

Usonic Leadership

Author: J. Atieno Fisher

*“Superman never made any money saving the world from Solomon Grundy.
And sometimes I despair the world will never see another man like him.”*

-Lyrics from “Superman” by the band Crash Test Dummies

Abstract: The “usonic” leader is the other-oriented or freedom-oriented leader of the future, in which self-organizing systems will replace the command-and-control model. Here, usonic leaders from various industries reflect on what caring leadership looks like in contemporary business. In their comments can be found the behaviors involved in usonic leadership: to “potentiate” others, with recognition as well as stepwise and sensitively matched tasking and listening; to provide a narrative that gives employees a sense of meaning and purpose that resonates with their own values and wishes about the future; to remain consistently aligned with values that lie deeper than the bottom line. Usonic leaders experience leadership as a commitment to love, caring, and service.

So many of the qualities that set leaders apart are associated in our minds with the rule of logic over emotion: self-control, the ability to think clearly under pressure and make decisions based on the facts rather than on fear or favoritism, the ability to command unquestioning obedience, and the ability to set aside the emotional self in order to get the job done, as must soldiers in combat, police, firemen, or other professionals who function in dangerous, time dependent, and traumatizing situations. We associate “being emotional” with a loss of power, a loss of self-command, an inability to tough it out. There is nothing complimentary in being called “emotional,” and indeed you can no doubt remember times that label was used to render someone irrelevant.

But what if “getting the job done” in fact depends on having an extraordinary emotional capacity? What if acting from deeply felt conviction is the mark of a truly powerful leader, indicating greater self-command and maturity than the hardened ruthlessness we traditionally associate with authority? What if caring is in fact the defining characteristic of leadership?

I interviewed a number of leaders of successful organizations and found that they each said something like this: today’s leader develops those in his or her charge, expressing genuine commitment to their pursuit of happiness out of a sense of purpose that goes deeper than just the bottom line. Leaders who are oriented toward the future know that the days of command-and-control are over as self-organized systems replace and outperform regiments. These future-oriented leaders remain distinct, and differently accountable, from other employees who are not in leadership positions, but demonstrate an other-focused emotional competence and a facility for communicating the meaningfulness of work.

I call these leaders “usonic,” a term I chose for several reasons. “Usonia” was made popular by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who emphasized designing to the needs of



individual families and development according to organic principles “from the ground towards the light.”¹ “Usonia” was distinct from contemporary ideas of “utopia” in that it unfolded “organically” rather than through enforcement. Usonic leaders likewise tailor to specific needs to help individuals thrive and fulfill their intrinsic natures. In Swahili, the word “usoni” means “[the days] to come” or the future, and also connotes the idea of being faced with something. Usonic leaders use face to face attention and recognition, and communicate a future vision that speaks to employees. They also listen to employees’ visions. The Latin root “sonus” has to do with hearing, the origin of our words “sound” and “resonate.” I also like the way the word evokes associations with supersonic jet engines, because usonic leaders are clearly powerful in the results they achieve.² Below, I offer stories from a number of usonic leaders and identify what I think are the key aspects of the way they see their role.

The Shift to Usonic Leadership

Is the future really going to be so different? These days, one hears a lot about the “conceptual age” – a time in which hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs will go offshore. Job coach Dan Miller echoes Dan Pink’s definitive book³ in a recent newsletter:

If you are a healer, peacemaker, artist, comedian, counselor, coach or spiritual leader you may have more “security” in the workplace than a computer programmer or engineer has. Any job that depends on routine or that can be broken down into a set of repeatable steps is at risk. Inventiveness, joyfulness, empathy, caring and insight are characteristics that cannot be outsourced to “electronic immigrants.” The MFA (Master of Fine Arts) is fast becoming a hotter degree than the MBA.⁴

There is talk of “translucency,” (see *The Translucent Revolution* by Arjuna Ardagh), the quality of glowing with inner peace, of “democratic organizations” and “freedom-centered leaders” (see WorldBlu.com), and of social and emotional intelligence.⁵ An increasing volume of books and organizations are dedicated to promoting meaning or

