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# The Power of Invisible Leadership: How a Compelling Common Purpose Inspires Exceptional Leadership

Gill Robinson Hickman  
*University of Richmond*, ghickman@richmond.edu

Georgia J. Sorenson

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# Unmasking Leadership

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This book explores the idea of invisible leadership—leadership in which the common purpose, rather than any particular individual, is the invisible leader that inspires leaders and followers to take action on its behalf. It is an idea that often goes unrecognized in the study and practice of leadership. We will examine stories and organizations where invisible leadership propels groups to the highest levels of commitment, innovation, and success. We will also provide evidence of the power of invisible leadership in action.

What we will describe exists in the space between people and in their shared dreams. Although that space is completely invisible, the effect is immensely powerful. We have called this region “the space between” and compared it to American jazz great Thelonious Monk’s “blue notes.” An evening spent listening to Monk’s jazz saxophone on “Straight, No Chaser” is an experience you will never forget. But why is his music so extraordinary? Jazz critics attribute the genius of Monk’s remarkable musical gift to the nuance, phrasing, and rhythm of the spaces between the formal notes. Indeed, it is the relationship between notes that makes the music soar, not the actual notes themselves. The score shows you the formal notes, not the blue notes, yet it is the blue notes in the performance that stir your soul and transform the musical experience.

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Note: We presented portions of this chapter at the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong Leadership Conference, October 19–20, 2007, in Shanghai, China. We also presented some of these concepts in these publications:

Hickman, G. R. (2004). Invisible leadership. In G. R. Goethals, G. Sorenson, & J. M. Burns (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of leadership* (pp. 750–754). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sorenson, G., & Hickman, G. R. (2002). Invisible leadership: Acting on behalf of a common purpose. In C. Cherrey & L. R. Matusak (Eds.), *Building leadership bridges* (pp. 7–24). College Park, MD: James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership.

Although it is not readily apparent, there is a lot going on that we can't see, as can be discerned from a number of scientific lenses, from the cosmic to the intrapsychic. Note the recent findings of dark holes in the universe yielding a churning cauldron of organizing dark material. NASA recently confirmed what was speculation by Fritz Zwicky in the 1930s: "Most of the stuff in clusters of galaxies is invisible and, since these are the largest structures in the universe held together by gravity, scientists then conclude that most of the matter in the entire universe is invisible." This invisible "dark matter" is the rich "space between" of our cosmos (NASA, n.d.).

