

SNAPSHOT

Insights into Leading Beyond the Ego

BY PROFESSOR TONY WALL



Background & Context

This Snapshot is the outcome from a Workshop event organised by the Washington Ethical Leadership Summit (WELS)¹ to explore the concept of Transpersonal Leadership². The Workshop consisted of a presentation by John Knights, the lead author of "*Leading Beyond The Ego: How to Become a Transpersonal Leader*" and Chairman of LeaderShape Global, which was used to seed and stimulate participation from the attendees. The Workshop was facilitated by Tony Wall³.

The event was attended by leaders from business, academia and not-for-profit organisations, hosted by Virginia International University, introduced by Ron Kovach, VP Academic affairs and sponsored by leading academic publishers, Routledge.

Note 1: The **Washington Ethical Leadership Summit** is a collaboration between Virginia International University, the University of Chester, and LeaderShape Global, and is sponsored by Routledge (part of the Taylor & Francis Group). WELS is an idea that invites you to be involved as part of an emerging community of practice.

Note 2: **Transpersonal Leaders** operate beyond their ego, continuing personal development and learning. They are radical, ethical and authentic while emotionally intelligent and caring. They create performance-enhancing and sustainable cultures. The journey to transpersonal leadership begins with raising awareness (of self, others and the world around them), learning to manage emotions, understanding which leadership style to use in which circumstance and to develop the right culture for the organisation. The advanced part of the journey helps leaders bring their values to full-consciousness, lead beyond their ego, improve their judgement and decision-making, and lead through purpose.

Note 3: **Professor Tony Wall** is an international leadership development innovator working across the UK, US and Australia, work for which he was awarded a prestigious National Teaching Fellowship Award. As Director of the International Thriving at Work Research Group, University of Chester UK, he leads three Santander International Research Excellence grants, and numerous practice impact projects, each of which focusing on "human thriving" in multiple cultural and ecological contexts. His consultancy and advisory work extends across multiple professional bodies to facilitate international impact (e.g. the European Mentoring and Coaching Council in Brussels; the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and Lapidus International – the words for wellbeing association).

Introduction

Leading in the context of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous landscape is a challenging feat – leaders may find it hard to know where the corner *is*, never mind what is *around* it. Think about how you would describe the biggest *leadership challenge* in your working lifetime. Is it the shifts in societal attitudes (for example, towards diversity and equality of opportunity)? Is it the expansion of the multigenerational organisation (spanning daughter, mother, grandmother, great grandmother)? Or is it the reach and depth of globalisation? In a recent workshop survey¹, participant's responses were split equally across each of these areas, significantly outweighing climate change, artificial intelligence and digital privacy.

In practice, it is all of these and more. Now, leaders are pressed for quick responses often with limited or conflicting information, where the reality of a situation may not be clear². And in some contexts, there may be people or agendas that can be at work to intentionally trip the leader up in order to gain or retain power, prestige, recognition, or reward³.

Such leadership responses however are ill-suited to contemporary landscapes: when there is a primary focus on self-image and self-gain, there are wider (typically negative) consequences on the wider landscape of practice⁴. Think of the example where a job move is primarily based on more money and might override what we know about the toxic work environment of the new organisational culture. Or undertaking your own evaluation of client interventions in order to gain more business from that client⁵.

This is the shift from leading with ego, that part of us all that is *nourished by self-image and self-gain* (thought to be part of a legacy of how the Neanderthals had to respond in their context), towards leading beyond the ego, where we bear a much broader set of stakeholders in mind when making decisions and taking action⁶. This is the realm of transpersonal leadership, that is, leading beyond the ego.

The problem is that it appears that we are still not necessarily creating and supporting such transpersonal leaders – just look at social media or the news, where unethical practices are shared on a daily basis, for example, where deals are struck between global companies to share personal data or to perhaps influence politic voting. As a response to this, a leadership event⁷ was therefore held to explore what it might mean to lead beyond the ego and how we might begin the transpersonal leadership journey. The key insights from that event are outlined in this Snapshot.



Insights into Transpersonal Leading

1. Images of ego and transpersonal leaders: how we recognise them
2. Ego as trickster: how we can be tricked by our ego
3. The pulse or purpose: how we connect with it, and how it develops
4. Touchstones, micro-moments, and ripples: what we do next

Images of Ego & Transpersonal Leading

So how do we make sense of that part of us interested in self-image and self-gain? What images come to mind to help us really identify with our egos? Is it a picture of us laying on a beach tanning our skin so we *look* healthy? Is it being the centre of attention at a party, or in the community, where we want people to notice us? Or maybe when we go to a family gathering and enjoy it when the younger people *look up to us*?

