Governance as stewardship

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Gilles Paquet
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Gilles Paquet is Professor Emeritus at the Telfer School of Management, and is associated with both the Centre on Governance and the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He has been the Editor of www.optimumonline.ca – a journal specialized in matters of governance and public administration – since 1994, and is a senior partner with the consulting firm INVENIRE.

La singularité du chef ne tient pas à ses caractéristiques individuelles, c'est un effet de système

Jean-Pierre Dupuy

Introduction

The notion of leadership is not unlike the inkspots on the slides used in a Rorschach test: one may read almost anything into these meaningless spots, and project into them any fantasy.

This weaselword – leadership – is popular for two main reasons.

First, leadership is anchored in the notion of hierarchy: it assumes that someone is in charge, and that he/she is responsible for the guidance of the organization and responsible and accountable for anything good or bad that may ensue from such guidance.

Second, leadership has mystical dimensions: it ascribes to the leader exceptional qualities the source of which is somewhat mysterious, and a power of seduction that cannot be entirely explained by rational means.

The attraction of such a notion lies fundamentally with its reassuring power: someone clairvoyant and wise is (or should be) in charge, and will take the organization to the promised land, sparing the rest of the crew the need to worry about where the ship is going. The followers can wallow in *servitude volontaire*.

The fact that in the real world nobody is in charge, and that these exceptional qualities are so elusive, makes the discussions about leadership somewhat surreal. Such discussions quickly slump into circularity and seek intellectual comfort in tautology: the leader is identified as a person who has leadership qualities, and these leadership qualities are said to be the capacity of the leader. Leadership is not unlike phlogistics for proto-chemists, centuries ago, who explained inflammability by the existence of flammable substance in objects

Yet a whole literature has burgeoned around the notion of leadership, and it has become associated to a wide range of disparate properties purported to invest particular individuals with particular capacities to take charge. Indeed a certain scholarship claims to have identified those properties, and some management schools are unashamedly claiming to be able to inject them like steroids into willing souls.

In the rest of the paper, I underline the inadequacy of this notion, and suggest replacing it by the alternative notion of stewardship – that would appear to be better adapted to a networked world (Goldsmith et Eggers 2004) where nobody is in charge because power, resources and information are widely distributed (Cleveland 2002). The notion of stewardship has the added benefit of not requiring any mystical garb, and of being based on certain understandable mechanisms. The paper explores those mechanisms.

A word ending in ship and dressed in a mystical garb

In English, the words ending in *ship* are part of a family of expressions connoting a capacity to exercise a complex activity – like entrepreneurship or citizenship. These words are congenitally fuzzy. They define the contours of a complex of behaviors, activities and relations – a nebulous entity that can only be approximated, but corresponds to a dynamic –, a set of activities oriented toward change, transformation, geared to accomplishing something.

The popularity of these expressions is ascribable to the fact that they lend some firmness to incompletely theorized realities. Conversely, it also explains why they allow dramatically different interpretations to blossom and to become accredited.

In the case of leadership, the true believers associate the word to some sort of aura of clairvoyance-cum-influence: the leader sees things better than others, has uncommon communication capacities, and command the unconditional followership of the masses. Cynics are rather skeptical about the existence of such clairvoyance, and suspend their judgment in the face of the constant reference to some sort of charisma – a word that connotes the same occult powers that were invoked to explain that rats and children were mesmerized by the pied piper in the Grimm brothers' tale.

The followers do not believe that it is irrational to follow the leader because he knows things the rest of the group does not know. One follows Warren Buffett because he is better informed than one is, more competent, and because he has obviously good reasons to do things even though one does not fully understand them. It is a matter of faith.

In the traditional model of leadership, the root of this asymmetry is based on some sort of enlightened guidance capability embodied in the person of the leader. This is the presumption in good currency even though organizations evolve in the absence of an enlightened person-leader: the determining influences on the choices by organizations may emerge from diverse sources – random events, culture, systemic gridlock, a multiplicity of sources of innovation, etc. – that cannot be related to any presumed leader.

This traditional approach to leadership drifts quickly into magical thinking when it rationalizes search processes for a leader in terms of these mystical personal qualities that one is purported to be able to transport from one situation to the other like the turtle carries its shell. This has generated a whole literature – from the nice photographs of Charles Handy's *The New Alchemists* (1999), to the self-help texts for sale in airports that promise all comers a recipe to become such a mystical leader in just a few lessons.

The intent here is not to deny that there are exceptional individuals who are able to inspire their colleagues. Rather it wishes to denounce a literature built on pop psychology that would appear to be as sophisticated as biology used to be when it classified animals according to the number of legs. Such an approach contributes to keeping the attention away from the modern realities of stewardship in a world of networks where nobody is in charge, and power, resources and information are widely distributed.

