The "Polyintelligent" Leader

*An Emerging New Paradigm
for Human Performance*

By

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Who can say which will be
more important in the end:
landing on the moon,
or understanding the human mind?

- Tenzin Gyatso
14th Dalai Lama

Time to Re-Think Leadership

The chaotic business environment of the new millennium is forcing us to reconsider, abandon, or reinvent many of the "truths" we've held so closely for decades. All of the basic disciplines of management – strategic planning, marketing, finance, operations, customer focus, IT, human resource management – are being re-examined, questioned, and rethought.

Perhaps it's inevitable that we rethink our basic ideas about leadership, in light of the radical changes in the way business organizations now operate. The emerging concept of *"multiple intelligences"* is now taking form, and more and more business thinkers are trying to figure out what it has to offer in the practical and pragmatic world of business organizations.

Leadership theories and models have been plentiful over the last several decades. Some of them have become popular, many have been interesting, and most have left us still hungry. The three main categories – style-based models, trait-based models, and skill-based models – have all had their moment on the stage. All have had their fans and their detractors. So far, no one has offered up the "final," or "ultimate" model or theory of leadership. We probably shouldn't hold our breath waiting.

The Multiple Intelligence Theory

Meanwhile, the latest turn of the conceptual wheel brings us to the idea of leadership as *an expression of intelligence*. The multiple intelligence theory, arising largely out of the pioneering work of Harvard professor Howard Gardner, advances the notion that we

human beings have a variety of intelligences – or forms of competence – not just one. More importantly, Gardner and other advocates of this theory claim that these intelligences are not fixed, wired-in characteristics of our brains, but acquired capacities.

This idea that intelligence can be learned, and perhaps even taught, has divided the academic community, caused an upwelling of new aspirations on the part of educators, and captured the interest of key thinkers in the business world. We're no longer sentenced to a fixed potential in life by a three-digit number awarded us by the "IQ test." We now have a much richer and more optimistic concept of human capacity.

The "MI" concept is one of several key strands of thought that are coming together to suggest a significantly different paradigm for leadership, not only in business organizations but in all dimensions of human endeavor.

I believe that most of the traditional theories of leadership have suffered from one or both of two serious flaws:

1. Failure to adequately consider the specific *performance context* – the unique situation in which an individual leader has to operate, and

2. Failure to adequately consider the unique *personal variables* that make the leader what he or she is.

The "Crucible": the Critical Effect of Situation

Professor Warren Bennis, one of the most distinguished thinkers in the field of leadership, refers to the "crucible" – a challenging situation in which the leader finds him- or herself – as calling upon the leader to become something larger, better, more capable than he or she has been. This concept of the crucible helps us understand why it's so often difficult to *predict* how a particular person will perform in a difficult leadership situation: *the crucible shapes the leader*.

> *Case in point*: American vice-presidents have been selected, traditionally, for political balance and convenience, not their prospective leadership skills. But from the Second World War to the present, three of them have been thrust into the US presidency by the death or incapacity of the elected president: Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford. None were prepared for the crises they had to face. Truman himself believed he was not up to the task, as did most political observers, yet he is widely considered to have become the kind of leader America needed during the war years. The same might be said of Lincoln, generally considered an unpromising political amateur from the back woods.

Leadership theories that focus on styles, traits, or skills, with little or no consideration of the crucible effect – the shaping influence of the situation – leave out this critical dimension of learning and growth. We might think of it, simply, as "intelligence" – the ability to learn, cope, and adapt. The key question becomes, not: "is this person sufficiently decisive?" or, "does he or she have 'vision?'," or "can he or she delegate?" – but "can he or she, as an individual, grow to meet the challenges posed by the crucible?"

This way of thinking sheds light on the myth of the "born leader," I believe. *No one is a leader until he or she actually leads.* In between leadership episodes, he or she is just a

person. But at the moment of truth, the prospective leader's accumulated life experience and learnings come into play, for better or for worse. The idea that there is some genetically determined set of leadership capabilities, conferred at birth, seems like a rather lame explanation for success.