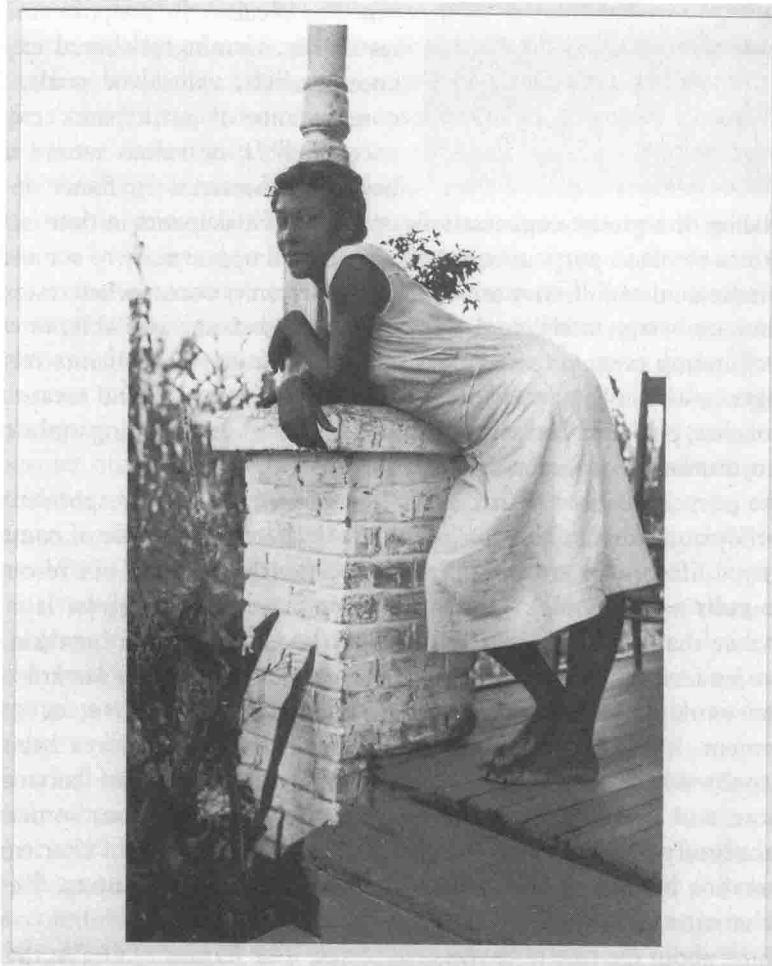
Noted psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan revolutionized the practice of psychotherapy by working solely within the space between the patient and therapist. He reasoned that whatever the patient's dysfunction or unhappiness—a tragic childhood, a distant catastrophic event, a numbing malaise, or another disturbing event or condition—it would eventually show up in the developing relationship between the patient and therapist (Barton & Sullivan, 1996). The space was like a mirror to the past; if he remained still and listened carefully, the experience would be replicated in full in the space between him and the patient. He could then work backward toward the genesis of the original dysfunction. We can learn much in the space between ourselves and others and in our shared work toward an inspiring common purpose.

This invisible space, while subtle, is not inaccessible to us, however. Sometimes we sense it in music, such as Monk's work, or in great art. Take, for example, the extraordinary photographs that short-story writer Eudora Welty made when she was young. Just out of college, Welty was hired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration to travel her native state of Mississippi. She took along her camera to photograph the people she met on the road. In an undated photograph she titled "Saturday Off," the sense of intimacy and trust between the photograph's subject—a young Jackson, Mississippi, woman—and the photographer is profoundly evident. It is this utterly invisible human interaction that makes the photograph great.

Welty described her work this way: "In taking . . . these pictures, I was attended, I now know, by an angel—a presence of trust" (Pleasants, 2001). The trust is the blue note, the invisible space between, the relationship between the two women that makes this photograph extraordinary. Great art emerges in the space between, that inexplicable sense of connection that goes beyond the technical abilities of the artist.

## Revealing the Hidden Leader—The Common Purpose

So what do the ideas of blue notes, unseen spaces, and the space between dark matter and people have to do with leadership, the subject of this book? We think it has everything to do with a concept we call *invisible*



**Photo 1.1** “Saturday Off,” from the Eudora Welty Collection.

*Source:* Reprinted courtesy of the Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Russell & Volkening as agents for the author’s estate. Copyright ©1936 & 1971 Eudora Welty, LLC.

*leadership.* Invisible leadership embodies situations in which dedication to a compelling and deeply held common purpose is the motivating force for leadership. This common purpose provides inspiration for participants to use their strengths willingly in leader or follower roles and cultivates a strong shared bond that connects participants to each other in pursuit of their purpose.

As we will see in the results of our study of award-winning innovative companies and nonprofit organizations, passionate commitment to and ownership of the common purpose occur when participants join



**Invisible leadership** embodies situations in which *dedication to a compelling and deeply held common purpose* is the motivating force for leadership.

together because the purpose embodies deeply meaningful shared experiences, beliefs, values, or goals. The commonality of participants' experiences, beliefs, or values moves them beyond self-interest to focus on the

well-being of a group, organization, or society. Participants initiate leadership for a common purpose based on a perceived opportunity to act and on their individual or collective self-agency. Opportunity occurs when resources (human, monetary, intellectual, or social capital) become available, or when a precipitating event provides the catalyst for action. Participants rely on self-agency and collective efficacy to advance the purpose and create new approaches, power structures, or institutions, or to defy existing authorities and institutions that are unresponsive or unjust.