¹ The pioneering spirit and cultural bias for innovation of the U.S. is captured in the term. Around 1910 on his first European trip, Wright spoke, “calling the U.S.A. "U-S-O-N-A" to avoid confusion with the new Union of South Africa... Over time, Mr. Wright made "Usonian" as much his personal word as he did ‘organic,’ and indeed, the two came to mean much the same for him. ‘Usonia’ was his name for the reformed American society that he tried for the last 25 years of his life to bring about. ‘Organic’ referred to the way in which this change was going to occur. Ultimately, both spring from Mr. Wright’s deep conviction that a culture or an individual should proceed integrally from its core or roots, ‘out of the ground and into the light.’” (www.usonia.com)

² I like this term so much that I named my consulting company after it! (www.USONI.com)

³ Pink’s *A Whole New Mind* has rapidly become integral to all discourse on business trends.

⁴ http://www.48days.com/newsletter_archives/20051011.html

⁵ Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence; Why it can matter more than IQ* and Karl Albrecht’s *Social Intelligence; The new science of success*. The January 2004 issue of the Harvard Business Review also focused heavily on “leading by feel” and navigating “the twists and turns” of emotion.

spirituality in the workplace.⁶ One of the four qualities of what a recent Harvard Business Review article calls the “fundamental state of leadership” is about being “other focused.” It includes behaviors like “seeing the potential in everyone, empathizing with people’s needs, supporting people, and expressing concern.”⁷

Whether or not attention to these areas embeds permanently into the business landscape or is simply a passing fad, there is little doubt that, as with roles in almost every area of contemporary life, our models of leadership are shifting, and are already much different than they were even five years ago. At least one study showed that managers 40 and below were more likely than older managers, aged 50 and above, to recognize their employees and feel it was important to do so.⁸ The emphasis in leadership today is shifting from the Ruler archetype and more onto the Mentor or Guide archetype. Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D points out the expectations “Generation Y” recruits (born between 1984 and 2002) bring to the workplace in her article “Ready or Not, Here They Come.”⁹ The number one thing Gen-Y'ers seek in a job, according to Goman, is “Great bosses and relationships.” She advises managers that “They want people who will get to know them personally as well as professionally and care about them as individuals.”

Recognition

Certainly an aspect of usonic leadership, and one obvious way caring expresses itself in business settings, is through recognition. Studies show that non-monetary recognition improves performance.¹⁰ Anne Sutherland Fuchs, former editor in chief of several women’s magazines and currently in charge of women’s issues for the mayor’s office in New York City, sees increasing emphasis on recognition throughout the business world.

With leadership, think of the programs that nowadays seem natural – mammograms weren’t part of the employment package in the past, but now they are. You frequently find employee recognition programs now, whereas 15 years ago you wouldn’t. Companies have done these things because they were losing their brainpower. They are really seriously addressing employee retention, whether with simple things such as a “happy birthday” email that, granted, is computerized, but nevertheless makes someone feel good, or with real recognition, such as sending someone to a business school for half a year, or to a conference to get exposure to other leaders. It’s all about getting that team cohesive and feeding them what they need.¹¹

⁶ See *The CEO and the Monk : One Company's Journey to Profit and Purpose* by Robert B. Catell, Kenny Moore, and Glenn Rifkin, and *The Diamond Cutter : The Buddha on Managing Your Business and Your Life* by Geshe Michael Roach, and check out organizations like spiritatwork.org, or the Business Spirit Journal Online.

⁷ Robert E. Quinn, “Moments of Greatness; Entering the Fundamental State of Leadership,” pg 80 vol 83 no. 7, pg 79

⁸ Pg 16, Leader to Leader no. 23, Bob Nelson “The Rewards of Recognition.”

⁹ www.CKG.com

¹⁰ Pg 18, Leader to Leader no. 23, Bob Nelson “The Rewards of Recognition.”

¹¹ Interview Sept. 28, 2005.

Goman agrees; “Gen Y employees want constant, informal assessment of how they are doing... Catch people doing things right. Instantly recognize and reward outstanding efforts, build reputations within the company, show people that you appreciate their contribution.”