A primer on stewardship

The central propositions underpinning governance as stewardship are that in modern organizations nobody is in charge, and that stewardship is *un effet de système.* Therefore it depends on the nature of the system in question. And since there has been a change in the nature of the system – a drift from Big-G government to small-g governance in most organizations – there has been a change of kind in the nature of stewardship (Paquet 1999; Hubbard & Paquet 2007).

In the world of Big-G, hierarchy was the order of the day, and some individuals or groups (legitimately or not) claimed to be in charge. They issued orders and inert agents were supposed to obey to the best of their abilities. This was the world of *servitude volontaire.*

In the new world of small-g, nobody is in charge and the different stakeholders have a portion of power, resources and information. As a result, collaboration and effective coordination are the new imperatives. This collaboration occurs through conversations and communications in which active agents are experimenting (each in their own way) in full consciousness that their action will trigger unintended consequences, and that their intended outcomes may not be the realized outcomes. In such a world, self-organization forces complement deliberate interventions: sometimes, it amplifies their impact, at other times it neutralizes or distorts them.

In the public sector, a massive redesign of the governing apparatus as a result of the drift from a welfare state to a strategic state (Paquet 1999) has generated forceful resistance within the technocracy (often emboldened by a citizenry not eager to lose generous state protection) to new arrangements calling for a lower valence for the state, more inter-sectoral partnerships, and more mass collaboration – all initiatives seen as reducing the power of the powerful, including the upper levels of the state bureaucracy in place, and demanding a greater personal responsibility of the citizenry. The same wave of transformation has hit organizations and institutions in the private and social sectors, with the same resistance from the managerial class.

Despite such resistance, stewardship has been transformed in all sectors. Coordination has become the pivotal feature. It can materialize through one person in small groups, like a boat with 8 rowers – through the light touch of the coxswain. In more complex organizations, nothing but the equivalent of an automatic pilot will suffice: an ensemble of mechanisms assuring the requisite dynamic coordination (Paquet 2007).

In the small-g world, each stakeholder needs to contribute to the stewardship through working at improving continually the automatic pilot. As a result, any lack of critical thinking or vigilance on the part of any stakeholder or member may result in less effective experimentation, poorer prototypes being developed, less effective social learning, and therefore in a governance regime that is less effective than it might have been (Argyris & Schön 1978, Schön & Rein 1994).

The governance regime (i.e., the ensemble of mechanisms making up the automatic pilot) ensures stewardship, and commands a new level of responsibility for all the parties involved. This new responsibility makes those who are not tinkering with the governance regime in real time, complicit in the fiascoes that may ensue as a result of their sins of omission.

Stewardship: components and guideposts

Stewardship is an echo effect of the governance regime, and the governance regime may be regarded as an attractor, the cruising regime that crystallizes temporarily in the absence of major disturbances.

One may analyze the governance regime as stewardship in its three components: (1) the emergence of the governance regime as attractor; (2) the process through which there is or not rallying support for it, and it acquires or not legitimacy; and (3) the capacity of this focal regime to generate the requisite amount of coordination, resilience, innovation, overcoming and accomplishment. The challenge is to explain how the stewardship emerges without needing to be personalized, and how it generates resilience and high performance or catastrophes – for there is no guarantee of success.

(1)   emergence

In certain cases where the situation is relatively simple, an attractor emerges organically. The contextual pressures generate some anomie in the agents. This leads them to search for guideposts, and a focal regime emerges to resolve the tensions among the different points of view. In the case of a pure and perfectly competitive situation, a price system will become the focal regime, as was experienced in the desolate world of POW camps in the 1940s where the fact that each prisoner was receiving a Red-Cross-type standard ration (which did not necessarily match his/her pattern of personal preferences) generated a situation that gave rise to generalized trading within the POW camp with cigarettes used as currency (Radford 1945). In a total panic, a crowd movement becomes the reference point (Dupuy 1992). In both cases, coordination emerges without any need for any personalization.

In more complex cases, the governance regime emerges in more circuitous ways: effective coordination connotes sets of principles, norms, rules, mechanisms, and protocols around which the expectations of agents converge, and around which decision-making and implementation get defined (Paquet 2005a : 76-78). Such a regime may crystallize quickly when the organization is relatively small. Communities of practice jell and, for instance, the board of directors of a small high-tech startup company brings together quite naturally the inventive engineer, the angel financier, the potential important buyer of the new widget, etc. This forum undertakes the stewarding function.

