

LEADERSHIP IN A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY (Based on the example of the Usui Shiki Ryoho community of practice)

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the phenomenon of leadership in the context of spiritual community. The description of the structure of spiritual community is proposed, the specificity of the manifestation of the phenomenon of leadership in such communities in contrast to other social situations and groups is determined. On the basis of comparative analysis, a new point of view on the phenomenon of leadership, its definition and the basis for analyzing special cases of manifestation of this phenomenon in order to increase the effectiveness of the group process of goal achievement is proposed.

Keywords

Leadership, meaning, Reiki, Usui Shiki Ryoho, spiritual tradition, meaning-volitional impulse, spiritual community.

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1. Introduction

The 20th century, among other things, can be characterized as an age of mixing spiritual and religious traditions: the ideological “rebellion” of Western youth in the second half of the last century led first to an increased interest in and then to the wide spread in the West of a large number of Eastern spiritual teachings, both traditional (Buddhism, Hinduism) and those that have not yet acquired the features and aspects of tradition. This trend clearly manifested the phenomenon of “spiritual community” - a group of people, from relatively small to millions of participants in many countries of the world, united by what can be called spiritual practice. Such groups, on the one hand, have similarities with traditional religious denominations and on the other - since their formation was motivated by the desire to find an alternative to these denominations - have had to give their members more freedom, both in a behavioral and ideological sense.

Nevertheless, such a community is a social phenomenon and therefore, can be the subject of sociological research. From our point of view, the phenomenon of leadership in such communities is of particular interest, since they, having emerged outside of tradition, are characterized by much more flexible structures and as a consequence, make more demands on their leaders: without reliance on structure, the leader has to focus much more on relations with followers.

In this article, we will look at the community that has formed around the movement known as Reiki (or more strictly, Usui Shiki Ryoho). Having appeared in the United States from Japan in the late 1930s in the form of small groups of people interested

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in spiritual healing (mostly Japanese living in Hawaii), this movement spread rapidly around the world and by the end of the 20th century had millions of followers in many countries.

2. Relevance of the topic

The topic of leadership is now more relevant than ever. It appeared in management discourse in the 1980s, thanks to such coryphaeus of management science as Peter Drucker (1909-2005), Abraham Zaleznik (1924-2011) and John Kotter (1947). Drucker (2004) believed that the key qualities of a charismatic leader are no different from the requirements for an effective manager. However, another authority in the field, Zaleznik (1992), showed that aspects lying in the areas of imagination, creativity and ethical behavior are more inherent in leaders than in managers. Kotter (2001) supported the idea of the differences between management and leadership in his article “What Leaders Really Do” where he noted that “a manager must be able to overcome difficulties...a leader helps to successfully deal with change” and “managers control and solve problems...leaders...must motivate and inspire their associates”. Summarizing these opinions, we will allow ourselves to give the following definition: leadership is a phenomenon that requires the presence of a leader, followers and purpose, where the leader's activity is carried out in relation to people, involves the manifestation of imagination, creativity and ethical behavior and is particularly relevant in times of change.

Obviously, this phenomenon is becoming especially in demand all over the world, having in mind such global crises as the COVID-19 pandemic, the existing level of geopolitical tension, the destruction of established relations between states and logistics chains. And the relevance does not depend on the scale: the leadership deficit is felt at all levels, from the first persons of states to relatively small commercial companies or non-profit organizations, the risks for which have seriously increased due to the global challenges described above. Pincus (2024) notes that “The leadership concept has remained a primary focus in both the private and public sectors, representing the single largest human resources outside of salary and benefits... only 11 percent of companies rate themselves as having a strong leadership team”. And a recent study of crisis leadership using the example of the fight against coronavirus in America suggests that “The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global health emergency, stands as a stark reminder of leadership vulnerabilities in the face of complex challenges ... effective leadership has become an existential imperative, towards navigating organizations and people through challenges and trying times towards success and development” (Adigwe *et al.*, 2024).

In our opinion, the study of leadership on the example of a young spiritual community makes it possible to identify certain features of this phenomenon that are not so clearly expressed in the long-established structures of traditional religions, public authorities or large commercial corporations due to the presence in the latter of managerial hierarchies and management systems that prevent the manifestations of leadership or replace them with formal authority.

3. Reiki, the tradition origins' history

According to the only official version of the Reiki story published by a Lineage Bearer, included in the so-called The Blue Book, written by Phyllis Lei Furumoto and

Paul David Mitchell (1985) for the Reiki Alliance in 1985, Dr. Mikao Usui was the founder of Reiki as natural healing system. His quest started with the question of one of his students, asking if he accepted the contents of the Bible literally, specifically the part about Jesus healing the sick. It took Dr. Usui a long journey to find the answer. The story says that after a long quest that took him many years he went through very intense inner experience in the end of a 21-day meditation on top of a mountain. As a result, he received the capacity to heal people by laying his hands on. He was practicing healing for some time after that and later also started to teach people his system which became known as Usui Shiki Ryoho or the Usui System of Natural Healing. So, he became the leader of the new spiritual movement having been recognized first by his patients and then – by the students.

