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## *Introduction*

This is a book about exemplary leadership, which, in any society, is a precious resource that must be identified, nurtured, and celebrated. Good leadership can be found in both corporate and nonprofit organizations, though its corporate forms are generally taken as our culture's ideal—widely researched, broadly revered, and, as we see it, routinely misapplied to nonprofit organizations.

We began our thinking and research with a simple concern: Nonprofit leaders rarely get their due. In classrooms, government funding agencies, and charitable foundations, in their own boardrooms, and throughout the vast literature on leadership, they are regularly required to lead like their corporate colleagues—or as the popular imagery about corporate leadership would require them to lead. The distinctness and complexities of their own worlds tend to be ignored. We intended to take up the mantle in their defense—to study them, to learn from them, and where deserved, to praise them.

Along the way, we discovered that our original intent had led us in unforeseen directions. We discovered a great variety among nonprofit leaders, as befits the great variety of challenges they face and circumstances in which they find themselves. It soon became clear that it made no more sense to try to identify or impose the finest, one-size-fits-all leadership style in the nonprofit world than it had in the corporate world. Rather the fit between leaders and their organizations seemed the key to effective leadership. Many different leaders and leadership styles were required for many different kinds of organizations. The difference between corporate and nonprofit leadership ceased to be our focus. Drawing a clear boundary around “nonprofit leadership” served as a launch point and not a destination.

As we unpacked and elaborated the idea of fit, we observed how effective organizations had aligned the character, skills, values, and personal objectives of leaders with the character, resources, culture, and objectives of their organizations, and how the qualities of leaders and their organizations were aligned

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with the communities or markets they served. When organizations were aligned in this way, they hummed with productivity, collaboration, and satisfaction. So we came to see alignment as the fundamental task, the fundamental measure of effective leadership.

### The Journey

The ideas in this book emerged gradually, through a circuitous and sometimes difficult journey. The journey itself has been instructive to us, and we want to introduce the book by inviting readers to join us. In our careers as organization development consultants (both of us) and psychotherapists (Barry Dym), we have worked with many leaders in both the corporate and nonprofit worlds. The leaders we have come to know vary enormously. Some are executive directors of large nonprofits or CEOs of major corporations; others head small grassroots or high-tech startup organizations. We have worked with family-owned businesses and public-private partnerships. Some of the leaders we know wear corporate attire and speak in crisp, crafted sentences honed at Ivy League colleges and business schools. Others speak in the tones and vernacular of ethnic or professional communities. Still others speak and act with the sense of noblesse oblige and the sonorous tones of feudal lords. Some, having founded their own organization, work with a passionate fury—almost unaware of their appearance and sometimes barely aware of the people around them. Others trust their minions to do the bulk of the work, and spend time with family or charitable causes, or keep their golf game in good repair. Leaders are short and tall, smart and not so smart. They are men and women. They are from black, white, Latino, Irish, Jewish, Chinese, Italian, and many other cultural backgrounds that help shape the ways they think and behave, the dreams, the fears, the ambitions, and the inhibitions that define their character and their actions.

Often this variety seemed a matter of fact—the way things are—but just as often the variety struck us as interesting, challenging, and the stuff of creative tensions. At the very least, the variety among leaders needs to be supported, affirmed, and utilized. We are a nation defined by our diversity, invigorated and ennobled by the waves of new and different people who come to coexist and contribute. As Americans, we dislike and mistrust efforts to ignore differences or to merge people into a single standard in which one type of person is said to be better than others. We appreciate the jazz of life—free-form within form.

In our consulting travels, on the other hand, we couldn't help but notice a certain homogenizing process with respect to leadership. More and more of the books we read insisted on a single best way to lead. Organizations followed

suit, developing programs to identify and train young leaders in the “correct” approach. The archetypal leader they celebrated was something of a bold manager or an entrepreneur with a solid grounding in modern management techniques, as taught in MBA programs. Foundations, management consultants, and non-profit boards almost all seemed to accept this MBA-like prescription, and insisted that nonprofit leaders either fit themselves to the mold or make way for those who could.

