

the leaderless organization

*In his recently released book, **The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations**¹, Jeffrey Nielsen makes the case for the end of leadership as we commonly understand it and for the creation of peer-based, leaderless organizations. When he presents the ideas in the book, similar questions tend to come up. Here are the most common questions with his responses.*

1. What is the myth of leadership?

It is a set of assumptions and the ideology that justify the significance we place on our concept of leadership, and the privileges we bestow upon our leaders - frequently to the detriment of others in our organizations. The Myth of Leadership creates the powerful belief that only a relatively few "gifted" individuals can be anointed leaders and so trusted to make the decisions and do the commanding and controlling of everyone else. It makes false assumptions about both leaders and followers - with detrimental consequences for both.

We create a dichotomy, two categories: one of leaders - a select and privileged few; and the second of followers - the vast majority. So you get secrecy, distrust, overindulgence, and the inevitable sacrifice of those below for the benefit of those above. When we use the word "leadership," we immediately create a ranked division of people in ways that do not serve healthy organizational relationships. We waste too much human potential and do not allow life in our organizations to be as successful and meaningful as it could be.

2. What is 'rank thinking' and what is 'peer thinking'?

I have learned through much good and bad experience that genuine communication tends to occur only between peers, and secrecy more often than not breeds corruption and abuse of power. Organizations which practice the kind of rank thinking associated with the myth of leadership find poor communication the norm and discover a growing gap between reality and the mindset of the top executives.

Peer thinking does not mean we are all interchangeable, or that we all possess equal talents, needs, ambitions, or that we even make equal contributions. What it does assert is that all members of the organization have equal standing. It is a strategic principle guaranteeing the organization will be more successful. By denying no one the chance to make decisions about issues affecting his or her work, it will increase everyone's productivity and lower costs. Our workplaces will also improve as we gain the productivity unleashed by treating one another as peers.

I define rank thinking as the belief that only a few in any organization (generally the designated leaders) should be given special privilege to monopolize information, control decision-making, and command obedience from the vast majority either through coercive or manipulative power. Peer thinking, on the other hand, I define as the belief that everyone in the organization should have an equal privilege to speak and an equal obligation to listen regardless of their position in the organization. In general this would mean that everyone shares in information, participates in the decision-making process, and chooses to follow through persuasive means.

3. Don't we need leaders? (Doesn't someone have to be in charge? How can you run a business without a leader?)

This question, and others like it, reveals both a positive intent as well as some hidden assumptions. The hidden assumptions are simply those of the rank-based myth of leadership. It is the mistaken belief that only a few select individuals in any organization have either the right or ability to monopolize power and control, to keep secrets and restrict both information and participation in decision-making. We are all aware of the deleterious effects of this rank-based management system.

The positive intent is, however, the realization that a management system is required. Obviously, there are certain management functions that need to be performed in our organizations. Things like setting goals and objectives, scheduling work, marshalling resources, solving problems, and making strategic decisions. Many people imagine that these duties can only be performed by some big chief or hierarchic leader. I disagree and present a peer-based model for managing our organizations through peer councils and the practice of rotational leadership.

4. Isn't leadership important for an organization? (Don't we need strong leadership today?)

When we raise this question, what we really mean, I believe, is that vision, wisdom, competence, teamwork, communication, and similar attributes are important to an organization. What we fail to realize is that our practice of leadership privileges an elite few and disadvantages the vast majority. This creates a context of command and control authority that works against the very things we desire.

We need wise people. We need visionary people. We need practical people. We need to be able to harvest the intelligence and strength of every member of our organizations. But I believe that our very concept and practice of leadership immediately selects a few and ignores the tacit knowledge of the many. We need to recognize that everyone in our organizations possesses an equal privilege to speak and an equal and reciprocal obligation to listen.

5. Peer-based, leaderless organizations won't work, why do you think they will?

To say that peer-based, leaderless organizations won't work is, I believe, just empirically false. There are today organizations that operate in this way and manage organizational decisions quite successfully. Companies from practically every industry have discovered the power of peer thinking and use it to achieve extraordinary results. I detail several of these organizations in my book, and everyday I learn about more companies striving to become peer-based. To say it won't work is more revealing of the implicit paradigm of the speaker than the possibility of leaderless organizations. I base my belief in the possibility of peer-based leaderless organizations both on the concrete experience of companies already doing it as well as on my confidence in our common human capacity for intellectual and moral progress.

6. Don't some people have more leadership ability than other people?

The better question is, "Don't some people have more ability than others?" Yes, but when we add the adjective, leadership, we introduce the myth of leadership with all its associated bad assumptions. When you drop the "leadership," you get rid of the connotations that those with fewer abilities should not and cannot participate in and contribute to the management of the organization. It does not diminish the contributions a person with many talents can make, but it does increase the opportunities for many more. Therefore, you open it up for many more to contribute to the success of the company.

The person who thinks, "I am better or superior to those beneath me, so I possess the right and ability to command both information and decision-making. If I need help, I'll ask those just like me - other superior beings who hold high leadership positions that I gave them." The person who believes this is going to fail.

7. Aren't you exaggerating the ability of the vast majority in organizations?

I believe in our common human capacity for goodness. I believe that each of us possesses remarkable talents to contribute towards the success of our organizations, and we are naturally motivated to use our talents for something larger than ourselves. Rank-based organizations prohibit many from such genuine contribution.

I am not saying we are all equal - there is great diversity. As Thomas Aquinas said, "Diversity manifests the perfection of the universe." What I am saying is that we have historically organized ourselves in rank-based ways that privilege the few over the majority. So, far too many people never have the opportunity to fully develop their skills and abilities, but live less than meaningful and satisfying organizational lives. This time has passed. Peer-based organizations give everyone equal standing in information sharing and participation in decision-making. We will take on different roles and responsibilities. We will have different ambitions, but there will be no artificial barriers that keep anyone from fully contributing to the success of their organization.