“When Usui’s life was drawing to a close, he recognized Dr. Hayashi (Chujiro Hayashi, a retired Naval officer and his student – author’s note) as the Master of Reiki and charged him with keeping the essence of his teaching intact. Dr. Hayashi ... founded a clinic in Tokyo where people could come for treatment and learn Reiki” (Furumoto & Mitchell, 1985).

Right before his death Dr. Hayashi recognized his American student Hawayo Takata as his successor in Reiki. Before the Second World War started Mrs. Takata brought Reiki to The United States of America, where she lived, practiced and taught The Usui System of Natural Healing up till her death in December 1980.

In this part of the history, it is important for our topic to note that the founder of the system Dr. Mikao Usui became a leader for his followers by demonstrating his gift of healing and his ability to pass that gift on to his students (which meant that he was recognized as a leader by his patients and students). For all the other Grand Masters starting with Dr. Chujiro Hayashi as the next Lineage Bearer of the Usui System, recognition was needed not only on the part of their students, but also on the part of their predecessors. The story goes that Dr. Usui “recognized Dr. Hayashi as the Master of Reiki and charged him with keeping the essence of his teaching intact”. And many years later Dr. Hayashi before his transition was “giving his final words and recognizing Mrs. Takata as his successor in Reiki” (Furumoto & Mitchell, 1985).

4. The structure of the spiritual community

Before we look at the phenomenon of leadership in a spiritual community, it is worth talking a little about its structure. Reiki originated in Japan, a country whose culture has very deep Buddhist roots. It would be logical to expect a spiritual community that originated in this culture to have corresponding characteristics. The Buddhist spiritual community has at its core the “three jewels”, which are “the supreme objects to be honored and respected. The first object is the Buddha, the one who attained and showed the path to enlightenment, ... The second object is the precious Teaching (in Sanskrit, Dharma), which aims at changing the inner mind. The third object is the spiritual community (in Sanskrit Sangha), whose members listen to learn the spiritual teachings and develop Buddhist spiritual and moral values...” (Tenzin, 2018). Thus, on the outer contour, a spiritual community should include three aspects: the teacher, the teaching and the community of disciples. Here it may be appropriate to draw an analogy with Plato's ideas (1994), formulated in the dialog “Philebus”, where he says that everything that exists in the universe can be described with the help of four “genera”: the limitless; that which has a limit; the mixture of these two and their cause. Applying this apparatus to the structure of a spiritual community, we can refer the community to the limitless (both in

terms of the potential number of its members and in terms of the possibilities of perceptions and interpretations of the teachings), the teacher to that which has a limit (because it is he who sets the rules and framework) and the teachings to the mixture of the first two (if we consider the teachings not as formalized knowledge, but as a living process of interaction between teacher and students). As for the cause, we will discuss this issue a little later.

5. Leadership and recognition

We will allow ourselves to make some generalization by saying that any spiritual community had a founder - someone who discovered and embodied in himself a certain wisdom, teaching, transcendent knowledge. And the emergence of such a leader's followers or disciples meant that they recognized and acknowledged the presence of these qualities in the being of the leader. Such recognition can happen through preaching, through action (for example, the first to recognize transcendent knowledge in Mikao Usui were his patients), perhaps through simple presence.

An interesting example of the latter is the story of the origin of the tradition of Zen Buddhism: "One of the parables says that once Buddha stood before people on the Peak of Vultures. The people were waiting for him to begin teaching the dharma, but Buddha did not utter a word. Quite some time had passed and he had a flower in his hand. The eyes of all the people in the crowd were turned toward him, but no one understood anything. Then one monk looked at Buddha with shining eyes and smiled. And Buddha said: "I have the treasure of the vision of perfect Dharma, the magic spirit of nirvana, free from the impurities of reality and I have given this treasure to Mahakashyapa". In that instant, Mahakashyapa experienced awakening: this state was conveyed to him by the Buddha directly, without instruction in oral or written form" (Alexandrova, 2018). Despite the lack of instruction, the ritual action was performed: Buddha said that he had "handed over the treasure to Mahakashyapa" and handed him the flower he held in his hands. This was an act of recognition on the part of the teacher. Thus, we can say that in a spiritual community that acquires the features of tradition (formalized teachings, the role of the Lineage Bearer) the proper context for the manifestation of leadership is the recognition of the leader by both the predecessor and the followers.