This homogenizing process seemed to us an enormous waste. It left out many talented people and potential leaders. It squeezed other leaders into a mold that made use of only some of their talents, and often made them so uncomfortable—trying to be people they were not—that they were rarely at their best. And it replicated itself through leadership training programs in which people are measured against the right way to lead rather than encouraged to build outward from their innate character and strengths.

Like the multicultural/diversity consultants who emerged in force during the 1990s, we tried to communicate the importance of being inclusive, of nurturing a variety of leaders and leadership styles. In parallel with the diversity consultants, we generally received token responsiveness and programmatic rejection. Usually we did not speak as complete outsiders; we would already be working with senior executives in large corporations, and we had their ear. They would agree that there are many different ways to lead, that diversity in method and point of view could be creative, that it might also be ethical, and that it might even be good for business; but they did not let it influence how they selected, trained, promoted, or rewarded organizational leaders at the highest levels.

We were satisfied neither that we were making adequate headway on behalf of our clients nor that we had done our homework. We wanted to be able to point to other models of leadership that were both successful and deeply different. So we turned away from the corporate world to make our case.

Two consulting experiences spurred us on. One took place during a two-year consulting experience with a large urban newspaper in the Midwest. Call it the *Standard Tribune* (ST).<sup>1</sup> Recently purchased by a still larger and more prestigious newspaper, the ST was being pressured to modernize its operations. Like most newspapers, the ST had long been a family-owned, paternalistic organization, with virtual lifetime employment guarantees and a stable network of employees who were in place as much for who they knew as for how well they could do their job. It was not a contemporary, hard-driving meritocracy disciplined by market forces. During difficulties, for example, the publisher would simply contribute his own money to tide them over until good financial times returned.

To spearhead the ST’s modernization, the parent company introduced a new publisher, one who had earned his spurs at the parent company as a disciple

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of Six Sigma improvement processes. He could take on a department or a companywide process and make it leaner, faster, and more efficient. He was a smart, determined, no-nonsense kind of guy who got things done. While he went through the motions of consulting others and talked a language of collaboration, he would make up his mind and hand out assignments to others whose job was to execute his orders. Having introduced a strategy to guide the ST's future, he was frustrated that departmental managers and other influential leaders were not implementing it with alacrity. So he decided it was time to clarify the nature of good leadership and achieve greater conformance to specifications.

Of course there was no question that leadership would need to be molded to the publisher's image. The organization was embarked on a long and arduous change process. But there were other effective leaders at ST, many of whom did not resemble the publisher at all. The chief operating officer, for example, tended to be a terrific individual problem solver and sole practitioner who had gathered around him a bevy of young people who could be deployed like SWAT teams to rescue or upgrade any department. The vice president for human resources was an extraordinarily personable woman, who had earned her spurs as an adviser to leaders and, because she was so trusted, as a source of information. She knew the pulse of the organization. She was not, at heart, a manager, but she was immensely valuable for the perspective and advice she lent to situations. The senior vice president for finance was probably the most effective manager, who worked almost entirely through her trusted senior team. She empowered others and facilitated their efforts by providing resources and clearing away obstacles. Perhaps more tellingly, the newspaper had lost several opportunities to integrate internet-related businesses—once due to the absence of an internet-style leader; another time, due to the absence of entrepreneurial leaders able to build a new initiative from scratch.

The publisher was blind to the idea of building on each of his executives' strengths and identifying others with strengths that might be particularly relevant to the fast-changing world of media and communications. Of equal importance, he was shy and uncomfortable in groups, and he did not know how to build or to trust a leadership team composed of his senior people, a team in which each person's strengths and limitations were optimized by the whole. Instead, he wanted each person to have the "right" skills. So he called for a series of executive meetings to define an ST model of leadership and instructed the Human Resources Department to hire only people who fit the model.