In more complex organizations (private, public, social) the governance regime takes a more formal attire (more legalistic, constraining), and the board is more stylized, but the same logic is at play.

In these complex cases also, Chait et al (2005) show that the governance regime is not playing the simple role of financial sentinel (Type I governance) but is also the place where the points of view of the different stakeholders get integrated (Type II governance). The governance regime is the locus of discernment, of meaning-making, provides the mental map of the organization, of its environment, its mission, its projects, and proposes the sort of transformations, innovations, and reframing likely to bring the organization beyond its limits, to renew itself (Type III or generative governance). This generative governance unfolds through a robust multilogue, much experimentation, prototyping and social learning, and the collaborative congealing of nothing less than a community of meaning (Michael 1993; Schrage 2000; Martin 2000, 2004, 2006, 2007).

(2)   support and legitimacy

In order for the focal regime to be able to resolve all those tensions in a creative way, it must generate a rallying effect that bestows legitimacy. What must emerge is nothing less than a culture, *une manière de voir* that establishes the basis of a collective intelligence that facilitates collaboration.

How is this collective intelligence constructed? – through communication and deliberation. A focal regime underwrites a structure, certain rituals, mechanisms that facilitate interactions by stabilizing anticipations. This is the visible face of the governance regime that triggers a rallying movement or a movement of rejection through the dual logics of synchronicity and cascades (Sunstein 2006).

This movement of contagion may materialize through reasoned discussion and justification, but it may also operate through surprise mechanisms – like modes and fads – via the media that may either dampen the cascade or amplify its impact and generate a movement of polarization (Guillaume 1987, 1989). These mechanisms of propagation are relatively badly understood, and may generate governance regimes that are idiosyncratic, fragile, and often unanticipated (McCann & Selsky 1984; Bikhchandani et al 1998; Barabasi 2002; Strogatz 2003; Sunstein 2006).

It is only when it is in place that a governance regime may be known to be performing well or not. Obviously the focal regime must make sense of the situation, but it must most importantly have a *great adaptive capacity* (Bennis & Thomas 2002: 45). This capacity does not emerge from the *properties* of the governance regime (that would be usable in all situations and transportable from one situation to another), but from the *capacities* of a regime that are revealed *in situ*, in a precise context and, particular circumstances (DeLanda 2006). It is the wave that determines if the governance regime as *surfer* has the required capacities.

(3)   effective coordination: uncertain

Do these difficulties condemn all efforts at designing good governance regime to fail? Some, like Lindblom (1990), think so; others are more optimistic, and believe that this is

not the case, and that one may soon be able to gauge, to engineer, or at least to nudge into existence the right mix of *capacities* likely to generate good governance and good stewardship. However, for the time being, most observers are satisfied to list important *properties* of persons-leaders (Badaracco 2006; Martin 2007 to name just a few), and there has been little attempt to sort out *capacities* likely to generate goodness of fit of governance regimes, and therefore effective stewardship.

One may reasonably suggest however that the principles of good governance likely to generate that sort of dynamic adaptative stewardship would have to make good use of the following reference points : inclusion, subsidiarity, multistability, experimentalism (Paquet 2005b : ch.8). In each case, these reference points must obviously be interpreted taking into account each particular context, but they cannot be ignored.

(i)   longitude: the inclusion-subsidiarity axis

The first two reference points have to do with the best way to assemble the potential partners when power, resources and information are diffracted, and that situation defines the structure of their coordinated work. The key idea is to include as many of the meaningful stakeholders as possible in the decision-making process (inclusion), and to design the decision-making apparatus in such a way as to allow those closer to the situation to take the decision (subsidiarity). From this ensues the principle of as much decentralization as possible, but as much centralization as necessary.

Such a participative and distributed governance regime should ensure continuous social learning, quick self-correcting feedback, creative conflict resolution, and the existence of shared responsibility mechanisms in order to generate the right mix of reliability and innovation.

In the words of Simons (2005), proper alignment for the organization requires that the spans of control (hard) and support (soft) – on the supply side of resources - be adequate to meet the obligations imposed by the spans of accountability (hard) and influence (soft) – on the demand side of resources.

(ii)   latitude: the multistability-experimentalism axis

The other two reference points deal with the resolution of tensions between exploitation and exploration (March 1991). The principle of multistability is important in the architecture of open systems. It suggests that the best way to stabilize a differentiated system is to partition it into sub-systems in order (a) to immunize the system as a whole from the impact of broad shocks, hitting it as a whole, that could destabilize it completely, and (ii) to be in a position to delegate to a portion of the organization (best able to handle the shock) the adjustment job that is called for.

