



Learning Leadership from Barack Obama – a Short Case Study

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Abstract

In a recent case study I asked if America would vote for a Messiah Leader (*Management Online REview*, Feb 2008), well the answer has been a huge yes. In that case study I argued that it wasn't enough to be a Messiah leader, that promising hope, being charismatic and a wonderful orator was never going to deliver on its own. So what took Barack Obama to the Whitehouse and what leadership lessons can be learnt from his victory?

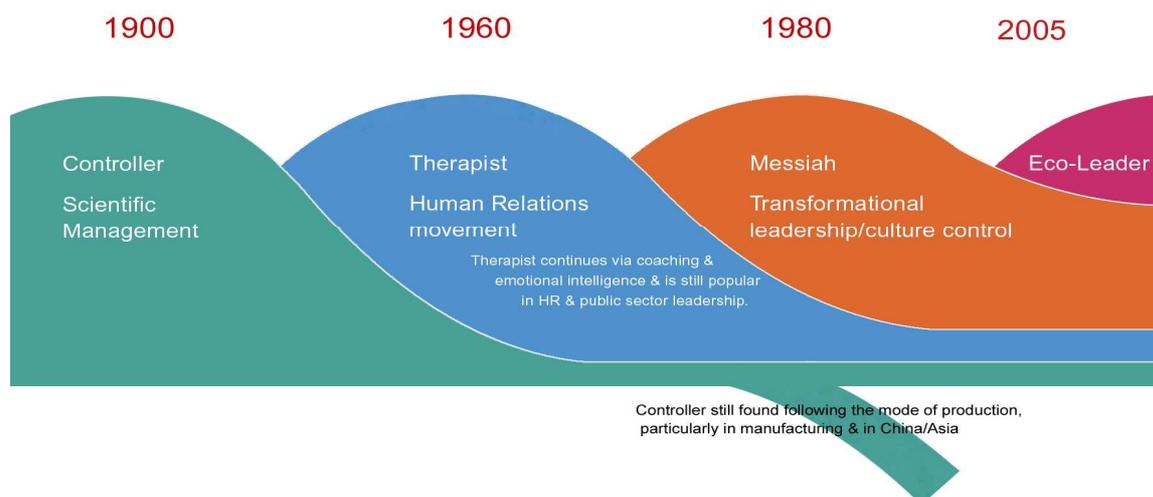
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What Obama managed to embody was both Messiah leadership and Eco-leadership. I use these terms in a particular way, they are taken from four leadership assumptions (or discourses) outlined in my book *Leadership a critical text* (Sage 2008). These four assumptions were drawn from research about leadership over the past 100 years. They set out how leadership is thought about, both consciously and unconsciously, how our expectations, hopes and fears about leaders are shaped and enacted. The four assumptions are:

- The Controller Leader
- The Therapist Leader
- The Messiah Leader
- The Eco-Leader

The table below shows when they emerged.

The Discourses of Leadership



(To find out your own leadership assumptions go to www.simonwestern.com and go to the leadership tab where you will find the 'Wild Questionnaire').

The Messiah discourse (epitomized by Transformational leadership) represents the idea of salvation, that leaders will take us to a 'promised land'. Unfortunately the Messiah discourse can also lead to conformist organizational cultures when dependent followers lose their critical faculties. The emergent leadership discourse for the 21st century is the Eco-leadership discourse, where leaders think about organizations as interdependent eco-systems and where leadership is not only situated at senior levels but is distributed throughout an organization.

The Eco-leadership discourse is about a new paradigm of leadership. Eco-leadership recognizes that within an organization there are interdependent parts which make up a whole. It is about connectivity, interdependence and sustainability underpinned by an ethical and socially responsible stance. (Western 2008)

Barack Obama is clearly the Messiah Leader, learning this leadership style from his charismatic church pastor and drawing inspiration from Dr Martin Luther King. However Obama has shown he is more than a charismatic figure and great orator. His ability to engage grass roots activists and to raise record funds has signified that he can turn hope into collaborative delivery. Obama draws on the Messiah and the Eco-leadership discourses combined. His mantra of 'Hope' signifies our individual and collective desire for a brighter future (Messiah) and his other mantra 'Yes we Can' signifies a shift from the 'I' culture to a 'We' culture (Eco-leader). He is tapping into an alternative narrative of the American Dream, he is the mixed-race child who makes good, the son of an African father, the outsider who finds a home, he embodies hope. It is true that America is a very individualistic culture but there is also a strong collectivist trait in the USA which Obama re-ignites with a vigorous new narrative. In the USA community matters, church matters, your ethnicity matters as both a symbol of pride and integration, your college identity matters. People identify strongly with their group and their nation, and it is this collectivism that Obama is re-engaging.

In his speech accepting his democratic nomination he referred to Dr King saying:

"We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."

In his election winning speech in Chicago, he again refers to hope and collectivism:

In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people.

He goes further, to address rich and poor across the globe:

And to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand.

And finally

to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that, out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.

These mantras are of hope and inspiration on the one hand, and of friendship and interdependency on the other. He offers a vision of hope (Messiah leadership) and a pathway to get there based on collaboration and reciprocity (Eco-leadership).

Barack Obama's tremendous achievement was to distribute and mobilize leadership, to engage so many in fundraising and mobilizing the voters. He and his team understood the new, networked society. His strategy was focused on engagement communication and connection. He didn't just communicate top down in one direction, he created dialogues amongst people, unleashed viral techniques to get peers to engage their friends, he was media savvy using old and new media with brilliance.

So what can leaders learn from this?

- 1) That hope underpins all success.

Leaders have to find authentic hope, to mobilize others. False hope and inauthentic hope creates cynicism (glib vision statements hoisted upon others doesn't do it). Leaders rarely create hope, more often they harness it, reading the situation, understanding the concerns and hopes of others and finding ways to articulate, symbolize and represent this on their behalf.

- 2) Leaders today are organizational architects.

Contemporary leadership is about connections rather than compliance. The Eco-leader thinks and works systems and networks. The worldwide web is more than a tool, it is a concept that signifies the way forward. Organizational structures are less fixed, and leaders need to think about working the connections and creating emergent strategies that are constantly adapting to a fast changing world. They also must learn that lateral communications work better than hierarchical ones: e.g. when selling

something, promoting word of mouth sales works best (viral marketing). Also when influencing employees, lateral communications are stronger than top down ones. Leaders today have to be organizational architects, seeing and creating the space and light in their organizations, which allow connections to be made, and creativity and leadership to flourish throughout the organization.

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