What about that feeling on the road when we experience 'road rage' when someone should not have crossed so quickly in front of *you*? Is it that feeling you get when you know that people believe that *you are the one* who is dependable? Or is it making sure that your name is listed on a paper?

Or what about in a meeting, that great feeling when *you have shown you know more than someone else*? Or those people who 'like the sound of their own voice'? Do *you* tell people *you* are number one in your class? These are all examples which illustrate and embody what the ego strives for, and feeds the ego.

What about when we talk and we start to notice how many times we talk about "me" or "I"? Indeed, some early perspectives in psychoanalysis remind us that when I start talking about "I", that moment where I claim something about myself – to not /trust it. Here, I'm masking something much more complex, and potentially protecting an image or pleasure associated with it⁸. Of course these may be images of when our ego is active, or maybe hyperactive, but what about leaders who lead beyond their ego? How do we make sense of that? Some notice the larger decisions and actions, such as:

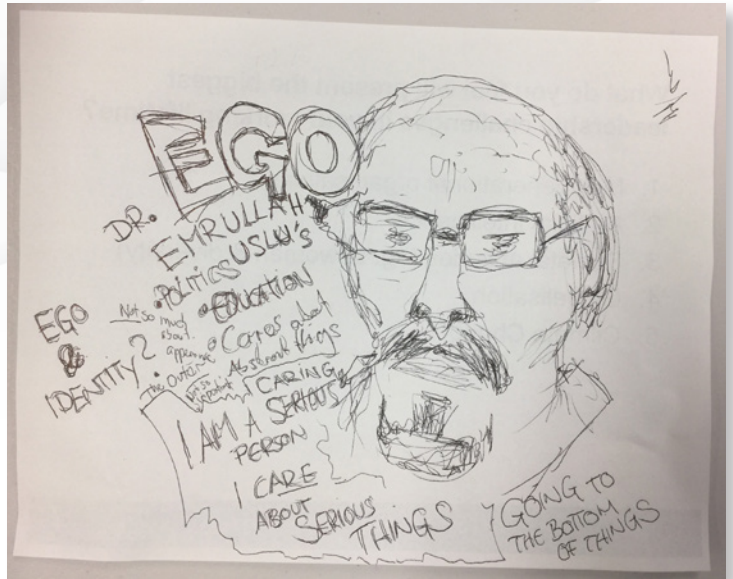
- The decision of previous US presidents to denuclearize, thereby reducing the health and safety risk to multiple communities and even countries
- The decision and continued work of Elon Musk (CEO of Tesla and various other high-tech organisations) to extend the affordability and reach of electric vehicles, thereby potentially reducing reliance on fossil fuels and associated impacts on the climate
- The decision and ongoing aspiration of Bill Gates to 'put a PC on every desk' to enable a variety of stakeholders to communicate, build communities, and extend education globally
- The decision and ongoing commitment by Stephen Hawking, (until his death on 14 March 2018), to raise awareness of science knowledge, threats of artificial intelligence, and commitment to social justice.

Yet some of us can also relate transpersonal decisions and actions, which take wider stakeholder needs into account, closer to our own daily lives. There were many examples of these, including conferences which bring stakeholders together to create dialogue and partnership working to



resolve problems, or to create new opportunities for students to connect with and strengthen relations with the local community. Indeed, such perspectives echo the United Nations sustainable development goals⁹. Some less famous examples, include:

- An individual's or organisation's decision to contribute their time, financial or other resources (e.g. such as blankets) to support a local charity, for example, refugee support – which supports the local community, local health and emergency services and the refugee community. Indeed, there was a real example shared in the workshop where a local hotel had donated over 400 blankets to the refugee community without any conditions or requests for reciprocal promotional agreements
- An individual's or organisation's decision to recycle or repurpose unused or unloved items, for the purposes of helping the planet
- A restaurant manager's decision to stop using plastic spoons in their restaurants, which has planetary interests in mind, along with the staff, customer's and potentially shareholders' interests
- A decision to support or contribute to the National Internet2 K20 Initiative, which brings "institutions and innovators from primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, libraries, and museums to extend new technologies, applications, middleware, and content to all educational sectors, as quickly and connectedly as possible"¹⁰, delivering a wide range of benefits to multiple stakeholders at different levels of education
- A decision by a US-based, national fast food restaurant to use employment practices which promote faith and family-oriented working, and supporting various charities and sports events in communities (and have a specific policy for not supporting charities and events which do not support civil rights), and to phase out the use of antibiotics in the chickens it uses.