Perhaps this is why many executive recruiting experts contend that the most reliable predictor of success, in most situations, is prior success in a similar situation.

The Dynamic Self: What the Leader Brings

"Well-rounded" leaders are actually few and far between, and that's probably a good thing. Most traditional leadership training programs have an expressed or implied intention of producing all-purpose leaders, presumably capable of serving in a wide variety of situations. They typically "cover" a whole range of skills and methods, as if all of the graduates will be able to reach into their tool belts and pull out the right fix for whatever situation presents itself.

With a few notable exceptions, most leader training programs neglect the kinds of self-insight assessments and experiences that could help the participants understand better how they think, problem-solve, learn, and grow. My thesis here is that *intelligence is the fundamental basis for leadership*. The specific skills and practices follow after that.

The "Polyintelligent" Leader

Dr. Douglas Bray, one of the pioneers of the assessment center method of selecting candidates for management, widely implemented by AT&T in the 1960s, was asked (by me): "Of all the aspects of human performance you've studied, if you had to choose only one as the basis for selecting managers, which aspect would you choose?" Bray replied, "I'd probably go for intelligence."

Now that we understand "intelligence" as a multi-dimensional construct, we can ask: which of the various intelligences are most relevant to leadership? And, how can those intelligences be assessed, developed, and supported?

To answer the first question, we need to look more closely at the current state of the MI theory.

Too Many Choices?

While Gardner and others use rather scientific sounding labels for the various categories of intelligence – *verbal-logical*, *mathematical-symbolic*, *spatial*, *kinesthetic*, *interpersonal*, *intrapersonal* and *musical* – we probably do little harm by re-coding them into street language and simplifying them conceptually. With appropriate respect for Professor Gardner and his theory, I've found it helpful to arrange these "multiple smarts" into six primary categories:

1. Abstract Intelligence: symbolic reasoning, formal logic, and mathematics.
2. Social Intelligence: understanding social contexts and dealing with people.
3. Practical Intelligence: common sense; coping with everyday life.

4. Emotional Intelligence: awareness and management of one's inner experience.

5. Aesthetic Intelligence: the sense of form, design, music, art, and literature.

6. Kinesthetic Intelligence: whole-body skills like sports, dance, music, or flying a jet fighter.

Others might argue for a somewhat different set of subdivisions, but these six categories work fairly well, and they have the modest extra advantage of spelling out a memorable acronym: ASPEAK.

Presumably the "Renaissance human," the success model most of us admire, would have a strong and well-integrated combination of all six of these key intelligences.

But this potentially powerful concept will remain just an abstruse theory unless we learn how to apply it in everyday life, work, and relationships. In the business world, for better or worse, the full range of six primary intelligences is probably too wide a selection for executives, managers, coaches, consultants, trainers, and employees to embrace. Trying to promote interest in all of them is probably too ambitious at this stage, and likely to confuse the prospective learners rather than enlighten and inspire them.

Clearly, some of the six key intelligences tend to fit more comfortably with the customs and cultures of business organizations, and others much less so. Aesthetic intelligence, for example, while appealing and valuable to many people, seems to offer less "return on investment" value to business leaders than, say, practical intelligence or emotional intelligence. Kinesthetic intelligence, while valuable in some few specialized occupations, is less encompassing in its reach than, say, social intelligence.

The "Big Three" Focus

Accepting this somewhat prosaic reality of the business world and the business organization, I propose that we focus on *three particular intelligences* – three components selected from the whole academic inventory of a dozen or more – as a core set of competencies that combine synergistically and powerfully to form a basis for most of our successes in life. All three of them tend to offer an immediate and obvious appeal to executives who might be inclined to invest their organizations' resources in them.

The three key intelligences that seem to emerge most strongly as relevant to business are:

1. *Emotional Intelligence ("EI")*: the ability to be aware of, understand, and manage your emotional states.

2. *Social Intelligence ("SI")*: the ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you.

3. *Practical Intelligence ("PI")*: the ability to solve problems and cope effectively with the challenges of everyday life.