The purpose is more than a mission statement, as many respondents in our study confirmed. Common purpose is a deeply held sense of common destiny, a life course or calling; it is aligned with a mission but resonates profoundly with people's values and their sense of themselves. It is the substance that binds people together and the aim or reason for their collective leadership. We found that it is often the reason people are attracted to the work of a business, nonprofit, community initiative, or social movement. It is also the reason they stay. This invisible force becomes the space where inspiration, interactions, and connection between a purpose and its leaders and followers ignite to bring about something extraordinary. It is more powerful than the classic Weberian charismatic personality, because it goes beyond individuals and institutions. We call this charisma of purpose.

Think about the first time you read or saw *The Wizard of Oz*. At the end of the story, you were astonished by the man behind the curtain. He looked and sounded nothing like the larger-than-life image (the great leader) that awed and intimidated Dorothy and her friends.

The story teaches us much about the essence of invisible leadership. At first we are disappointed to see the small person behind the curtain. But Dorothy and her friends show us that there is nothing as motivating and powerful as an inspiring purpose. They need committed involvement with each other to find the wizard (the common purpose, in this case). They must be willing to play leader and follower roles at different times, and even make personal sacrifices to further the group's goals. One of the most important lessons that Dorothy and her friends learn is that they have the power or self-agency to achieve their cherished goal. While meeting their collective goal, the common purpose, each character gains something different and valuable from the experience. The Tin Man finds his heart, the Lion gains courage, the Scarecrow discovers his brain,

and Dorothy finds that she has the power to return to her family in Kansas. They each develop a better and stronger self and form an enduring bond of relationship, leadership, and action in the invisible space between.

Can a common purpose actually inspire leadership? Our research leads us to believe that it can. When you ask most people about leadership, they think of extraordinary individuals—their abilities, experience, traits, circumstances, and situations. Many scholars and students of leadership studies are conditioned to think of leadership in terms of the leader (like the great and powerful wizard) helping a group of followers understand and commit to an important purpose, the leader influencing and persuading followers to do the work and reach the goal. In fact, a great deal of leadership is done this way or at least characterized this way. Our work, however, and the work of other leadership scholars described in Chapter 2, led us to consider other ways that leadership can occur. Invisible leadership does not eliminate leaders. It emphasizes the idea of leader-as-role over leader-as-person, as introduced in the work of organizational behaviorist Robert Kelley (1988, 1992). The use of leader-as-role allows for a more fluid and multifaceted process where responsibility can be distributed among multiple actors or concentrated in one person. The crucial role of leaders in invisible leadership, as we describe in Chapter 6, is to create a context or environment where invisible leadership can thrive and the common purpose flourishes as lived experience among participants.

We asked our colleagues and ourselves: Does leadership involve the same dynamic when people already understand and are committed to an important purpose? When they know what needs to be done and willingly bring their talents and skills to the work? When they hold themselves responsible and accountable for achieving the common purpose? When they sometimes put the purpose ahead of their personal needs or safety?

After some work in this realm, we discovered that the idea of a common purpose inspiring people to initiate leadership is not a new concept. Mary Parker Follett, an early management scholar and practitioner in the United States, first described this concept in 1928. Instead of the accepted or classical view of leadership as people following a charismatic leader, Follett observed that in certain highly effective companies, leaders and followers are both following the invisible leader—the common purpose:

While leadership depends on depth of conviction and the power coming therefrom, there must also be the ability to share that conviction with others, the ability to make purpose articulate. And then the common purpose becomes the leader. And I believe that we are coming more and more to act, whatever our theories, on our faith in this power of this invisible leader. Loyalty to the invisible leader gives us the strongest possible bond of union. (Follett, 1949/1987, p. 55)

Invisible leadership takes into account the people and the processes of leadership but stretches beyond these parameters into a realm of leadership and action that encompasses wholeness of purpose and the transformation of people, wisdom and values within the group, ethics of the purpose, means and ends, and limitless possibilities. Thus, “increasing shareholder value” is not antithetical to a common purpose, as highly successful entrepreneur Béla Hatvany will later tell us. The purpose is the leader and motivating force for all aspects of the enterprise.