Multistability also facilitate experimentation and innovation by allowing them to proceed *par morceaux*. Innovation is creative destruction, and thereby destabilizing. A good governance regime will be fundamentally *experimentalist*, capable of engaging the

organization in new avenues, but safely and prudently – i.e., engaging it tentatively, partially and often *par morceaux* (Sabel 2001, 2004); Schrage 2000). This form of attentive experimentalism is an essential condition for Type III governance.

(iii)   sextant

Despite the fact that these reference points will help in nudging an adequate governance regime into existence, and in ensuring effective stewardship, there is no assurance that such an outcome will prevail. There are systemic blockages that may prevent such emergence: an important one is the gridlock fragmentation of ownership powers that may well prevent the assembly of what every stakeholder knows is a winning combination (Heller 2008).

There are also acts of sabotage: passive sabotage as a result of neglect, lack of vigilance or sheer incompetence, or active sabotage by powerful vested interests who may see immense benefits for their clan in ensuring that some effective governance regime and stewardship will not materialize (Hubbard & Paquet 2009).

More importantly, maybe, governance failures and ineffective stewardship may evolve because of cognitive dissonance, and a refusal to factor in (even in a tentative way) the dynamic of context and the power of self-organization that are bound to produce surprises (good and bad). These occurrences cannot be ignored and must be dealt with opportunistically. This factor is most important not so much because of any inherent destructiveness *per se* in self-organization, but because of the fact that the very existence and importance of self-organization is occluded, denied, and therefore not fully (or even at all) taken advantage of.

(4)   the unbearable denial of self-organization

In a world where nobody is in charge (Cleveland 2002), stewardship emerges from a good matching of the structure of governance and of the dynamics of the context – together with a full awareness of the underlying forces of self-organization that are constantly unleashed. But a mental block exists with reference to self-organization.

Mitchel Resnick (1994) has analyzed that blockage with much subtlety. He shows that it corresponds to a profound sentiment in humans who (i) do not understand creative mechanisms like randomness (that opens new avenues of exploration), positive feedback (that amplifies the impact of a minor shock), emergence ascribable to interactions among agents (as in the case of traffic jams), etc.; (ii) refuse to acknowledge the very notion of self-organisation; and (iii) cling to explanations that assume that complex realities must be orchestrated by a *deus ex machina*, and that it cannot be that there is not a leader.

This is the sort of reaction one expects from young children (who are naturally animists). Resnick tells a story about Rachel (the very young daughter of a friend of his) who has a theory about rain: clouds rain, she suggests, because the thunder orders them to (Resnick 1994: 147). For children, there must be someone in charge.

But adults and scientists have the same mental blocks. This explain the difficulty to communicate the message of Adam Smith (market and the invisible hand) and of Charles Darwin (evolution) who have proposed theories that do not require that anybody be in charge. The same skepticism awaits works that suggest that CEOs and orchestra leaders may not be as indispensable as is usually presumed (Cleveland 2002; Semler 1989; Seifter and Economy 2001).

It is only by disclosing the basic mechanisms at work in the stewardship of organizations that one may unveil the workings of the automatic pilot, and that one may hope to dispel these mental blockages (Spinosa et al 1998). In this sense, the flow of studies of leadership in the traditional literature is counter-productive: they contribute to keep alive the tradition of mysticism, instead of showing how the basic mechanisms of stewardship work.

Some studies of complex systems like ant hills or synchronized flocks of birds show the way: complex coordination exists without an ant in chief or a leader bird (Resnick 1994). This is also the case for human organizations as in the case of a leaderless orchestra (Seifter et Economy 2001) or the governance of aircraft carriers operations (Pool 1997). It is only through an examination of a very large number of such cases of complex organizations where there is stewardship without a leader that one may hope to break the spell that gets experts and lay persons to fall prey to the propensity to search always and everywhere for a *deus ex machina*.

But this demolition work cannot suffice. One must also find ways to open the minds to the ways of self-organization (Axelrod & Cohen 1999; Johnson 2001; Tapscott & Williams 2006). This is bound to be a daunting task. For the time being the theories of self-organization of Smith and Darwin are said to be believed, but it is often more for fear of ridicule than as a result of their theories being fully understood, even by the educated public.

Stewardship as process

The crucial difference between properties and capacities raises questions about how one may expect to improve the practice of stewardship since 'adequate' properties may not suffice. This calls for a dynamic sense of stewardship as process, as the result of on-going social learning based on individual and collective capacities, affordances, and innovation.