Viewed as a combination of overlapping capabilities, as illustrated in Figure 1, these three core capacities are shaping our actions, reactions, and ruminations virtually all of

the time. I refer to this combination of three key "smarts" as the *Triune Intelligence Model*.
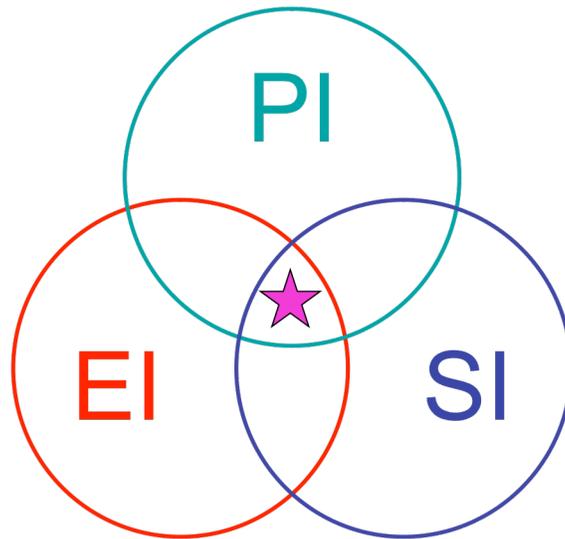

Figure 1. The Triune Intelligence Model.

Several key aspects of this triune model have already been foreshadowed by previous theories and theorists. Douglas Bray noted a construct he called "social intelligence" in his statistical analyses of leader performance. The eminent psychologist E.M. Thorndike nominated SI as a separate dimension several decades ago. Harvard professors David McClelland and David Berlo suggested a leadership dimension they called "skillful use of self." Others have talked about "emotional hardiness" as a key capacity of leaders.

If this line of thinking sounds like a "mental health" paradigm, that's probably a fair assessment. The intersection of the three domains shown in Figure 1, as a Venn diagram, is the core of the triune concept, flagged by the star. The fusion of EI, SI, and PI at the very center suggests an integrated state of maturity. It's the nucleus of the psychological "atom" – the place where they can no longer be separated. It's convenient to discuss each of the three key intelligences in the triad on its own merits, and it's equally important to understand them as closely interwoven and interdependent.

Polyintelligent Leadership in Action

Well, "So what?" A theory is no better than the results it makes possible. How does the concept of polyintelligence point us to a new conception of leadership? How do we recognize a polyintelligent leader when we observe one? How can polyintelligence, and polyintelligent leadership, be assessed? How can it be learned, developed, and cultivated in a business environment? We don't have all the answers to all of the questions at this point, and considerable thought must be devoted to elaborating the elements of the model.

Of course, we mustn't minimize the importance of knowing the basic principles of "how to run things," or the practical methods for "getting things done." From the point of view

of polyintelligent leadership, however, we can see those as *expressions* of the triune intelligence complex – the "outward and visible signs" of the internal codes for success.

Although a detailed recitation of the key skills and practices of leadership is not necessary to the scope of this discussion, suffice it to say that all of them can be mapped back to one or more – often several – dimensions of the triune complex. This is most revealing when one considers *leadership in action* – an episode of some kind in which the leader is called upon to act.

> *Case in point*: terminating the employment of someone who can't or won't meet the requirements of the job. This is typically a stressful, or at least unpleasant, experience for most managers, and many lose sleep the night before. Clearly emotional intelligence is called into play, along with the other dimensions. The leader-manager has to cope with his or her own feelings and reactions – EI – while interacting one-on-one with the departing employee – SI – and managing the whole process effectively – PI. Any deficit on the part of the leader-manager can impair his or her capacity to manage the critical episode and the overall process effectively. Conversely, adequate strength in each of the three dimensions can make the termination process humane and tolerable, and can even lead to positive feelings on the part of the departing employee once he or she has come to terms with the experience. Of course, the three intelligences can have the same personal value for the employee as for the leader-manager.

This triune intelligence paradigm immediately triggers a number of key questions:

- How does this apply to me, as a leader or leader-manager?
- How can I assess my own current state of intelligence?
- What do I need to learn to become more "polyintelligent"?
- And, perhaps: if I'm responsible for developing leaders, how can I introduce these concepts to my organization?