Ego as Trickster

2

One of the inherent complexities of leading beyond the ego relates to the way in which the ego can mask and mislead in order to inform decision making and behaviour¹¹. And if our attention is drawn to multiple stakeholders, we might be retrospectively justifying a decision or action that is nourishing to our ego. This means it can be very difficult to know the driver because we are becoming more intentional in embracing different stakeholder perspectives over time.

Though the point is that we become more sensitised to such issues, one way to consider these tricky effects is to consider decisions and actions on a longer scale, which can prompt us to re-think and re-consider whether the decisions or actions we once upheld as transpersonal, are perhaps not.

For example, at one point in time we perhaps considered it was an inexpensive and unproblematic decision to dump plastic in the ocean? Perhaps we didn't think the risks of dumping debris in space were important? And perhaps we think the decision to develop electric cars was an effective way to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels to alleviate climate change?

Yet, we now know that plastic in the ocean is a globally significant issue which is not only toxic to oceanic ecosystems, but micro plastic particles are making it in to our own bodies. And we now know that the debris in space is creating major risks to space travel. And even more problematically, electric cars are still reliant on the extractive industries to produce the car and the highly toxic batteries (not to mention that the cars may also be using electric power produced by dirty fuel).

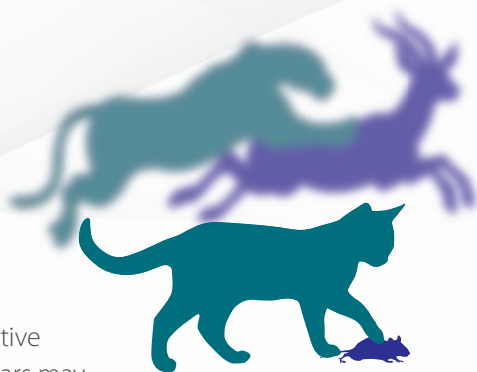
Indeed, each of the examples on the previous page could also be towards building or protecting self-image and self-gain. For example, the decision not to use straws may well be for the manager to help the store compete more effectively with other stores in the local area, thus securing a promotion in his next job move. Similarly, some of the practices of the fast food restaurant may have been to attract particular customers from a particular faith (and indeed, some of the practices have been heavily criticised for being discriminatory by other stakeholders).

Indeed, the most common stakeholder groups identified within the workshop were customers (double the number of respondents than the next stakeholder), staff, and the community. Interestingly, this reflects another tricky effect where the decision and action is skewed by a single stakeholder, which equally has some interesting effects.

A current example of this is the global drive to make education at all levels relevant to the job market. Here, teachers make major efforts and drive innovations to bring the students close to job opportunities, and minimise aspects of their experience which are either (a) not yet relevant and/or (b) it is not clear whether it is relevant or not¹². In the context of business education at least, this is a drive to train students to refine their sensitivities to their own self-image and self-gain, which (a) demotes the importance of collective working and benefit and (b) demotes the importance of dealing with the 'difficult knowledge' aspects of complexity¹³. As such, a laudable goal might be – inadvertently – working against the urgent need for sustainable development mindsets which need complex thinking skills¹⁴.

Yet some decisions and actions, for example related to charity work, though may be laudable, can reflect wider psychological wounds which drive actions to help gain in the sense of alleviating the pain of the wound. And in this sense, therefore, is vicariously working through a wider social purpose towards a self-gain.

One fruitful question that can be asked is: how do we choose which stakeholders to serve? There are long established processes which help decision makers here, linked to the idea of the 'triple bottom line'. But given the trickery of the ego, one way forward is to consider the United Nations' sustainable development goals, which can act as a guide to the multiple perspectives and stakeholders that might be influenced by a decision or action¹⁵. It can prompt self-awareness around where you are leaning, and can lead to exploratory dialogue with multiple stakeholders.