As we have shown elsewhere (Paquet 1999, 2005), social learning is triggered by anomalies noted and taken seriously. This is best captured by the social learning cycle à la Boisot (1995) that produces collective intelligence – defined by Pierre Lévy as "une intelligence partout distribuée, sans cesse valorisée, coordonnée en temps réel, qui aboutit à une mobilisation effective des compétences" (Lévy 1994:29). Such intelligence is continuously producing new knowledge and sharing it with all the partners, for its main purpose is social learning and the effective mobilization and coordination of the continually growing competencies of all the partners.

(1)   Social learning

In an effort to identify the major obstacles to social learning (and therefore to guide the process architecture interventions), Max Boisot has suggested a simple mapping of the social learning cycle in a three-dimensional space – *the information space* – which identifies an organizational system in terms of the degree of *abstraction*, *codification* and *diffusion* of the information flows within it. This three-dimensional space defines three continua: the farther away from the origin on the vertical axis, the more the information is codified (i.e., the more its form is clarified, stylized and simplified); the farther away from the origin laterally eastward, the more widely the information is diffused and shared; and the farther away from the origin laterally westward, the more abstract the information is (i.e., the more general the categories in use) (Boisot 1995).

The social learning cycle is presented in two phases with three steps in each phase: phase I emphasizes the cognitive dimensions of the cycle, phase II the diffusion of the new information.

In phase I, learning begins with some scanning of the environment, and of the concrete information widely diffused and known, in order to detect anomalies and paradoxes. Following this first step (s), one is led in step 2 to stylize the problem (p) posed by the anomalies and paradoxes in a language of problem solution; the third step of phase I purports to generalize the solution found to the more specific issue to a broader family of problems through a process of abstraction (at). In phase II, the new knowledge is diffused (d) to a larger community of persons or groups in step 4. Then there is a process of absorption (ar) of this new knowledge by the population, and its assimilation so as to become part of the tacit stock of knowledge in step 5. In step 6, the new knowledge is not only absorbed, but has an impact (i) on the concrete practices and artefacts of the group or community.

In Figure 1 below, one may identify the different blockages through the learning cycle. In Phase I, cognitive dissonance in (s) may prevent the anomalies from being noted, epistemic inhibitions of all sorts in (p) may stop the process of translation into a language of problem solution, and blockages preventing the generalization of the new knowledge because of the problem definition being encapsulated within the *hic et nunc* (at) may keep the new knowledge from acquiring the most effective degree of generality. In Phase II, the new knowledge may not get the appropriate diffusion because of property rights (d), or because of certain values or very strong dynamic conservatism which may generate a refusal to listen by those most likely to profit from the new knowledge (ar), or because of difficulties in finding ways to incorporate the new knowledge (i).

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Figure 1

Learning cycle and potential blockages.
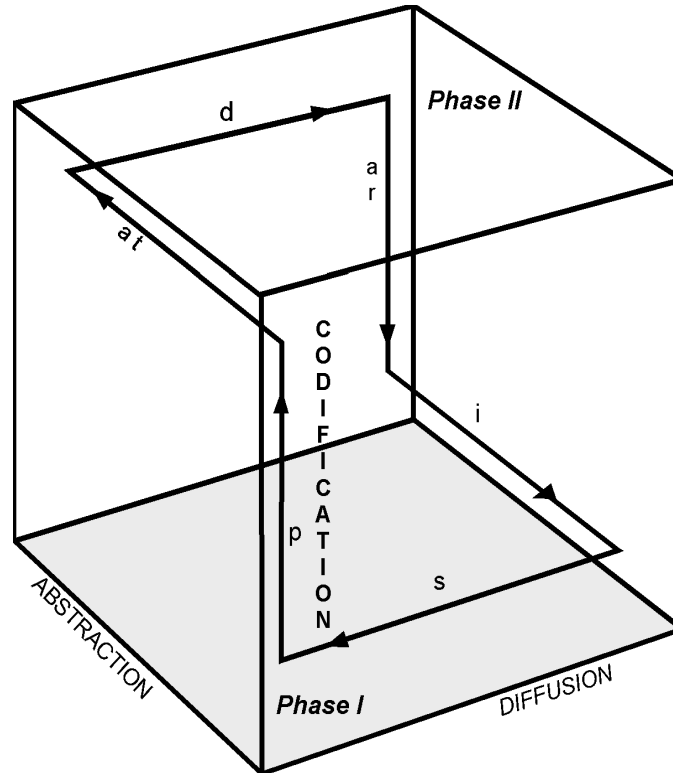
Source : Max Boisot, 1995, pp. 237, 190.