Fatima Hadji, who has held a number of management positions in banking and retail and now works for women’s issues, teaching leadership in workshops for women from diverse countries, named some specific ways she expresses respect and recognition to those she leads;

I say thank you in front of their peers and tell them they deserve a day off, that I will make sure they get a paid day. I find small things, like ordering “to go” to give it to someone to say ‘you have done a wonderful job in the past few days.’ Or I create a certificate to recognize them.¹²

Developing Individuals

Part of recognition has to do with giving thought to the professional growth and development of those in one’s care. Bob Allen, CEO of i.d.e.a.s., told me, “To effectively lead people you have to be able to say to yourself how can I potentiate this person and the emergence of the being that they really want to be and aspire to?”¹³

Madelyn Blair, a manager at the World Bank for many years and later of her own consulting company, Pelerei, embodies an excellent example of this.

As a manager I would often explore with staff what their goals were and then as much as possible I would assign them activities in support of those goals, and be explicit about the link between what they were assigned and how it would feed their goals. Let me give you a metaphor to explain what I mean. I learned a great deal about leadership from gardening. You can’t make a plant do anything that a plant can’t do. If you want plants to do something, all you can do is create the best environment for them, and if you don’t have the best environment, you better put the plant in another place. But under no circumstances should you expect to get green beans from a tomato plant.

Madelyn cultivated a way of developing competency called Tracked Autonomy (see her website, pelerei.com) She offered several examples of the process, but the story that serves this point best comes directly from one of her employees, Sonia Bisaccia:

I didn’t realize [how good she was] at the time, until I worked with other people. Some people give you something you’ve never done before that’s not even in your field just because they don’t want to deal with it, and then when you come back with

¹² Interview September 7, 2005.

¹³ Interview, August 6, 2005.

something they say, ‘That’s not what I wanted.’ Other people are always looking over your shoulder and would have saved time by just doing it themselves. Madelyn never did that. Things that were more complicated, she would give a task as a stepping stone and then say use that and do this with it, all the way through until we had a complete product.

Madelyn, it appears, is paying forward an investment by someone who cared about her own development:

Xenon Zudens was engineer but his specialty was static displacement. When I went to work for him he was way over six feet tall and he stood very straight and erect. He had lots of energy. I was in total awe of him. I was very young and this was only my second professional job. The first thing he did was lay out a huge blueprint and he say I’d like the measurements off this. I said I’ve never done this, and he said, ‘You can figure it out’ – and I did. Every task he gave me was a little more complex. He never became angry even though he had all this energy. He would correct me, move on and give me the next job and the next and the next. He drew out of me much much more than I thought I ever had.

To develop an individual, tasks need to be matched not only to gradually increasing competence, but also to interest and enthusiasm. Anne notes that people are successful when they are happy with what they’re doing.

When you ask them to make a list of 100 things they enjoy most and underline the top five, that’s a job. The reason that job works is because they’re happy doing it. Understand the carrot – if their goals match the company’s, that’s a match.¹⁴

This kind of focused attention on an individual’s unique gifts for the purpose of steering careers must be based on listening, not on the observations of the leader. Bob speaks about a leadership mistake that taught him not to rely solely on his own assumptions.

In my corporate life, there was a young guy I’d worked with for years and I said ‘I’ve got great news, I’m going to promote you, you’ll be managing all the people who do what you do now.’ In a month he was in the hospital. Do unto others as they would be done unto, not as you would have done unto you -- It’s not about you at all! I call it the Platinum Rule. I should have said to that young man, ‘What does career growth look like to you?’

Fatima is a proponent of one to one meetings for creating a development plan based on questions like “Tell me who you are, what do you want to do in life and how is it possible for me to help you get where you want to get?” Almost every leader interviewed here said something similar to Fatima’s credo: “A leader is the one who helps them enhance

¹⁴ Interview, September 28, 2005.

their capacities.” Fatima began exercising leadership as empowerment at a young age, in her home village of Timgheet*, located in the south of Morocco, in the Atlas mountains.