Barry was on the team charged with designing the process, and he argued for a multitude of ST leadership models with the emphasis on their learning to work together in a collaborative and complementary manner. He described the different skills brought by different leaders and the missed opportunities due to a lack of entrepreneurial leadership. And he specifically noted that the publisher's proposed model would probably either exclude three of his most

valued senior managers or require them to turn themselves into pretzels, trying to succeed in styles that did not suit either their character or the relationship they had built with their own staffs. And he lost the argument.

While this kind of replication of self—what works for me should work for everyone, everywhere—is familiar and understandable, it does not leverage organizational resources. If, for example, the publisher had had the courage to surround himself with different kinds of leaders, with people who complemented rather than mimicked his set of skills and his style, then he would have increased the executive capability of his organization.

The idea that there is one kind or a best kind of leadership, so prevalent in the popular literature,<sup>2</sup> in which there exist formulas for leadership success, is offensive to us on a number of levels. First, our experience tells us that it does not make sense. We have led, worked in, and consulted to innumerable organizations, in which many types of leaders worked effectively. Second, as a cultural norm, a single leadership ideal is reminiscent of the melting pot idea, the notion that many diverse cultures that make up our country would eventually merge into a single, American culture. What the purveyors of this idea meant is that we would all become White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and that non-WASP culture would eventually fade away or be relegated to ethnic neighborhoods and rural backwaters. The melting pot ideal is, at heart, a nativist ideology, one that favors culturally dominant groups and dismisses the contributions of minority groups. Third, the belief in one correct leadership style is personally offensive to us because it marginalizes many of the people we find most compelling, talented, and effective.

In another situation, this time a nonprofit, we observed this homogenizing impulse close up. The organization had been funded largely by a grant from a foundation, which, in turn, was the instrument of a wildly successful businessman. He and his program officers tried to convert the very experienced and talented nonprofit leaders into corporate managers. They did so both explicitly and implicitly, by demanding a kind of extensive strategic planning and program assessment that required the leaders to behave like managers of large-scale corporations. The leaders were dependent on the foundation and so turned themselves inside-out trying to behave in ways that were unnatural to them. Much that was best about them—the ways they inspired staff, taught, brought out energy and ideas in staff, and reached out to potential clients—grew dull and ineffectual as they attended to the program officers.

There is nothing dramatically unique about this foundation-nonprofit relationship. Foundations, boards of directors composed of wealthy donors from the professional and corporate worlds, and government agencies routinely tone down and systematize nonprofit leaders, trying to squeeze them into the archetypal leadership style. This process has a parallel in the corporate world, in which venture capitalists and their boards generally assume they will have to

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replace the early-stage entrepreneurs before the next stages of financing. Their belief is that these passionate entrepreneurs are useful in the very beginning for their ideas and frantic energy but have to be replaced by effective managers who know how to put in systems—the infrastructure that sustains—and people capable of scaling up the organization. Often enough, the baby goes out with the bathwater. Instead of building on the imagination and passion of the founder by complementing her with good managers, they eject her and weaken the organization's founding spirit, mission, and momentum.

These two experiences were not isolated. They reflected what we were seeing in corporations, in nonprofit organizations, and in the books and articles we were reading.

We began our research with a review of the literature, imagining that this would yield sufficient material to write a few papers portraying the distinctive qualities of nonprofit leaders. But the literature on nonprofit leadership, while growing (see the journal *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*), is still pretty thin. Generally, it follows the corporate leadership literature in being primarily prescriptive, not descriptive. It tells more about how to lead and much less about how leaders actually go about their business. It seemed to us that prescription before description is putting the cart before the horse.

Interviews with nonprofit leaders proved instructive in explaining why this is so. Several confidently proclaimed that corporate and nonprofit leadership were the same. Nonprofits had to be profitable, as well, they claimed. What did this mean? we asked. There is no profit in nonprofits. Did they mean that nonprofits had to be efficient, well organized, accountable to their stakeholders, fiscally responsible, and, at times, competitive? Yes, they said. This reasoning makes good sense, but not the wholesale importation of corporate, free-market language and concepts—the ascendant vocabulary in our culture. After hearing this language so often from board members and funding sources, nonprofit leaders were speaking it. Some had lost their distinctive vocabularies of mission, ethics, community, advocacy, and hope.