Interventions to remove or attenuate the negative effects of such blockages always entail some degree of interference with the mechanisms of collective intelligence. In some cases, like the modification of property rights, the changes in the rules appear relatively innocuous, but entail interfering with the affairs of the mind: correcting social learning blockages modifies relational transactions and therefore the psycho-social fabric of the organization.

(2)   Framework for stewardship in action

If one had to stylize the stewardship process through social learning in a sequential way, one might make use of the template used by practitioners (Parr 2002).

Stage A begins with some perceived gap between current reality and some desirable outcome as a trigger to direct attention toward initiating action. This originates with the recognition that action (either individually or collectively), and the subsequent exploration of action possibilities, are required.

Stage B is a concurrent search for the mobilization of required partners and the nurturing of the necessary collaboration. This dual and interactive sub-process calls for

Mobilization	Collaboration
the right framing of critical issues and opportunities and focusing the attention on what needs to be done	the creation of platforms for people to work together
the communication of key information likely to inspire, rally and motivate a broader set of people to take part in the diverse networks	the development of new relationships capable of generating tangible results and thereby of changing mindsets, and of encouraging creative thinking

Stage C has to do with efforts to sustain change through creating and renewing institutions, and re-igniting the process through refocusing on new challenges and opportunities. This entails much conceptual refurbishment and efforts to agitate and rekindle the social learning process through reframing the very notion of what is possible.

What is required is maintaining a capacity for the organization to learn, i.e., to reflect on its own experience, to make sense of it, and to retool, restructure, and even to reframe the basic questions facing the organization in order to generate effective ways to discern and grapple with the generative challenge of learning. These requirements have been spelled out by practitioners of reflexive governance. They may be summarized as follows: knowledge integration and learning by doing; capacity for long run anticipation of systemic effects; adaptivity of strategies and institutions; iterative experimental and participatory definition of broad directions; and interactive strategy development (Drath & Palus 1994; Voß et al 2006).

(3)   Competencies

Since dynamic adaptation is the core process, such stewardship action requires capacities and competencies that need to be nudged into existence not only by leveraging the existing forces of self-organization but also by harnessing them also somewhat.

These required competencies may be sorted out in five categories (Michael 1993; Hughes & Weiss 2007:

(i)   contextual
(embrace uncertainty and error, building bridges, reframing, improvise, adapt, overcome in the manner of Clint Eastwood's Heartbreak Ridge);
(ii)   interpersonal
(consultation, negotiation, deliberation, conflict resolution, facilitation, brokering, preceptoring, educating, animating, changing roles);
(iii)   enactment
(enabling, empowering, responsiveness, creativity);
(iv)   systems values
(ethics of interconnectiveness and interdependence, removing obstacles for others to act better);
(v)   stay the course while rocking the boat
(imagination, experimentation, responsibility to explore, emphasis on sins of omission, learning by prototyping)

These capacities are not only individual but collective in the sense that rules of interaction among individuals generate emerging properties deriving from the dynamics of situations not from the heads of actors: the interaction order (in the language of Goffman) generates a sort of collective intelligence, a sort of social mind (Goffman 1959; Johnson 2001; Rheingold 2002: 179).

The dual (individual and collective) capacities are obviously interacting and confronted to a context that affords 'action possibilities' and not others. Whether these affordances are real or perceived is of less relevance than the fact that they limit the realm of possibilities. In particular, the context has affordances that individuals and collectivities perceive or learn to perceive. Learning to perceive affordances is a key kind of perceptual learning (Gibson 1982; Norman 1999).

"Affordances are not fixed properties: they are relationships that hold between objects and agents… to discover and make use of affordances is one of the important ways " to deal with novel situations (Norman 2007: 68-69).

Learning to perceive affordances better or developing ways to improve such perception is the substance of social learning, and is at the core of innovation and innovative design. This is the way in which the automatic pilot is improved.

(4)   Stewardship dynamics

This dynamic of stewardship focuses obviously on information and communication. But it need not be, as mentioned earlier, only through the head of actors: it may equally emerge from the context and situations. All the dimensions explored earlier are important (components, guideposts, process, framework, competencies) but they remain incomplete unless one can add some foundational assumptions, and enabling resources – like the use of the mega-community, the development of common knowledge, and the full appreciation of the forces of synchronization – that are at the core of self-organization and constitute the sort of glue that makes these other components hang together.

This is not the place to probe these matters at great length but they cannot be ignored altogether.

i.   foundational assumptions

(a)   process

The process approach is a general strategy for the description and explanation of reality. It is a generalized approach rather than a unified doctrine. It does not deny that things exist, but it suggests that material bodies (like all stable structures) are rooted in process, and constitute only temporary bundles of powers generated by a process that remains unfinished and open-ended.