But first, it will help to explore each of the three components of the triune model in somewhat greater depth.

Emotional Intelligence: Where We're "Coming From"

EI is the ability to be aware of, understand, and manage one's emotional state – or states – as a means for interacting effectively with one's environment. EI incorporates elements of self-esteem; emotional autonomy, i.e. not getting hooked into the negative emotional dramas of others; appropriate control over one's emotions; and the capacity to engage with the environment and the people in it with an appropriate degree of energy.

A particular example can serve to illuminate the role of EI in the leadership context.

> *Case in point:* the "nice guy" manager. This is the leader-manager who can't seem to bring him- or herself to apply pressure when individual team members aren't getting the job done. The "NGM" prefers to hint, cajole, model, and hope, rather than confront poor performance and insist on results. This syndrome often originates from an intense aversion to conflict, a fear of making others angry, and

a disabling desire to be liked. It can also be connected to a low sense of self-worth, self-doubt about one's qualifications as a leader, and a reflexive anxiety that sets in when people become angry or aggressive. The NGM typically finds it very difficult to deal with problem employees, and tends to avoid the protracted and stressful process of following up with a failing employee and getting him or her back into a productive mode. The NGM needs to learn to understand and confront his or her avoidance patterns, perhaps understand the early-life decisions that led to the dysfunctional reflexes, and experiment with an escalating ladder of new behaviors that are more effective. Without an understanding of the polyintelligence concept, the manager's boss or a leadership coach might be inclined to just urge him or her to follow the "problem employee" protocols. However, "just do it" might not be a very useful piece of advice for this individual, at this stage of his or her development.

Social Intelligence: How We Engage Others

SI is the ability to get along well with others, and to get them to cooperate with you. It includes dimensions like situational awareness; a sense of "presence," or bearing; authenticity in dealing with others; clarity of expression and skillful use of language; and the ability to establish and sustain empathy with others.

A particular example can serve to illuminate the role of SI in the leadership context.

> *Case in point*: the "toxic" manager. This is the leader-manager who treats his or her subordinates, sometimes colleagues – and sometimes just about everybody else – rudely, inconsiderately, and with little regard for the quality of ongoing relationships. This person seems to believe that getting what he or she wants, on a situation-by-situation basis, is the only thing that counts. His or her favorite slogan is "I'm not here to win a popularity contest; I'm here to get results." This is a classic syndrome often studied in leadership training programs: criticizing and fault-finding much more than praising; intimidating and oppressing staff members; punishing those who speak up or offer differing opinions; and scolding or humiliating team members publicly. Over time, this coercive mentality can become self-reinforcing, as people are less inclined to support and assist the manager, and so he or she intensifies the dysfunctional behavior. This syndrome often originates in simple ignorance and insensitivity to others, lack of skill in handling interpersonal situations, and a kind of tunnel vision that excludes the social realities of working relationships. There is often a connection to the EI domain, possibly related to low self-esteem, fear of failure, and fear of intimacy. The toxic manager needs, first, to become aware of the price he and others are paying in the impacts of the toxic behavior; second, that better options are possible; and third, that changing one's behavior is not necessarily difficult.

Practical Intelligence: How We Get Things Done

PI is the ability to cope with life's everyday challenges, solve problems, make good decisions, and get things done. It involves capacities such as conceptual thinking, divergent and convergent thinking, systems thinking, thinking relationally and comparatively, and extrapolating from one experience to general situations.

A particular example can serve to illuminate the role of PI in the leadership context.