The general search for insight into nonprofit literature led us to an important early realization: The majority of people working in nonprofits, both as employees and volunteers, are women.<sup>3</sup> While there is little in the way of a distinctive literature on how this preponderance of women helped to shape nonprofit leadership, there is a burgeoning literature on women's leadership in general. The research and writing about women is essentially divided into two camps: the popular writers, journalists, consultants, and feminists, who see women's leadership style as distinctive (Helgesen, 1995; Blumen-Lipman, 1996; Gilligan, 1982); and social scientists, who do not (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995). Authors in both camps are almost exclusively women.

This schism makes intuitive sense. Researchers argue that when placed in the same circumstances, men and women operated in similar ways. When large

organizations have prescribed certain modes of behavior, women who rise will have mastered those behaviors. In fact, women who rose in male-dominated organizations—the vast majority of corporations and a substantial proportion of the large nonprofits—behaved in ways associated with men: hierarchical, competitive, and the like. Those who built their own organization or who rose in women-dominated organizations, however, fit the descriptions of the popular writers. They were more democratic and less hierarchical, more nurturing to younger employees, more collaborative, and the like. Moreover, there is a generational difference. Younger women, whose way was paved by feminists in their mothers' generation, tended to behave more like men. Older women tended to build leadership styles based on older cultural norms, working around formal hierarchies and making extensive use of networks.

In the end, then, the literature on women's leadership confirmed a basic premise: that leadership varies according to the needs, norms, and objectives of the organizational and community culture in which it arises. What was disappointing, though, was that both camps were at such pains to compare women with men that they tended to ignore the rich diversity of leadership among women.

Here and there in this literature were references to minority women. Although writings about them are scarce, it is immediately clear that they developed styles to fit their circumstances. African American women who participated in the Civil Rights struggles of the sixties and seventies, for example, were not yet permitted to assume leadership positions in mainline, multiracial institutions (Elazer, 1995; Woocher, 1991). Lacking organizational position, they made things happen through informal networks and developed leadership styles analogous to the way they organized for church activities.

At the same time that we were looking into the research on women's leadership, Barry was consulting to a Jewish nonprofit organization dedicated to launching new day schools. Leadership was a key area of inquiry: the grassroots leaders who launched the schools, the professionals who took over the boards after these entrepreneurial beginnings, and the professional educators who ran the schools. Since these schools were launched to preserve Jewish tradition (Dym, 2003), the question arose, is there a distinctly Jewish way to lead?

Leadership in the Jewish community, for example, almost always has its eyes on both local needs and those of the world community (Elazer, 1995; Woocher, 1991).<sup>4</sup> And Jews have been a peripatetic group, moving from land to land to escape oppression and to find the freedom to practice their religion in their own way. Because of this nomadic tradition, Jewish nonprofit leaders, from community-based organizations to religious schools, see themselves as serving a dual function: running their organizations and providing for their people, in essence, a government in exile. Here, then, is another illustration of variety and the importance of context.

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At this point, we were primarily interested in identifying the variety of effective leaders and arguing that excluding many of them was a waste of an extremely valuable resource as well as a culturally insensitive and ethically dubious practice. This celebration of diversity could be a valuable contribution to the leadership literature. It would fit well into many of the current conversations, particularly those about multiculturalism. Any help we might offer in broadening the idea of good leadership, which, in turn, might increase the dignity and strengthen the voice of less powerful communities, would be worth the effort.

But we grew wary about celebrating leadership diversity either for its own sake or just to strengthen the idea of multiculturalism, which many people dismiss either indirectly through tepid support or directly through an expressed distaste for political correctness. The fate of multiculturalism in American organizations that are led by mainstream stakeholders is often sad. We see this in diversity workshops that seem compelling at the time but are rarely followed up with structural or programmatic change. However, it is also true that multiculturalism misconceived as valuing differences for their own sake can turn into a dogma of its own.