## The Essence of Invisible Leadership

How did we happen upon this concept? We developed our initial conception of invisible leadership by analyzing situations where leadership appeared to be inspired by the purpose as much as or more than by the influence of particular leaders (Sorenson & Hickman, 2002). We probed case studies of business and nonprofit organizations; studied written accounts of social movements; and examined existing interviews with activists, initiators of change, entrepreneurs, and organizational founders. We examined how other fields (physics, psychology, management, music, and photography) and cultures (Asian, African, and Native American) use the idea of invisible processes. We also explored the concept with focus groups of leadership scholars, educators, and professionals in lectures and workshops, and engaged leadership studies students in a semester-long examination of the topic.

As we distilled our thinking, we settled on three essential points that are fundamental to invisible leadership, although there are numerous subsets of these points that we enumerate in our research design in Chapter 4:

- A compelling and deeply held common purpose,
- A readiness to use individual strengths in either leader or follower roles with or without visible recognition or personal ego, and
- A strong shared bond among participants pursuing the common purpose.

For this study, we surveyed 21 award-winning companies and nonprofit workplaces to test our concepts. The results are detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. We include the survey results in these chapters to encourage further research on invisible leadership. Indeed, our study is a starting point that we hope will lead to further scholarship on this topic.

## Invisible Leadership in Action

People tell us they can easily see that compelling social causes with a common purpose, such as the civil rights movement or the environmental movement,

can certainly inspire individuals to act collectively and bring about a common good. They are not convinced, however, that other contexts can generate such strong, committed leadership from most people in the process without one prominent leader motivating the group and showing the way. We believe that invisible leadership can and does exist in companies, governmental bodies, nonprofit organizations, neighborhoods, schools, communities, and grassroots and social movements. The examples that follow come from our examination of existing case studies of organizations; written accounts of social movements in autobiographies and biographies; and interviews with activists, initiators of change, and organizational founders (Sorenson & Hickman, 2002).

### Illustrations From Nonprofit Organizations

In the nonprofit arena, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra is a conductorless ensemble founded on the belief that musicians can create extraordinary music when an orchestra uses the full talents and creativity of every member (Seifter & Economy, 2001). Its purpose is to demonstrate a collaborative leadership style in which the musicians, rather than a conductor, interpret the score. Leader and follower roles are fluid and rotating, permitting members of the ensemble to share equally in the group's leadership. All the while, the group's leadership remains invisible to the public. The driving force of the orchestra is its common purpose, as Seifter and Economy (2001) make clear:

Above all, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra is marked by our passionate dedication to our mission. That passion drives every musical and business decision that we make. Our organization's mission isn't imposed from above but is determined—and constantly refined—by the members themselves. (p. 16)

We observed the Orpheus model personally in a demonstration with several of the Czech Republic's finest chamber orchestra musicians at the International Leadership Association in Prague several years ago. The concert was truly amazing. Fascinated, we later interviewed Harvey Seifter (2009), former executive director of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. We learned just how radical the Orpheus model truly is: There is no conductor! Members of the orchestra share and rotate leadership roles. As Seifter and Economy (2001) described in their book, for every work that they perform, orchestra members select the concertmaster and principal players for each section. These players constitute the core group, form initial concepts of the piece, and shape the rehearsal process. At final rehearsals, all members participate in refining, interpreting, and executing the piece. Members take turns listening from the auditorium for balance, blend, articulation, dynamic range, and clarity of expression and give feedback to the group.