> *Case in point*: the "do it yourself" manager. This is the leader-manager who sees him- or herself as pulling the plow rather than holding the reins. Caught up in the minutiae of the workload and often overwhelmed by it, he or she typically finds it difficult to "organize, deputize, and supervise." This person has trouble making the transition from doing the work to managing the work. The justifying slogan is usually "By the time I show him or her how to do it, I might as well do it myself." One can sometimes spot the DIY manager by the queue of people outside his or her office, each waiting for the boss to solve a problem or make a decision that they could probably handle themselves. And, of course, by the lights burning late at night in his or her office after everyone else has left. Sometimes this syndrome arises from a simple lack of insight and insufficient experience. There can also be a connection to the EI domain, if the DIY leader-manager tends to be overly cautious, fearful of losing control, or unable to trust others to get things done. The DIY manager usually needs to learn some basic systems thinking skills such as time management, planning, deciding on priorities, setting up projects, assigning responsibilities, and tracking results with team members.

Formal Authority and Earned Authority

The triune paradigm highlights a key concept found in almost all leadership theories: the idea that a leader's influence, impact, and contribution rest upon two equally important pillars:

1. *Formal authority* – his or her entitlement to act, which is derived from some higher source of authority, or from the "consent of the governed," in the case of an elected leader; and

2. *Earned authority* – the willingness of others to accept his or her influence and direction by virtue of some personal relationship or connection they have, or perceive themselves as having, with the leader.

One of the iconic historical examples of a leader with virtually no formal authority and an enormous impact via his earned authority was Mohandas Gandhi. The famous "salt march" in 1930 in which he walked from his ashram to the sea to collect a handful of salt – a symbolic act, yet one forbidden by British colonial law – culminated with thousands of Indians thronging behind him. Ironically, the British governor and his military enforcers had full authority to put down the demonstration with the most brutal violence, yet they were helpless to change the determination of the people who participated.

Another, less historical example of a leader with high earned authority was Walt Disney, a creative master and a keen businessman, who built one of the most successful and most admired companies in America. He had a way of attracting and inspiring creative people that has seldom been equaled in the movie industry. In his recorded memoir at the Disneyland park, he told of his early experience in "enrolling others in his vision," as Professor Warren Bennis calls it:

> [Paraphrased] "We were making 'Fantasia,' which was the biggest animated production ever attempted. I was getting a bit worried about the costs, and wondering whether the film would really live up to the investment we were making. We had already gone over the $10 million mark, and it would have to earn more at the box office than any animated film in history, just to cover its costs.
>
> "One day I was walking around the studios, and I was struck by the amazing energy and enthusiasm that I saw everywhere. People were working away like beavers, helping one another and turning out the work. Suddenly, it dawned on me: 'These people think I know what I'm doing!'"

Apparently he did: "Fantasia" became one of the all-time success stories in animation, paving the way for much of the latter-day technology-driven animated entertainment. Every seven or eight years it's re-released, and it continues to draw impressive revenues.

One of history's great lessons about inspiring leaders, I believe, is that:

> *Great leaders earn our loyalty,*
> *not by the way they make us feel about them,*
> *but by the way they make us feel about ourselves.*

The Five Tasks of the Leader

The polyintelligent leader paradigm invites us, I believe, to move beyond the traditional static models of traits, styles, and skills, to a view of leadership as:

> *the skillful deployment of an evolving intelligence, in a challenging situation*.

Commenting on the successful leaders he and his colleagues studied, Professor Warren Bennis noted, in his inspiring book *Still Surprised: a Memoir of a Life in Leadership*:

> "We discovered that all [of the leaders we studied] had undergone a *crucible*, a transformative experience that had prepared them to lead. … We found that *adaptive capacity* was the single most important attribute for success, whatever the field."

Note the key phrase in Bennis' proposition: *adaptive capacity*.

If we agree that leadership is about coping with crucibles, then it would seem that leaders actually behave as *serial problem solvers*. Each new challenge, whether it's figuring out the grand strategic vision, responding to some unexpected disaster, or rethinking some aspect of the product or service, demands *a new solution*.

Leadership becomes a dynamic *process*, involving five critical steps, or tasks. In each new episode, the leader must skillfully:

1. *"Read"* the situation – discern the essential truth of what's happening.

2. *Design* a solution – create a recipe for a better state of affairs.

3. *Sell* the solution to the vested parties involved.

4. *Support and guide* the actors who make it work.

5. *Close* the loop by insisting on results.