So in asking ourselves how to conceive of and affirm diversity in a way that is oriented to both the coherence and quality of organizations, we were led to the notion of “fit.” Simply put, fit means placing the right person in the right place at the right time. Thought of this way, good leadership requires different people for different ends in different circumstances and at different times.

Think of the high percentage of organizations that are successfully launched by entrepreneurs, people who passionately believe in the possibility and value of their efforts, who are not discouraged by setbacks, and who sometimes override what others see as realistic. They frequently work overwhelming hours for long periods of time. They tend not to trust others, nor to delegate well, even while commanding great loyalty. Yet entrepreneurial leaders, in their mad dash to the prize, may let important matters fall between the cracks. If they don’t delegate well, and if in turn they limit their organization’s capacity for growth, they demonstrate lack of fit. More managerial types may then be required to move the organization along—either by themselves or in complementary relation to the entrepreneurs. At later stages in an organization’s life, this managerial capacity is often a better fit.

To state the obvious, an organization focused on violence against women that works through shelters—an organization like the one we explore in our central case study in Chapter 2—needs a woman as a leader. The clients and the staff, many of whom were themselves victims of violence by men, are mistrustful of men. If such an organization is located in and serves a primarily Spanish-speaking population, then a Latina will have a distinct edge in understanding the cultural aspects of the problems, the responses and needs of clients, and the political buttons to push in the community. So it is for many other



organizations that serve distinctive stakeholder communities. The leader of an information technology company needs to have sufficient technical knowledge and experience to gain credibility with employees, investors, and customers.

The more we thought about the importance of fit, the more we began to identify variables involved: the skills, character, and values of the leader or leaders; the organization's objectives and strategies, as well as its structure, processes, history, and internal culture; and the larger context or market, including the potential for fund raising or paying clients, the regulatory situation, the surrounding community, and the current economic climate in communities, states, and nations.

Fit bridges leadership variety and complexity of circumstance. We had come to believe that having the right person in the right spot at the right time is a better predictor of leadership success than any particular qualities of individual leaders. During the startup phase, an entrepreneurial style generally works best. Excellent managers—principals in large school systems, for example—often find themselves adrift in the startup's absence of rules, clear-cut roles, and organizational structure. They regularly fail as leaders in new organizations but succeed when brought in after stability has been achieved. Family-business leaders, having been promoted over more seasoned professionals, often blunder; yet, during crises, with their family pride, security, and community standing on the line, they hold on with such tenacity that they seem the only leader who could have succeeded under the circumstances. Katherine Graham, who took over from her father and later from her husband, brought the *Washington Post* through just such a crisis brought on by a striking printer's union.

In the wrong circumstances, even great leaders will fail. Churchill's frustrations and frequent ineptitude during peacetime illustrates this point. Both Dostoyevsky (2002) and Mark Twain (2002) wrote powerful stories about angels and saints returning to earth centuries after they had spoken to loving crowds, preaching, again, as they always had, only to be rejected by the now-skeptical crowds who gathered around.

The idea of fit, however, conjures up a relatively simple and, perhaps, mechanical image: placing one object into another. The process of leadership is dynamic. It is a process "whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2001). And it is a complex process involving the leader, the organization, and the community or markets that utilize the organization's services. "Alignment" seemed more apt than "fit" to describe the complexity of this process.

## Alignment

The more we observed effective leadership in action, the more convinced we were that leaders become effective by aligning themselves with all available

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resources in the service of the organization's mission, objectives, and strategies. In other words, the leader's character, skills, style, values, and personal objectives have to mesh with comparable qualities in the organization she leads: its processes, structures, values, and culture; the way it develops and utilizes its staff; the way it interacts with its community; and, perhaps most important, the way it pursues its strategies for success in the communities and markets it serves.