A long time ago, I was ten or twelve, I would gather this group of girls in my village and I would have an ugly big piece of iron on the wall of an old building as a chalkboard. My mother would make tea for them and welcome them and treat them like her daughters. After our tea and bread I would teach them how to be a strong woman, though I didn’t know what it meant at that time. At the time to me it meant the ability to overcome problems and obstacles without feeling rejected. Because everything that comes to you as a woman of that age in the village hurts you, it makes you shy, and makes you not want to talk. I didn’t know much, but whatever I knew at that time from my parents, I would tell them.

Fatima passed on advice from her father, the thrust of which was that standing out academically makes it impossible for people to ignore you, and stories from her mother.

My mother had an analogy that had to do with working on yourself to be a contributor to society and recognizing that you are part of a social system. She would say, ‘Being an average person is very easy, like letting a boulder roll from the top of a mountain. But trying to be a good person is like taking the stone from the bottom up. It is very heavy, sometimes you have curves and sometimes you have to rest but you will get it there, and you will be gratified by your effort.’ It’s much easier in Arabic than English, but I still tell that story to people, I still tell it to myself. Weaknesses and failures are just an exam that prepares you for your success. Your ability to succeed does not mean you succeed at first attempt, just that you will taste success eventually. When you finally taste it you tend to retain it and work towards a better one.

Leaders who develop others create leaders. Fatima reports that all of those girls, now grown women, have made extraordinary educational achievements and are finding ways to make a difference together in their home village.¹⁵

Making Meaning

In the stories that Fatima told in the dilapidated building long ago in Timgheet, another important facet of usonic leadership is revealed; that of making meaning. When an individual can see disappointing events as preparation for success, or view a lifetime as a worthwhile struggle to be extraordinary because of a contextualizing frame of choosing to push the boulder rather than to let it roll, that individual’s attitude and behavior will be markedly different than if those frames were absent. Mitch Litrofsky puts it most succinctly:

* “Timgheet” means “originating from the ground.”

¹⁵ Interview, September 7, 2005.

A leader's job is to make meaning. Not to dictate, but in the vernacular, 'Here's the movie we're in guys and here's what we're doing in this movie.' You can call it mission, values, whatever, it's really to make meaning. The bigger the organization, the harder this is to do, and the more important. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves and of something that is meaningful.

Vision was mentioned by all the leaders I spoke with. Bob Allen was characteristically to-the-point: "There has to be a 'there' there, some future state that you aspire to and articulate, that's lofty, and maybe some days even seems impossible." Nearly all of the leaders also noted that these days there is frequently a collaborative element in creating company vision. Madelyn recognized this as a time-saving dynamic in which front-end investment in buy-in made efficiency possible down the road:

Today what I see (and it certainly is not uniform) is a greater recognition that where an organization is going doesn't need perfect consensus, but at the very least an understanding of the vision. As I observe younger people there is a real need to not only understand but to agree with it. That matters almost more than compensation. Once everyone's on the same page, you can let them gallop on their own. I used to tell my first line managers to go off together without me and create a design to meet the year's objectives. Once they understood the objectives, the specifics were always right.

Goman verifies that the new generation of recruits is

looking for meaning in their lives, so help new employees make a 'values match' between their personal values and the organization's vision/mission. Let individuals know specifically how their work fits in and contributes to the goals of the enterprise.

As the benefits of having a workforce aligned with a vision have become apparent, it has become equally obvious that alignment does not happen without voice; "buy-in" occurs most readily through multilateral processes. Goman warns:

Command and control tactics don't work with the Gen-Y'ers, who are looking to exchange knowledge and be treated as a valuable team member. Bring employees into the planning process of anything that affects them. Address their concerns and co-create goals and strategy.

Again, it is difficult to assess whether the derision for poor old "command and control" is more than a fad. But the shift is apparently obvious and real if viewed from the perspective of the last thirty years. In Ann's words:

When I started, you decided as a leader what you wanted to do and did it. Now it's much more collaborative; you take a retreat and come up with the 'aha moment' when everyone's on the same page. I think what happened has to do

with a new emphasis on the individual that has come about in part because technology allows you to market and target communication now to one person at a time.