The vision of the world in good currency until very recently remained some version of social physics – but a pre-quantum physics, i.e., one still enamoured with reversible-time equilibrium analysis, as exemplified most clearly by economics.

The renaissance of the social sciences has been fuelled by a shift to a process approach, emphasizing a dynamic open-ended approach in terms of flows (Rescher (1996, 2000). It has aptly restated the basic tenets of process philosophy, and anti-reductionist social scientists have begun to see the human world as consisting of processes, with "objects" having a derivative status.

(b)   design

An offshoot of the process perspective is that intervening in a process is in the nature of design. Since participants talk across discrepant frames, designing "is a process in which communication, political struggle, and substantive inquiry are combined…(that) may be judged appropriate … if it leads to the creation of a design structure that directs inquiry toward progressively greater inclusion of features of the problematic situation and values for its transformation" (Schön 1990:138-9).

Such exploration or inquiry leads designers to learn by doing, but more importantly to escape from straight deductive thinking (proving that something must be) and indulging in abductive reasoning (suggesting that something may be and reaching out to explore it).

This is fundamental in the world of design which "involves inquiry into systems that do not yet exist" (Romme 2003:558).

This new way of thinking is underlying the whole new generative governance of social systems building on experimentation and serious play, and making the highest and best use of grappling, grasping, discerning and sense-making as part of reflective learning (Chait et al 2005: ch.6).

(c)   reflexivity

A final assumption of the new approach is the taking into account of reflexivity: a fundamental condition for social learning on which effective governance is based.

Reflexivity is defined by Jessop (2003:7) as "the ability and commitment to uncover and make explicit to oneself the nature of one's intentions, projects and actions and their conditions of possibility; and, in this context, to learn about them, critique them, and act upon any lessons that have been learnt". Reflexivity means that knowledge acquired gets integrated during the process and unfolds in order to modify the outcome.

As Douglass North (2005) clearly states, traditional social sciences have done a very poor job at factoring in human intentionality, and the human capacity for representational redescription. The belief systems underpinning these representations have an immense impact on the institutions themselves.

The new mindset recognizes that the complexity and turbulence of the context is such that agents cannot fully understand and grasp it. This entails a process of inquiry with a built-in on-going critical ability to think about the implications of particular choices, and an on-going capacity to modify means and ends as learning evolves. It entails learning how to learn reflexively (double-loopedly) à la Argyris and Schön (1978)

These three assumptions of the new mindset are ways to respond to three weaknesses of the old mindset. The old mindset is plagued by its assumptions about an object-world, its view of intervention as problem-solving within a maze-like world where the problem is already set, and a neglect of human intentionality and its key role in a governance process that must be reflexive. This explains the static and timeless dimensions of the traditional approaches.

ii.   enabling resources

(a)   megacommunity

Stewardship entails cooperation and has to take into account the various points of view coexisting within the mega-community process involving divergent interests and developing partnerships based on trust, in which parties may jointly pursue somewhat different objectives.

A mega-community – i.e., "a public sphere in which organizations and people deliberately join together around a compelling issue of mutual importance, following a set of practices and principles that will make it easier to achieve results" (Gerencser et al 2006) entails a requisite amount of both trust (institutional, interorganizational, and interpersonal) and social capital.

In practice, Gerencser et al have identified four critical elements for a thriving mega-community: (1) understanding the problems to be resolved, the necessary players and partners, and the ways in which they affect one another; (2) the presence of partners in a listening, learning and understanding mode; (3) designing and customizing of suitable cross-sector arrangements; and (4) experiments, learning from them, and effective collective monitoring of progress.

People and groups potentially affected by, or involved in, stewardship are by definition players in the mega community. For all of them, their interests in it (and views of it) will tend to be framed by the mindset that dominates the culture in good currency in the socio-economic context. Their opinions will evolve to some extent as time passes, and will change to a greater or lesser degree as a result of external influences.

Partners have quite different expectations. In the private sector, the main interest is the profitability likely to ensue if additional efficiency and effectiveness are value adding. From the public sector point of view, even though the public good is readily invoked, bureaucrats, elected officials, political opposition, and the unionized public service may have diverse interests, and may not see things the same way. This is bound to have an impact on the nature of the negotiated contracts. The not-for-profit mindset is no more univocal. Board members, paid permanent staff, and volunteers may pursue different objectives that will shape their direct involvement and choices in the process of enhancing stewardship.

The media also play a special kind of role as opinion-molders, to the extent that they influence the frames of reference of both the mega-community and the particular actors, and help to shape their perspectives.