The image of alignment, of many moving parts working together to create something as a whole, worked better for us. Leadership can be conceived less as the work of a single individual person, and more as the unfolding of a system; less as a pattern strictly defined by following, and more as a mobilization of organizational or community resources to achieve collective ends. The process by which this happens can vary immensely. When people and their interests, affections, and information are working well together, when good decisions are made and executed efficiently, then we can say the organization is aligned in support of its objectives. Leaders that play effective roles in this complex process can be said to be good leaders.

When there is alignment of leader, organization, and community or market, we observed, it brings out the best in everyone. Leaders give clear instructions, and employees know what is expected of them and are provided the proper resources with which to accomplish their jobs. They can succeed. When they do, they receive positive feedback, which encourages them to work harder and do better. Managers and their staffs feel supported not only by clarity, feedback, and resources but also by the processes and programs that link people and resources. Programs are suited to their skills and to their ideas about what constitutes success. Information is provided to help them do their jobs. And, as each does her job in concert with others, the organization hums.

But the emphasis on alignment has its own downside, as well—"too much" alignment can threaten variety. We had been in too many organizations where leadership called for everyone to "get on the bus" or find another place to work, where, in the name of alignment, ideologues and autocrats tried to get everybody to think alike and to act in programmed ways. Leaders like this were successful in the short run, but they ended by creating rigidity, narrow focus—ignorance, really—and an inability to adapt to the constant changes in their communities and markets.

We observed that alignment, in the best sense, was a temporary arrangement and a temporary experience for leaders and their staffs. Organizations adapt to changes—internal and external, social, technical, intellectual, and ethical—and they move in and out of alignment. They can be set for success one moment and still be thrown into confusion or instability by the introduction of new demands by clients, new markets, and new technologies. When successful organizations work their way out of their confusion, they realign themselves. They change the way they think and behave, and the way individuals,

departments, programs, and processes relate to one another. And the new alignment tends to be a synthesis of its traditional way of conducting itself and some of the ways it has adapted to change.

This dialectical process is, in fact, a better description of alignment than one that resembled the infamous Cartesian clock, in which all the parts work perfectly together but within a closed and controlled universe. The challenge of leadership, from a dynamic perspective, is to acknowledge, affirm, and facilitate the ongoing process of alignment, change, and realignment.

Even when we added the adaptive and dynamic qualities of alignment, however, we worried that the end operational goal might still seem to make everything and everyone the same. Each time the organization realigns itself, it could return to a clockwork precision. And we noted that many managerial types of leaders, brought in to remedy the confusion and excesses of entrepreneurs and their startup organizations, do, in fact, achieve an order that becomes rigid and stultifying.

So we raised this question: How does leadership align organizations in a way that is inherently dynamic? To answer this question, we began with another: Does alignment mean making the parts all the same? Our answer is no. In fact, alignment more often means bringing together different, complementary qualities and organizational structures.

One of the most basic complementarities in leadership and organizations—the partnership between a visionary or entrepreneurial leader and a well-organized operating manager, or the chief executive officer and the chief operational officer—illustrates this point.

Teams are built on complementarities, as well: people with different skills, each one necessary but not sufficient, joined together in the right combination for the task at hand. And, of course, teams work at all levels of organizations, from boards of directors and senior management teams to departmental teams to program teams and project teams, some full-time and some part-time teams. All of them depend on the dynamic and complementary interaction of their members. Effective teams are aligned teams. They do not consist of identical parts, but the alignment of different parts makes them purr.

Beyond individual partnerships and the synergies of teams, there are complementary processes. Sometimes, there are people and teams in organizations whose role it is to design innovative products or service methods that are inherently disruptive to organizations—their purpose is in fact to disrupt outmoded methods. But there are also people and teams whose role it is to take those innovations and implement them in ways that eventually lead to very orderly functioning. These two types of individuals and teams complement one another. They must work together; when they do, they are aligned.

