisory, managerial assignments, and then into the generalist role, either in your own right

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or (more likely at first) as staff assistant to a leader whose preoccupation with the whole you are expected to share.

You may be (to adapt some of John Gardner's words) a clarifier, definer, critic, or teacher. Or you may be an implementer, manager, problem solver who will "redesign existing institutions or invent new ones, create coalitions and fight off the people who don't want the problem solved." Or again, you may be counted among the "mobilizers" who "catalyze the social morale, help people know what they can be at their best, and nurture a workable level of unity." You may even come to be effective in all three roles; a good many people are.

This broader role requires a capacity for integrative thinking you didn't learn in school, "people skills" that were not graded and scored earlier in life, attitudes that differ in fundamental ways from those that made you a rising young specialist. Graduating from successful specialist to generalist leader is a wrenching, demanding, sometimes traumatic change of life.

As you shift gears, you will already have had a good deal of practice getting around in, and getting around, large-scale bureaucracies: foiling the personnel classification system, outwitting the budgeteers, hoodwinking the organization analysts, suffering the auditors, and even getting some better furniture for your office. You will also have learned, if you are considered a promising "comer," that despite those pyramidal organization charts the real world of work consists mostly of horizontal relationships. Most of the people you see from day to day don't work for you, and you don't work for them. You work together, even if that isn't the way it looks on the chart.

You will thus already have explored in action the leadership of equals, and tried to get things done in consensual systems—learning, for example, that overt confrontation is more likely to produce resistance than results. This environment will also have required you to cultivate the suasive arts, to learn the constructive uses of ambiguity, to develop the self-restraint not to cross bridges until you come to them, and to practice such conventions of committee work as

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introducing your personal views by attributing them to others. ("What I hear you all saying is. . . .")

The geometry and gimmickry of bureaucratic behavior are sometimes taught as "business management" or "public administration," or even as "advanced management." They are, indeed, essential survival skills in societies full of public and private bureaucracies. The bird that never learns to get around in its environment—that is, to fly—will never go far.

But the critical dimension of leadership, and the centerpiece of education for leadership, is not the technology of office work and committee sitting. That's the easy part. The hard part is organizing your mind for the analysis and projection of breadth.

Breadth: "The Intervals Between the Notes"

Breadth is a quality of mind, the capacity to relate disparate facts to coherent theory, to fashion tactics that are part of a strategy, to act today in ways that are consistent with a studied view of the future.

No one person can know enough to send a team of people to the Moon, in the sense that grandpa and grandma could know everything important about managing their corner grocery store. (The best of the old grocers virtually kept the inventory in their heads, as many merchants in Mideastern bazaars, West African "mammy-wagons," and Oriental jewel markets still do today. But imagine trying to keep in your head the list of spare parts for the space shuttle.) So different kinds of people, with very different kinds of knowledge and skills and personalities and personal goals and networks of friends and acquaintances, have to be brought together in organizations designed to transmute their separate expertnesses and their collective insights into wise day-to-day decisions in the service of a shared objective, *together.*

Breadth is not a contradiction of depth, but its complement. Everything really is related to everything else: the person who plumbs the depths of any specialty finds more and more connections with every other specialty. The astronomers who reach far back in

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time to postulate a big bang must in scholarly honesty ask the humanistic next questions: *Why* the bang? Who set it off? What does it *mean?* And so the experts come, by the circuitous route of pure reason, to speculations that can only be explorations of faith.

The Scientific Revolution, and its younger siblings the Industrial Revolution and the Information Revolution, were made possible by our capacity to divide into separate disciplines the proven methods of inquiry, and to retrieve from bins of manageable size and complication the knowledge we accumulated by observing, experimenting, and theorizing. But in the latter part of the twentieth century, we came to realize that most of our troubles stem from neglecting the interconnections of knowledge, the interdisciplinary character of all real-world problems. (Chaos theory, discussed in Chapter Eight, seems to have been developed by brilliant oddballs who delighted in breaching disciplinary frontiers.)

Isaac Stern, who was not only a superb musician but a philosopher of music education, was once asked in a public forum at the Aspen Institute why all professional musicians seemed to be able to play the same notes in the same order, yet some sounded wonderful and others did not. The world's best violinist paused and scratched his head. "But it isn't the *notes* that are important," he objected. "It's the intervals *between* the notes." A wise comment, not only about music but about other forms of knowledge. It's not mainly our capacity to dig out "the facts," but rather the educated reason and practiced intuition to relate them to each other and arrange them in meaningful patterns that make the human brain something more than a data-collecting machine with a computerized memory.