Madelyn, a successful professional of about the same age, independently made similar observations:

When I started there was this expectation that the manager knew what was supposed to be done and would tell you what to do. I remember when I first encountered a manager who was interested in what I had to say it almost took me by surprise. The other aspect that I think has occurred during the same time period is that we've come from a place where the solution appeared simple because the problem appeared simple, whereas today I think people are much more aware of the complexity of the problems being addressed. And you can't address problems with unilateral thinking anymore, it doesn't work. Democratic? I would not choose that word, I would choose the word cooperative, coordinated. It has to do with coming to decisions with all voices heard.

Navigating by Personal Values

But being an usonic leader does not mean being one of the gang. Being connected and caring does not change the fact that a leader stands distinctly apart in terms of accountability. Quinn's HBR article claims, "when leaders do their best work, they don't copy anyone. They draw on their own values and capabilities."¹⁶ Madelyn appreciates collaborative approaches, but also noted that much of what a leader does is in the quiet of her own heart.

There are certain things you do all by yourself. You have to think about every individual and how they fit – that's a very hard task to do, and you have to do it alone. Once you understand then you may go out and seek advice and even talk with the individual, but you've got to do a lot of thinking on your own. Then you've got to decide how you are going to act in a particular setting – very hard to do at first. In the end you're the one who has to say is this how I want to act – if advice isn't consistent with who you are, it's no good to you.

Bob, who leads about 30 employees in a highly creative enterprise that relies heavily on collaboration, told me, "You've got to be willing to make decisions, execute, and be clear about that." What sets leaders apart and makes them leaders is that they do more than follow instructions – they make choices and take responsibility for the consequences. Without a set of values to guide these choices, they prove more or less useless as leaders.

Ann considers herself an old-fashioned leader who cares about "making sure everyone's heading west and making sure the numbers come out right." But, she says, "What really

¹⁶ Quinn, pg 80.

can make or break whether that works is how you treat other people. What is your moral compass, what will you do to get a customer?" She referenced the business scandals of the last decade:

We've seen leaders who were on covers of all these magazines ten years ago; have they endured? The guys going behind bars, well, their ability to meet the bottom line was there all right, but what happened to their moral compass?

Usonic leaders have caring at the base of their ethics, not to avoid jail, but for its own sake. Bob told me that he gives workshops on "servant leadership" and sometimes encounters the 'what will this get me?' attitude.

One young guy came up to me to ask a question after a workshop and he was kind of hemming and hawing. I finally said to him, 'I think what you're asking me is will this get me promoted? I don't know, but that's a terrible reason to do it, and even if it worked, it wouldn't be worth it. There are a dozen ways to get promoted much more easily than practicing this. Take it on because it inspires you. Then, even if you get fired, you still will have this practice you value.'

Usonic leadership is not just about adding values to business, the lesson that seems to have been drawn from these corporate crimes. An article in the summer of 2005 in Leader to Leader magazine concluded:

We've all read about companies that have been toppled because their leaders didn't know how to incorporate values into their business practices and processes. These companies were led by managers that had a 'what's in it for me?' attitude, and as a result they brought their employees, their families, and their futures to financial ruin.¹⁷

Usonic leaders are not trying to stiffen their moral fiber to succeed in business, they are trying to succeed in business because they are up to something even bigger. Madelyn told me:

What I perceive in today's best leaders is that they are aware of their own impact, of the company's impact, and that they really have a desire for doing something that will create a better world, as well as a profit.