The Pulse of Purpose

One of the ways in which leading beyond the ego can emerge is to have a purpose in life and work which is beyond the ego or beyond self-image and self-gain. Results from the workshop indicated that most people thought that they have a purpose which is not clearly defined, some thought they had a clearly defined purpose, but nobody had never thought about it or thought it was pointless. Some of the key words used in the purpose statements are summarised in the table below.

| Action | Fulfilled | Legacy |
|---|---|--|
| Balance | Fully engaged | Listening |
| Best | Giving respect | Productive |
| Contribution/Contribute to self, family, community and peaceful society | Good name | Relationships |
| Decent living | Grow | Rewarding |
| Determined | Happy/happier, healthier | Share/Share compassion, creativity, talent |
| Do what is good for me | Help/Help neighbours/Help others to achieve | Be successful |
| Empowerment/Empowering students to achieve their goals | Impact | To speak out |
| Enhance democracy and tolerance | Improve | To teach/Always be willing to teach/ Transfer knowledge |
| Enjoy the path | Learn/Learning | |

In an experiential exploration of purpose, a number of dialogue points emerged:

A key point related to **how to define purpose**. Here, there seemed to be a variety of ways in which people experienced or understood purpose, with varying degrees of intensity and therefore varying degrees of motivation associated with it. Purpose was conceptualised (1) as a specific goal which is measurable (I will be become a CEO by the age of 40), (2) as a specific outcome (leave a legacy in my community), (3) a fuzzier idea or notion (I want to have impact), (4) as a continual process or experience (I want to grow, enjoy the path, or I yearn for finding or learning).

Visually, some people captured these aspects in words and others as images such as laying on a beach or in a fuzzier Venn diagram where the purpose is still forming from the intersecting elements. Indeed, this emergent process seemed to mobilise energy.

For the people in the workshop, most had developed ways of making sense of their own purpose in highly individualised ways that was meaningful to them, and it seemed that fuzziness was in itself a motivational characteristic of purpose. Indeed, one process which seemed to help make sense of the strength of purpose was knowing **when a purpose connects or feels 'right'**. Here, some people 'just knew' a purpose was right, linking it to an intuitive, bodily sensation rather than rational justification. In this sense, purpose – at least for some – was an embodied phenomenon which resonated inside the body (e.g. the gut) and outside the body (e.g. living out action at work or in the community).

At the same time, there was also a dialogue around the extent to which purpose is **fixed or changing**. For some, as a fuzzy and embodied phenomenon, it was prone to movement and so would refer to it as a purpose "at this juncture" or "right now" – it was mobilising and meaningful at that moment in life. Indeed, previous research has indicated the power of 'earth shattering' moments which can shift a person's understanding of the world and themselves. For others, there was a sense that their purpose had "always been with me and always will", perhaps instilled as a child by a loved one or role model in the community. It seems both fixed and fluid purposes can generate meaning and mobilising effects for the individuals involved.

Even after this dialogue, we also noticed **echoes of ego trickery**, where there were potentially explicit purpose statements where self-gain and self-image were seemingly in the driving seat. Examples included 'doing what is good for me', 'having a good name', and 'being rewarded'. Although these could be interpreted in different ways, they can also speak directly to the ego, and illustrate how easy it is for the ego to walk centre stage as we walk our leadership journeys.

Touchstones, Micro-moments & Ripples

4

Another way of developing an approach to leadership which leads beyond the ego draws on values as guiding lights towards ethical or stakeholder-based thinking and action. In practice, we have multiple values, but one approach is to identify and develop touchstone values, and use them as practical standards by which to judge own thinking and action.

Within the workshop, "integrity", "fairness" and "trustworthiness" were the most commonly stated touchstones values, closely followed by "vulnerability" and "resilience". Such concepts were seen to be interlinked and complex to implement in practice. For example, one leadership challenge highlighted the difficulty of being a leader and seeing how others' own emotional or behavioural patterns can be damaging to that person (or others around them). This in itself demonstrating a resonance or connection with the lives of others – a transpersonal concern.

One leadership response was to reveal one's own vulnerability in the context to share how they themselves had tackled a similar pattern – and in doing so, making a connection with own difficulties and challenges. In practice, sharing vulnerabilities can be a powerful leadership practice which creates an environment where people able to share openly, honestly, with mutual care, and demonstrating an "altruistic love" towards others.

At the same time, there was a recognition that it might still be culturally inappropriate in some settings to behave like this – at least until there is a cultural change perhaps initiated by the (transpersonal) leader. Indeed, "altruistic love" was the least referred to touchstone value.