Of course, all five of these steps can involve participation and contributions from various people involved in the solution, to various degrees. Building a team, inspiring and supporting the team members, and helping them develop the critical capacities they need, are all skillful expressions of the primary intelligences that the leader brings to the situation.

Professor Bennis also emphasizes the key role of problem solving:

> "… we developed a theoretical model for the alchemy of leadership. In *Judgment* (2007), Noel Tichy and I argued that a leader's life is the summation of the leader's judgment calls. *Making judgment calls, we concluded, is the primary job of a leader, the DNA of leadership*. With good judgment, little else matters. Without good judgment, nothing else matters."

In the words of that oft-quoted Greek philosopher Anonymous, "Wisdom is simply knowing what to do next."

This concept of the leader as serial problem solver gives us one more angle of view on the age-old question: "How is being a leader different from being a manager?" In the context of well-defined business organizations, at least, we can say that:

- Managing is primarily focused on maintaining a successful state of order, or "doing things right."

- Leadership is primarily focused on rearranging the current state and arriving at a new and better one, or "doing the right things."

Any one individual can both lead and manage in varying proportions, depending on the demands of the situation. In a stable, "steady state" situation, where the organization is operating effectively, the managerial role predominates. When the situation changes and "creative destruction" is called for, the leader role emerges more strongly. And, of course, the same person can be serving both roles at any one time.

In other words, every manager needs to have an "inner leader," which is called forth when new solutions are required. Not every leader is a manager, but every manager is potentially a leader.

Polyintelligence: How do We Know it when We See it?

Each of the three intelligences that form the triune model can be described, assessed, and developed. Each involves a rich constellation of interesting capacities, and I have chosen to try to summarize them in the form of a fairly memorable acronym – "S.P.A.C.E." At some risk of appearing to force-fit complex concepts into a simple container, I believe we can use the same S.P.A.C.E. mnemonic as an efficient shorthand for all three intelligences. Please note that the S.P.A.C.E. acronym is only

intended to round up and relate the key concepts for thought and discussion; it cannot be presumed to capture all of the sub-dimensions of all of the triune dimensions.

Figure 2 shows the five key S.P.A.C.E. components for each of the triune intelligences, appropriately labeled for each dimension.

Factor:	Emotional Intelligence: "The Inner S.P.A.C.E."	Social Intelligence: "The Social S.P.A.C.E."	Practical Intelligence: "The Action S.P.A.C.E."
S =	Self-Esteem	Situational Awareness	Systematic Thinking
P =	Present Mindedness	Presence	Possibility Thinking
A =	Autonomy	Authenticity	Abstract Fluency
C =	Control	Clarity	Change Tolerance
E =	Engagement	Empathy	Emotional Neutrality

Figure 2. The "S.P.A.C.E." Model of Multiple Intelligences.

We can consider each of the five S.P.A.C.E. components, under each of the three intelligences, in terms of its unique contribution to the leader's effectiveness in various challenging situations.

These various components are explained further in other sources. For the present discussion, I hope they are sufficiently descriptive to lend perspective to the conversation and to stimulate interest in further investigation.

Implications and Applications

An appropriate degree of intellectual humility dictates that we view the polyintelligent leadership paradigm as an emerging one, which is just beginning to take shape. It needs careful and critical scrutiny, a thorough conceptual shakedown, and considerable evaluation in real-world situations.

The discussion presented here is intended to serve – at most – as the first word on the subject, not the last.

About the Author:

Dr. Karl Albrecht is an executive management consultant, futurist, lecturer, and author of more than 20 books on professional achievement, organizational performance, and business strategy. He is also a leading authority on cognitive styles and the development of advanced thinking skills. His books Social Intelligence: the New Science

of Success, Practical Intelligence: the Art and Science of Common Sense, and his Mindex Thinking Style Profile are widely used in business and education. The Mensa society honored him with its lifetime achievement award, for significant contributions by a member to the understanding of intelligence. Originally a physicist, and having served as a military intelligence officer and business executive, he now consults, lectures, and writes about whatever he thinks would be fun.

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