(b)   common knowledge

Another set of forces that is most important in the dynamics of stewardship is common knowledge. Chwe (2001: 98-99) has shown that "coordination is often achieved through adaptation and evolution and implicit communication, but often people explicitly communicate" in order to solve them. Common knowledge often emerges through communicative events like rituals, ceremonies, and other cultural practices. He thereby shows how the problem of indeterminacy in coordination can be resolved by common knowledge through rituals. It indicates ways in which intervention might nudge people toward coordination through generating common knowledge, and allowing choices to be made by actors on that basis. This approach explicitly leverages the cultural and informational contexts likely to generate effective self-organization.

(c)   synchronization

Yet another set of forces at work in the dynamics of stewardship has to do with synchronization: the fact that, for reasons that are not always clear, humans like animals would appear to fall into synchronized behavior in self-organized ways (traffic flows, applause, etc.). Strogatz (2003) has reviewed thoroughly the existence of synchronization in animal and human worlds: spontaneous outbreak of coordinated or herd or mob behavior with certain thresholds (or mix of thresholds for different groups) defining tipping points where mass synchronization occurs (Granovetter 1978; Watts 2002).

Strogatz has shown that, in the animal world, spontaneous coordination is omnipresent (fireflies flashing in unison, flocks of birds flying in formation, etc.). It has been shown also that synchronization also materializes in the material world of lifeless things of clocks. In the human world, group think, coordination of menstrual cycles, etc. are also well documented. In the same way, synchronization materializes in group behavior and we are beginning to understand the mechanisms underlying such generation of order out of chaos when certain thresholds are reached. This illustrates in a simple way the forces of self-organization that need to be taken into account.

Such forces of synchronization need not generate orderly coordination. Often they generate heart fibrillation or mobs. But understanding such forces is fundamental if one hopes ever to find at the social level the equivalent of a defibrillator.

The dynamics of stewardship underpinning the metaphor of the automatic pilot needs to be understood as a mix of mechanisms many of which are designed with certain purposes in mind but many of which are simply the result of self-organization either triggered by common knowledge or as unintended consequences of context, situations and experimental interventions, or as a result of synch.

While this definition of stewardship does not promise the simplicity of the literature on imperial leadership, it has the advantage of defining a program of research that is immensely more promising and realistic. It escapes from the simplistic anthropomorphic images of governing by recognizing both the full extent to which mechanisms can be put in place capable of nudging the organization in preferred directions, and the full extent to which experiments with prototypes to tinker with complex non-linear systems is likely to generate important unintended consequences as a result of the self-organization it triggers. Such an approach does not promise success in governing organizations, but it provides an insight into the ways in which governing works.

Conclusion

How can one refocus research away from leadership toward stewardship, toward questions like how focal points emerge, how their legitimacy gets established by contagion, how coordination through experimentation, prototyping, serious play and social learning contributes to develop an improved governance regime in symbiosis with

the self-organization of the context, how effective governance provides effective stewardship?

Primarily, in the first instance, by casting doubts on the chivalrous stories in good currency, and suspicion on their alchemists, but also by showing that one can usefully replace their magic potions with mechanisms. This quest has begun a long time ago with the intriguing work of scholars like Nobel-Prize Thomas Schelling (1978) who have made a career of showing how some complex social phenomena can be shown to be the outcome of relatively un-mysterious mechanisms; or like Leonid Huwicz (another Nobel prize winner) doing work of the same sort in a different genre (Hurwicz & Reiter 2006).

But one must also be bolder and accept to deconstruct complex social phenomena like leadership in the same manner, to dare to put forward hypotheses as fascinating, intriguing, and perplexing in such areas as those that have been proposed in dealing with the animal world.

One must succeed in generating for human organizations something like what Resnick has done to explain the creation of a single central cemetery in ant hills. He has shown that if an ant follows two simple rules – (1) if you stumble on a dead brother, and you are unburdened by a dead brother, take him on, and (2) if you stumble on a dead brother, and that you already are carrying another dead brother, dump him – it is possible to show by simulation of thousands of notional ants that they will construct a central cemetery without the need to assume that there is any foreman-ant.

This is the challenge of research in organization and coordination science in the next round: a sort of deconstruction of black-box notions and concepts into their component mechanisms.

Can one, with the existing tool box available, disclose the foundations of stewardship in all sorts of different contexts? To a certain degree, one most certainly can. And the hypothesis at the core of this paper is that the answer lies in a better understanding of governance regimes, of the dynamics of self-organization, and of the interactions between these two sets of forces. However, it may be that the work cannot be completed without much conceptual refurbishment: a new lexicon, new analytical tools, a new paradigm (Resnick 1996; Axelrod 1997).

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