Another example from the nonprofit sector is C-SPAN. Brian Lamb started C-SPAN to provide direct and unfiltered broadcasts of public policy matters to the American people so that they could decide key issues for themselves (Frantzich & Sullivan, 1996). Although he retains a powerful influence on C-SPAN, in the 34 years he has been broadcasting, Lamb has never spoken his own name on the air (Farhi, 2012). Lamb along with those who fund C-SPAN and the founding members of the organization believe wholeheartedly in its purpose and persevere in their quest to bring public issues to the people. C-SPAN's approach to reporting and media competition has been credited with "transforming American politics" (Hazlett, 1996). The broadcast has gained tremendous respect and popularity since its inception in 1975. Even so, Lamb, in keeping with the role and style of invisible leadership, was determined to have increasingly less influence on C-SPAN. At the same time, when we first interviewed him, Lamb (1999) saw no particular reason to prepare for organizational succession. When Lamb did make the transition in 2012, the succession was publicly seamless. "I never thought the person on top here mattered all that much, except to keep the rhythm of the place going," he said (Farhi, 2012).

## Illustrations From Public Sector (Government) Organizations

Much of the leadership in public sector agencies below the political appointee level is, by design, invisible. At its best, invisible leadership in public agencies consists of men and women who work on behalf of the public good without particular recognition or fanfare. They are quite literally "public servants."

Invisible leadership is strongest in public sector agencies when organizational members regard citizens as their central focus, truly care about citizens' well-being, and gain their inspiration from the compelling common purpose of their agency. These "servants" serve the public first, and their commitment to serve is true in the United States and in other countries around the globe.

Accenture (2006) studied public leadership in 21 countries throughout Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America and discovered that leadership in high-performing public sector agencies has a "citizens-first" point of view—all necessary information is organized around the citizen, and is particularly focused on their desired outcomes, which are defined by the mission (p. 1).

A nationwide, representative telephone survey of 1,051 U.S. federal government workers and 500 private sector employees, conducted by the

Princeton Survey Research Institute for political scientist Paul Light at the Brookings Institution, found federal workers were split in their motivation to join the public sector: Some joined for job security and others for their commitment to the mission of public service (typically the higher-level employees). The report concludes, “Whatever their primary motivation for coming to work each day, the key question for a healthy public service is whether employees care about their organizations’ missions” (Light, 2001, p. 4).

Some tribal governments in the United States, such as the Cherokee Nation, have built their communities around purpose, mission, and service. Again, a leader whose personal style was consistent with these factors arose in the Cherokee Nation. Wilma Mankiller was the first woman to be elected chief of a major Native American tribe, which made her quite visible. Invisible leadership does not require leaders or followers to be invisible. It is the space between that is invisible—the strong bond of relationship and leadership generated by a group’s shared work toward a compelling and deeply held common purpose.

Beginning with a small project—a 16-mile water line to rural homes—Mankiller turned the economy and the identity of the Cherokee Nation around. During Mankiller’s term of office, the Cherokee Nation grew its net worth from \$34.6 million to nearly \$52 million. It funded \$20 million in new construction, including job corps facilities, health clinics, an educational center, and a museum. Unemployment rates and high school dropout rates slowed dramatically, even in the face of slashed federal programs for Native Americans during the Reagan years.

What was her secret? She was a true follower of the invisible leader—the common purpose of the Cherokee Nation. Mankiller never lost this focus. Her cultural identity is central in her sense of self and purpose, she told us:

Knowing and valuing our culture helps me keep some perspective and keeps my feet on the ground. I have to spend so much time away from the basic kind of work I started out doing, which is community organizing and Indian advocacy. Now much of my work is involved in administration, lobbying in Washington, activities of that nature. It’s still development, but it’s at a different level. To keep my feet on the ground, I still participate in tribal ceremonies and make sure I take the time to be involved in Cherokee culture, even if it’s much less time than I’d like. I still do that because it keeps things in perspective. There is something very grounding about going to a tribal ceremony that has been celebrated since time immemorial—to sing songs and participate in dances that we have been doing forever. That’s the anchor. (Mankiller, 1992)