An important role of field-based staff members is to bring in clients and ideas that do not exactly fit with the organization's current capabilities or its

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current ideas about how to do things. Program directors who need clients are likely to modify their programs to accommodate new clients or to accommodate ideas that will bring in new clients. In unaligned systems, these directors will reject what the field people bring in, or the field people will cease their efforts to recruit new clients because “they just aren’t out there.” In an aligned system, the two groups work in tandem; they are aligned.

Organizations and their communities can be aligned through both similarities and complementarities. For example, organizations can be a corrective to a neighborhood deficiency, such as housing, food, or political representation. At the same time, organizations can be “of” the people they serve, sharing their values, goals, and ethnic or racial origins.

Leaders and organizations can complement one another. A fast-paced, entrepreneurial organization and leader can benefit from a prudent, more careful board of directors—so long as they each appreciate what the other brings and do not try to make the other into their own image. Similarly, a long-standing executive director, who has developed very stable, effective service programs, may benefit from a board at the top or program directors below who insist on risk-taking to meet foreseeable challenges in the future.

As we thought over this more complex idea of alignment through balances of similarities and complementarities, we still thought it a little too cozy. Often, creativity and the urge to change only emerge out of friction. A new leader is brought in who does not quite fit with the organization. She may come out of the corporate world and into a nonprofit role, for example, and introduce financial disciplines that make program directors uneasy. If some friction, a little conflict, and a great deal of negotiation lead to positive changes in both leader and organization, this process too is the process of alignment.

Yet even this idea of alignment seemed to be missing something. In our interviews, we began to hear stories that filled in the blank. One leader said she hadn’t a clue what leadership meant (Gerry Martinson, Big Sisters of Massachusetts, research interview). She never set out to be a leader. Things needed to be done, so she did them. When they were too much for her, she asked others to help. When they were all working together, when things were “flowing,” then, she supposed, leadership was happening and, if pressed, she would say she was the leader. Her employees told a similar story. “You should see us when we’re really working together,” they said. “Gerry gets us going but we take over. Then it’s hard to tell if anyone is leading. We’re all just doing it.”

What was missing was the experience—some would say the phenomenology—of leadership. So we asked leaders not only how they understood and carried out their leadership function but how they felt when they were doing it, how they felt when things were going well and when they were not. And the more we learned about the experience of leadership—from all concerned—the more it sounded like what athletes and athletic teams mean when they say they are

“in the zone,” an utterly unselfconscious process in which all the parts come together and just flow.

Excellence in leadership surely requires talent and character. But these come in many forms, and each form works best when there is a fit between the leader and the circumstances in which he or she must lead. This fit, because it involves so many moving parts, is best thought of as alignment. Good alignment optimizes the opportunity for leader and organization to enter the zone of effectiveness and flow.

So, at last, we come to the idea of leadership as alignment, and alignment as a complex system of interrelationships including cycles of sameness and difference, convergence and divergence, and hoped-for moments when everything works together.

## Notes

1. We have changed the names and enough of the detail to protect the privacy of this organization but have preserved enough detail to be true to the activities witnessed.

2. The attempt to define the best form of leadership may be seen in the work of our best known and best respected leadership pundits, among them Tom Peters, Warren Bennis, James McGregor Burns, and John Kotter.

3. See Odendahl and O'Neill (1994) and articles by Ronald Shaiko (1996, 1997). Shaiko maintains that 75 percent of the nonprofit labor workforce is female, compared with 50 percent of the total workforce. Some 50 percent of women in the sector occupy “professional and managerial” positions compared with 21 percent in the government sector and less than 10 percent in the business sector. He cites various characteristics of organizations as predictors for whether women or men will serve in the top spot. Women are more likely to serve as executive directors of smaller, newer, less wealthy nonprofits headquartered outside the Washington beltway. Conversely, men are more likely to occupy the top spot if the organization is larger, older, wealthier, and inside the Washington beltway and close to the center of government power (Shaiko, 1997).

4. On minority women leaders, there are several helpful articles and a few books. We found two by Nancy Naples particularly informative: *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty* (Naples, 1998b) and *Community Activism and Feminist Politics* (Naples, 1998a). Also see Barnett (1993).

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