In particular, thinking of practice as a series of micro-moments – those moments which are personally symbolic or significant in some way – these can be utilised to practically live out these touchstone values. For example, within the moment, to use the touchstone values to:

- Help to assess the quality of our thinking and action by our own standard and
- Help to decide what action to take by those standards.

Examples of how participants at the workshop utilised these ideas and put them into the context of their own lives are summarised in the table below.

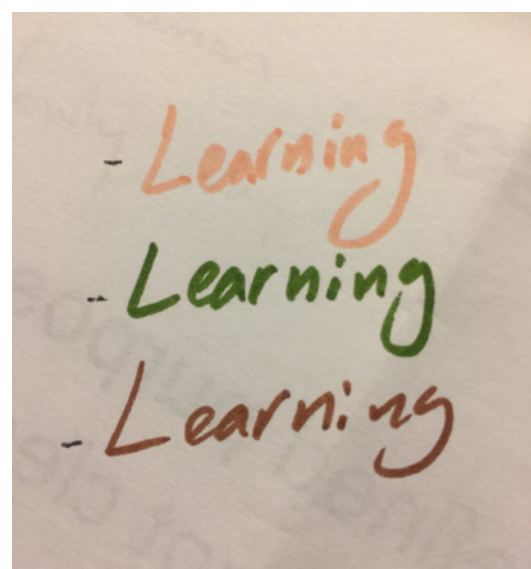
| | |
|---|--|
| Being patient with the kids in the car | Look at the bigger picture before responding |
| Donating and contributing to a fundraising campaign | Not to interrupt others when talking |
| With graduation this week I will be resilient and create an atmosphere which stakeholders will remember | Capture more reflections |
| Be more patient in instances of stress, confusion, or unpleasantness | Be patient and don't jump to conclusions |
| Reflect on own purpose and write it up | Be more forgiving and patient |
| Create opportunities to listen to others, especially people I will work with | Counting to 10 before responding |
| Take/Make more rest | |

Conclusion

Many of the actions (or designed micro-moments) referred to above directly or indirectly point to patience or slowing down our thinking and acting to adjust the impact individuals have on others. Although not explicit, perhaps this is a momentary dedication towards a form of 'altruistic love' and compassion which contemporary working life dampens or renders culturally inappropriate. Yet it is a powerful line of flight for leaders and followers across the globe as well as the stakeholders they come to impact in a more sustainable approach to work and life.

Perhaps this sort of 'altruistic love' can be likened to the sense of unadulterated and intrinsic curiosity we can experience when we learn something or want to learn something. Indeed, the image of learning (on the right) – which is depicted in different colours by a participant – perhaps amplifies the importance of a commitment to learning and continual development in all of its forms and its multiple roles and functions in life. Perhaps learning has a special role in the context of leading beyond the ego – linking to three aspects outlined above?

One of the functions of learning seems to be related to the leadership awareness and development of **purpose and values**. Here, when learning generates new knowledge structures and associated awareness, it can refine or re-define a leader's own understandings of purpose and values. For example, seeing the world in connections and webs rather than hierarchical structures can provide new insight into how one might lead¹⁶.



A second function might be related to developing the detailed and nuanced **noticing** capacities associated with transpersonal leadership which in part guard against the trickster characteristics of the ego. As we learn more in this sphere, and adding to the complexity of our understanding of life and work, we can gain a more intricate understanding of how we – and our egos – operate to trick us. This might involve momentarily *playing with the possibility* that each action has an ego aspect to it – and being comfortable in exploring those thoughts and the implications on others.

And perhaps a third function of learning relates to creating a psychological and physiological environment in and around the body where the mind and body are in a constant movement, where change and adaptability build capacities for **resilience**. Here, learning is part of a leadership journey which persists even when times are tough or even unbearable – when we reveal vulnerability whether we like it or not – and becomes the fuel for continually living a life which strives for more balanced and compassionate world which points towards a more sustainable world.

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Professor Tony Wall is Founder and Director of the International Centre for Thriving at Work at the University of Chester in the UK, institutional lead for the global Inter-University Sustainable Development Research Programme, and a National Teaching Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has won multiple Santander International Research Excellence Awards and Erasmus+ grants to collaborate in projects across the globe. As a co-founder of the Washington Ethical Leadership Summit, he works with a vast range of practitioners, crossing the fields of computer science, stem cell research, and economics, to generate dialogue around the ethics and sustainability.

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