Although Mankiller is frequently described as a visionary, she is a visionary who is very aggressive about achieving the goals she has in mind for her people, goals inspired by the group’s vision rather than a personal vision:

As a result of my experience, I came to the conclusion that everyday Indians and poor people have a lot to contribute. I wanted to try to get people to be involved in articulating their own visions. I see a lot of beauty and intelligence and sharing in our communities. I would like to build on that. (Mankiller, 1992)

Leaders like Mankiller, who practice invisible leadership, look to the true heart of the community and know that the leadership must pass on to others. “I try to make decisions that are in the interest of the Cherokee Nation after listening to a lot of people and getting input from all kinds of folks,” she said. It’s about their collective vision, not about her own. “I really see myself as a temporary person; I’m here for a while, and then I pass the leadership on, and somebody else continues.” Mankiller, who died in 2010, left a legacy of powerful invisible leadership. She was far from invisible personally, yet she kept her focus on the tribe’s core purpose and legacy.

### Illustrations From Business

Colors restaurant in New York is Manhattan’s first cooperatively owned restaurant. It is run by former workers from the legendary Windows on the World restaurant (in Tower One of the World Trade Center). It is a self-governing organization, founded on the idea that everyone who works there has to be an owner. Their inspiring purpose came from their desire to move forward as a tribute to the 73 workers who died at the restaurant on 9/11 (Casimir, 2006). Restaurant worker-owners decided to share their diverse cultures as American immigrants through food from their countries of origin. The staff of owners includes 44 immigrants from 22 countries. They operate under the premise that everyone has to have the same share—an equal say in the restaurant. Its purpose not only inspires and organizes the business but also attracts customers, who come for the good food as well as to support the worker-owners’ purpose of honoring their lost colleagues, as can be seen in recent Yelp restaurant review postings.

Béla Hatvany is an iconic pioneer in the information industry and was cofounder in 1983 of SilverPlatter, one of the first companies to produce commercial reference databases on CD-ROMs for libraries and other users. Companies he founded have been responsible for the first online public access catalog (OPAC), the first CD-ROMs, the first networked CD-ROM, the first client-server library databases, and some of the earliest Internet library database retrieval engines (Baczewski, 1994).

Since he sold SilverPlatter in 2001 for a purported \$113 million, Hatvany has had the resources to dedicate himself to buying and working with purpose-oriented businesses around the world, including Classical.com,

JustGiving, Credo Reference, Productorial, Mustardseed Charitable Trust, and Coreweb. In turn, these companies have helped him to develop a business philosophy that empowers others and produces companies that are strikingly successful by any measure.

One of Hatvany's approaches is to sit with members of one of his enterprises, and listen. This may be just one or two days a year, since he does not manage his companies. "This is leadership not management. It is not directing or managing outcomes. It is inquiring deeply and thus drawing forth the joint understandings hidden in the spaces between all of the knowledge of the participants in the inquiry," he told us (Hatvany, 2012).

A bedrock criterion for his work is "to serve all constituents in a balanced way" (Hatvany, 2000). He defines constituents as the "customers, our business partners, our employees and our investors—all must be served in a balanced way" (Hatvany, 2000).

To do so, he believes that leaders have a role in holding shared values, because behind a powerful purpose are compelling and commonly held values:

Organizations don't have values, people do, so it is up to the leader to be the persistent carrier of these values . . . reminding everyone in the organization of how they guide actions. For me these values must always be centered on the imperative of serving everyone in a balanced way. (Hatvany, 2012)

His thinking has evolved to where he sees all of the world as what he terms *corpus humanitatis*, a great human "corporation" or "body" connected by the Internet, an ecology of limitless possibilities. In his own words,

I wish to enable an "ecology" in which all experience themselves to be well-served. I experience a world whose abundance is made available by human collaboration. . . . Money [commerce] is made of human agreement and enables this collaboration on a world-wide scale. (Hatvany, 2012)

Recently, leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns met with Hatvany to discuss leadership, and Burns remarked that Hatvany embodied and made real in a practical way his ideas about transforming leadership (personal communication, October 9, 2010).