Just the same, executive leaders are very likely to be unsuccessful unless they have, earlier in life, put in some time as first-rate specialists. It really doesn't matter in what field. In the offbeat words of poet Charles Olson:

> Best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man* until you yourself know more about that than is possible to any other

> man. It doesn't matter whether it's Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast: One saturation job (it might take 14 years), and you're in, forever.

You don't leave behind the attitudes that served you so well when your primary task was to get to the bottom of whatever-it-was. The get-it-all-together person needs above all to be good at judging whether the experts who stream through the executive office, creating a chronic condition of information entropy on the executive's desk, are getting to the bottom of their subjects. An executive who has never had personal experience with specialized research and analysis won't even know what competent expertise *feels* like. It's not a new idea. Liu Shao, writing about human relations management in China, said it seventeen hundred years ago: "You cannot recognize in another a quality you do not have yourself."

An Exciting Profession

Each of us has known some people who would pass the tests implied in what I have written about the generalist role, about integrative thinking, about making what hasn't happened before happen now. Indeed, in any successful effort, from a summer camp to a television show to a corporate merger to a peacetime alliance, you will find working generalists near the center of activity. They are the people who furnish most of the glue that holds people together and the imagination around which other people mobilize.

Most of them might even object at first if you were to call them leaders; they describe themselves, and their peers describe them, as camp counselors, artists, businesspeople, or diplomats. But their common talisman is *their concern for the general outcome*—and their willingness to do something about that concern.

Paradoxically, the leaders who listen most attentively to what our Declaration of Independence calls "the general opinion of

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mankind" may seem (to their peers, to the establishment, to the media, and even to members of the general public for whom they purport to speak and act) to be uttering heretical thoughts, prescribing for undiagnosed diseases, proposing bizarre solutions—because others have not exercised the wider curiosity or done the integrative thinking that come more naturally to the generalist.

"Getting it all together" can be an exciting profession, but it can also be a vulnerable one. The first reaction to your good idea may recall that pungent line from a Ring Lardner story: " 'Shut up,' my father explained." The resistance to what has never been done before may remind the generalist of Peter Ustinov's claim that one of his grade-school teachers wrote on his report card, "Peter shows great originality, which must be curbed at all costs." The first birds off the telephone wire (the image is John Gardner's) need both spunk and persistence.

Each of us who presumes to the kind of leadership that welcomes innovation while it is still new has to try hard to think about what the Club of Rome called the *problématique,* the constantly changing general context. I mean this quite literally. None of us can expect to *act* on more than a tiny corner of the great complexity. But in our interrelated society, itself part of an uncompromisingly interdependent world, we have to *think* about the whole complexity in order to act relevantly on any part of it. A 1980 convention of futurists in Toronto summed up the generalist mandate in four now-famous words: "Think Globally, Act Locally."

The message comes through, loud and clear, from the most prophetic of our contemporary public philosophers. In one of his many lucid and useful books, *Managing in Turbulent Times,* Peter Drucker poses the puzzle of pluralism: "Each institution pursues its own specific goal. But who then takes care of the common weal?" His answer (and mine) is: the specialized professional who graduates into general leadership. "He does not cease to be a 'professional'; he must not cease to be one. But he acquires an additional dimension of understanding, additional vision, and the sense of

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responsibility for the survival and performance of the whole that distinguishes the manager from the subordinate and the citizen from the subject."

Scary as it is to be a citizen-leader so defined, we have to agree with John Gardner's exhortation (in a pithy little piece called "The War of the Parts Against the Whole"). This is a moment, he writes,

> when the innumerable interests, organizations and groups that make up our national life must keep their part of the bargain with the society that gives them freedom, by working toward the common good. Right now. In this time of trouble. Their chances for long-term enjoyment of pluralism will be enhanced by a long-term commitment to the common good as we go through this difficult passage. At least for now, a little less *pluribus*, a lot more *unum*.

It's not an easy philosophy. But don't blame the messengers who bring the news, blame the delightful complexities and stimulating dynamics of a society in rapid transition. And be assured, by one who has been there, that the exhilaration usually exceeds the exhaustion.