Usonic leaders get their bearings from integrity with the values they feel on a plane that lies somewhere beneath the bottom line, and they take more responsibility than they have to, not less. For example, Fatima mentioned that as a leader she takes on the obligation to practice the excellence she preaches. "You want to be someone people listen to not because they have to because of your position, but because they want to hear what you have to say." But Bob adds that "integrity is not just 'walk the talk.' Integrity is kind

¹⁷ Herb Baum, "Transparent Leadership" pg 41, Leader to Leader no. 37 Summer 2005.

intention.” In the following statement, he takes responsibility over and above the minimum traditionally required for leadership in a couple of different ways:

As a leader, you need to realize that even when you aren't intending to communicate, you are communicating. I very much believe in Robert Greenleaf's servant leader model. You have to be a person who mitigates risks and provides all the tools and environment you can to potentiate. To accept leadership is a tremendous act of responsibility, the real commitment to the other person, to say 'I agree to do this for you.'

Caring

Kindness is nice of course, and people are free to draw lines all over the place if the regular old bottom line doesn't satisfy them. But surely caring is a fashionable ruffle on leadership, not intrinsic to it, and perhaps even inappropriate attire for the contact sport of business? Perhaps it even encourages disrespect and invites exploitation?

I don't think so. Take a minute to think of the last time you felt truly cared for and nurtured by someone in a way that made a difference for you. (Really stop reading and remember.) Is that person in any danger of being taken advantage of by you? Confusion arises when fear of causing offense, which is not a powerful value, or of worrying about one's own reputation, is associated with "caring." In fact, consumers and employees want authentic, caring, usonic leadership, and will pay extra, so to speak, to get it. Imagine working for a boss like Bob:

Be in love with the people you lead, love being a qualitative space that you enter into with those people, a space of unlimited friendliness and compassion. Take joy in their joy, provide them plenty of space to be who they are. That's how I'd define love.

Cele Peterson, the owner and operator of a successful chain of women's clothing stores for over fifty years (in her nineties, she was still going to work every day) is another example of usonic leadership.

I have a particular different way I run my business that involves humor and caring. Caring is a big word around here. With humor and stories, you immediately disarm customers and they know they can trust you. Caring is our business. We have existed this many years because we care about the people that come in. We want our customers to walk out of here with the feeling that they rate – that they're outstanding, that they're different.¹⁸

Paradoxically, caring is a bottom-line issue. Benefits do accrue to usonic leaders. In a time when almost everything of value is commodified, marketers would not be

¹⁸ Interview, June 17, 2005.

increasingly reaching to attach those “priceless” qualities of social connection and human warmth with their products if this were not the case. The paradox is that caring is valued precisely because it is felt and practiced for its own sake, not in order to acquire profit or authority.

The Future is Usonic

Usonic leadership is not for the weak. Perhaps nothing requires more energy and strength than caring. I asked Bob to talk more about the concept of servant leadership.

There is a whole mystique around it, but I think it’s simpler than that. Be clear, pay attention, look deeply, be willing to enter a relationship with the people you are leading, be willing to put them before you. You can imagine what it took for MLK to say ‘even if we are beaten we won’t beat back and I am going to stand in the front.’ That’s servant leadership -- instead of backing up from the things you find unpleasant you say, ‘This is where the pain is, this is where I will go.’ Because you recognize that pain is where you will find the truth of the experience and the resolution of it. When you are willing to go there without armor on and without a weapon, you can transform that pain, and looking deeply you can see some root causes.

Usonic leaders recognize and develop others out of a freely-chosen commitment, a choice that reveals an emotional competence and ability to see and convey meaningfulness that we have not always required from leaders in the past but that will be increasingly vital to leadership success in the future, driven by demand. A study reported last year in the Harvard Business Review claimed that “emotional commitment,” which arises when workers value, enjoy and believe in what they do, has four times the power to affect performance as “rational commitment” based on professional or financial self-interest.

Some organizations are enjoying up to 20% higher levels of employee performance not because they pay more or provide better benefits but because they let each employee know how important they are to the success of the business, give them lots of opportunities to contribute, and help them believe in the worth and credibility of the organization.¹⁹

Thousands if not millions of imperfect but inspiring usonic leaders are already operating in significant positions throughout the world. Attention will probably begin to turn now from justifying usonic values to finding practical ways to cultivate their practice.

¹⁹ Leigh Buchanan, pg 20, HBR December 2004, vol 82 no. 12.