### Illustration From Social Movements

The work of the Women's Political Council (WPC) provides an example of invisible leadership committed to achieving an inspirational goal. Prior to the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, a group of black women activists, who were members of the WPC, began the fight against segregation



in their city by targeting Montgomery's segregated bus-seating practices. Jo Ann Robinson played a key role in initiating the WPC-orchestrated boycott. David Garrow's description of Robinson captures the essence of invisible leadership in action:

Mrs. Robinson remains generally hesitant to claim for herself the historical credit that she deserves for launching the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956. Although her story fully and accurately describes how it was she, during the night and early morning hours of December 1 and 2, 1955, who actually started the boycott on its way, it is only with some gentle encouragement that she will acknowledge herself as “the instigator of the movement to start the boycott.” Even then, however, she seeks to emphasize that no special credit ought to go to herself or to any other single individual. Very simply, she says, “the black women did it.” (Robinson, 1987, p. xv)

## What Invisible Leadership Is Not

When people first hear the term *invisible leadership*, they often assume it means something different from the concept as we define it. We mean the common purpose is the invisible leader that inspires leaders and followers to take action on its behalf. We would like to clarify what our concept of invisible leadership is not.

It is not leadership that no one recognizes or acknowledges. Leaders and members of the organization know and value the work that others do to advance the purpose (like Jo Ann Robinson or Brian Lamb), even though much of their leadership may be internal to the organization, behind-the-scenes, quiet, unassuming, or not visible to those outside the organization.

Invisible leadership is not rendering individuals invisible. Certain groups of people in society, such as women, minorities, older people, or people with disabilities, are often made to feel invisible in their organizations. This is an important area of inquiry, which we have written about in earlier work but do not pursue here, and it is not what we mean by invisible leadership.

Invisible leadership does not mean that leaders or followers are invisible. Like Wilma Mankiller, people who use invisible leadership can be highly visible, or they can be deliberately in the background, like Jo Ann Robinson or Brian Lamb. They may choose either foreground or background leadership, and some are thrust into visibility as embodiments and advocates of their group's common purpose.

Invisible leadership is not a leadership substitute. On the contrary, there is plenty of leadership taking place by positional and nonpositional leaders at all levels of the organization. Positional leaders who engage in invisible

leadership may have different functions from the leader roles in classic theories, because many organizational members are able to take action or lead based on a clear understanding of and commitment to the purpose. There are, however, essential functions for positional leaders, founders, and informal leaders. Béla Hatvany plays an essential role in the companies he is part of, as did Wilma Mankiller, Brian Lamb, and Jo Ann Robinson. All of them have personal traits of humility, emotional intelligence, and powers of listening and inquiry. But each of them understands deeply that the organization's success depends not on single leaders as much as the purpose, the group's shared work, and the relationships formed in "the space between." When leaders and members join in the invisible leadership of the organization, amazing things are possible.

## Overview of the Book

The remaining chapters provide insight into the concept of invisible leadership through insights from different cultures, theories, our original research, and experiences of organizational members. Chapter 2 describes ancient and modern ideas that contribute to the foundation of invisible leadership. It includes concepts from Chinese, African, and Native American traditions together with modern theories of transforming leadership, servant leadership, convergence theory, and shared leadership concepts. In Chapter 3, we explore the ethics of invisible leadership by examining the moral implications of various types of common purpose and the group actions that ensue from implementing each type. Chapter 4 provides the results of our survey research, which examines the indicators of invisible leadership in 21 award-winning North American and international companies and non-profit organizations. Chapter 5 uses the extensive comments provided by survey respondents to understand their personal experiences with invisible leadership in these organizations. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on advice and possibilities for the practice of invisible leadership and implications for future research.

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