To do this, we need access to information and participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, a peer-based organization does not depend on the goodness of people. It appeals to the self-interest of each one of us. It creates a peer context that enlarges one's understanding of one's self-interest to include the 'self-interest' of the organization.

8. So how do you do it in my organization - or in any particular type of organization?

There isn't a textbook, ready-made, off-the-shelf answer to this question. I do not possess the wisdom to know how a peer-based organization will take shape in every particular type of organization. Part of the concept of peer thinking is that inherent in every organization is the wisdom and competence to make this happen and to apply the assumptions, logic, and practices of peer thinking to each unique situation. It's not a model you simply superimpose on an organization, but it is a thinking that transforms the organization from the inside-out. However, there are important guidelines that need to be understood and followed in creating a peer-based organization. These guidelines are presented in my book.

9. I still don't buy it. Someone has to be in charge! Everyone can't be involved in every little decision, can they?

This question is mistaken in assuming that in a peer-based organization no one has specific responsibilities - that it's just laissez-faire with no direction or control. It is a false dilemma to think there are only two options. One, either some big chief, hierarchic leader is in charge; or two, no one is in control. This question falsely assumes that in a peer-based organization every minor decision must be brought before everyone in some huge committee meeting. Leaderless, peer-based organizations still have division of labor and specific management responsibilities; the difference is in the openness of information flow and the transparency of the decision-making process.

10. We tried that before and it didn't work. Why should we think it will work this time?

Well, you just can't turn people loose and say "Ok, we're all peers, now go make it work." There are certain intellectual skills required that everyone has the ability to develop, but not everyone has had the opportunity to develop. Things like decision-making, problem-solving, strategic thinking, and meeting management. All members of the organization need to develop these skills so they can fully contribute.

Some training process is required to make this happen. Here is where the former rank-based leaders can be very helpful. They can adopt a mentoring role and coach others in the development of these important skills. Two competencies are especially crucial to develop within the leaderless organization: peer deliberation and consensus decision-making; and communication skills.

11. Aren't there examples of good rank-based leaders?

Of course, the myth of leadership is not an indictment of the individuals who hold leadership positions. This is an attack on the context of rank-based management and the inhumane and nefarious effects on rank-based leaders and followers alike. As **Robert Greenleaf**² and Vaclav Havel have pointed out, the burdens and privileges of rank-based leadership positions have isolating and corrupting influences on the well-being and happiness of the leaders themselves.

In my book, I discuss what I call the "catch-22 of rank-based management," where I try and show the negative effects on the leaders themselves caught in the myth of leadership. Ultimately, however, the argument is that a peer-based organization will be strategically more competitive and successful than its rank-based counterparts will be. Good rank-based leaders will be even more effective as good mentors and coaches to the peer councils in their organizations.

12. With all the prestige, power and money currently associated with being a senior executive, it's unlikely that many will willingly relinquish their command and control positions, isn't it?

For the sake of brevity, I will limit my response to two salient points. One, my main goal in writing the **Myth of Leadership** was to articulate clearly the difference between rank-based and peer-based thinking in organizational management and to provide a template for transitioning from rank to peer thinking and managing. Several organizations have made or are making this transition, and I profile a few of them in the book. Yet there has been the lack of a replicable model to assist other organizations that want to become more peer-based. Other organizational theorists have expressed many of the ideas I detail in the book, yet I provide a nomenclature - a vocabulary and context - that can help a growing number of companies make this transition.

Two, I do not expect that die-hard rank-based thinkers, who buy into the assumptions of the myth of leadership, will change because of the arguments in my book. I recall what **Thomas Kuhn**³ said about the emergence of new paradigms in the scientific community. He pointed out that no amount of argument or evidence will convince the old paradigm thinkers to accept the new paradigm. The new paradigm will only become dominant when the old guard have died off or retired. Yet ideas have a life and influence of their own and once expressed, if they match our experience, find a receptive audience, and if the time is right, will gain momentum and ultimately revolutionize the world without coercive or manipulative force.

I have spent enough time in organizations to know that the ideas in my book match our experience. My gamble is that they will also find a receptive audience and that the growing complexity of our networked world ensures the time is now right. Hence there are no coercive or manipulative gimmicks for dealing with rank-based leaders in the book.

13. So why call them "leaderless organizations?" Can't we just redefine leaders as something like "peer leaders" and keep the idea of leaders and leadership?

Any conception of leadership that we could come up with will still create a dualistic world. I have experienced this in every organization I have consulted. We create a dichotomy, two categories: one of leaders - a select and privileged few; and the second of followers - the vast majority. So you get secrecy, distrust, overindulgence, and the inevitable sacrifice of those below for the benefit of those above. That's why I have argued for creating peer-based organizations, and the wording here is terribly important. When we use the word "leadership," we immediately create a ranked division of people in ways that do not serve healthy organizational relationships. It also produces a privileged elite who, no matter how sincere they are, will eventually be seduced by their position. I define a leaderless organization as an organization of peers. In a peer-based organization, there are ways to perform the functions of management without rank-based leaders and in a manner that evokes the talents and diverse abilities of everyone in the organization.

Jeffrey Nielsen, June 2006

This is an extended and updated version of an article which first appeared at <http://www.refresh.com!/jnielsen4.html>

The author can be contacted at mythofleadership@hotmail.com

Endnotes

¹ Nielsen, Jeffrey, *The Myth of Leadership*, (Mountain View, CA, Davies-Black Publishing, 2004)

² Greenleaf, Robert K., *Servant Leadership*, (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2002)

³ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1996)