6. Leadership as a phenomenon

Above we have suggested a definition of leadership based on the opinions of experts in the field of management. If we stop looking at management as a context and go to a purely phenomenological description and take as an axiom that any human action is aimed at achieving some goal, we will see that leadership can manifest itself only if three factors are present: a leader, a follower (or followers) and a goal. Let us also take as a basis of the definition that within the framework of the discussion of leadership the actions of followers should be voluntary, i.e. we will remove from consideration the situations of coercion and/or the manifestation of power determined by the belonging of the leader and followers to any hierarchical social structure. Then the manifestation of leadership can be stated in the case when the leader performs a certain action aimed at inducing followers to do what he/she suggests and followers react accordingly. If the followers' reaction was not there or it was not what the leader expected, it means that leadership did not happen.

If we take as another axiom that a person never acts without a goal, we will inevitably come to the conclusion that a voluntary action is an action based on the assumption that it brings the actor closer to a goal that is important to him. It is this that gives us the basis for saying that for leadership to manifest itself, it is not enough to have a leader and a follower, we also need a purpose. However, purpose always exists in a certain context.

For example, in a social context, according to Sorokin's theory (1992) of social stratification, goals can be formulated as movement upward along four axes: power, wealth, education, prestige. In the context of spiritual and religious search, the goal can be self-actualization, enlightenment, getting to paradise after death, etc., depending on the doctrine a person follows. Purpose and context also define the boundaries within which leadership can manifest itself. For example, the pursuit of social goals (e.g., financial) may lead a person to recognize a successful entrepreneur as a leader and follow his advice on how to organize a business, but he is unlikely to heed the same person's advice on diet or family relationships. While some spiritual teachings have strict rules related to diet or family relationships and a spiritual leader may require his followers to follow these rules and they will behave accordingly.

So, we have arrived at the fact that leadership in its purest form manifests itself as a relationship between two or more people, one of whom occupies a leadership position. The actions of the followers in this relationship are voluntary, that is, the followers believe that these actions will help them achieve a goal that is important to them. And this goal makes sense in a certain context, which, in turn, forms the boundaries of possible actions of followers made under the influence of the leader.

7. Leadership in the context of Usui Shiki Ryoho

By the end of 1980, the spiritual community that had formed around the practice of Usui Shiki Ryoho was as follows: it had thousands of followers, mostly living in the United States and Canada. The leader of the community, who held the title of Grand Master, was a woman named Hawayo Takata. The community consisted of first- and second-degree practitioners as well as Reiki masters. The first- and second-degree students differed from each other in the way they practiced, the master level gave the ability to teach others how to practice the first and second degree. Only the Grand Master was authorized to initiate someone to the level of Reiki Master. Hawayo Takata had been in this role for over forty years, was the undisputed leader in the Reiki practitioner community and was very much respected by its members. In this way, all three aspects of the spiritual community were present: the teacher, who embodied the spiritual lineage coming from the founder of the System, the teachings (the form of which was structured by Mrs. Takata for different levels of learning) and the community of practice. The goal pursued by the participants in this community was physical and spiritual healing. It was in this context that Hawayo Takata's leadership was manifested in the relationship between her and the members of the Reiki community: her students and her students' students followed her guidance in practicing the Usui System of Natural Healing.

8. Leadership as a meaning-volitional impulse

When we consider leadership in more familiar contexts, it can look like a purely social phenomenon, such as when a military leader leads his army to victory or an economic leader leads his company to prosperity and wealth. In a spiritual context, things

are far less clear-cut, since categories such as spiritual development, enlightenment, spiritual healing or life after death are not part of everyday human experience and their goal-setting requires faith, which substitutes for a clear, experience-based picture of a desired future. This is why the example of leadership in the spiritual community is so important to us. To understand the phenomenon more deeply, we need to understand what causes this faith. It is questionable whether the charisma of the leader can be the only basis for it.

As an example, we suggest considering a situation that arose in the context of the Reiki tradition immediately after the death of the third Grand Master, Hawayo Takata. Recall that when her teacher Chujiro Hayashi died, he publicly recognized her as his successor among his students. Similarly, according to Reiki history, when the founder of the System, Mikao Usui, died, he left the responsibility for her future to Dr. Hayashi. In Mrs. Takata's case, no such transfer occurred - she died suddenly while her granddaughter Phyllis Lei Furumoto, who later became the fourth Grand Master of the Usui System, was in another country. This led to a "leadership gap" in the Reiki practitioner community.

According to Mrs. Furumoto's recollection (2006), at this time other Reiki masters (Mrs. Takata initiated 22 masters in her lifetime) called her and these conversations were as follows: "... people called me and said, "Well, your grandmother is gone and you are her successor. What are you going to do?" And basically, I said "I don't know"". A year and a half after the death of the third Grand Master, there was a meeting of the masters initiated by her and it was at this meeting that Phyllis Furumoto was recognized by the Reiki Master community as the next Lineage Bearer. She recalled: "The recognition of Takata Sensei's other students was very important... They knew exactly how much experience I had in Reiki. Still, they were willing to say, "I recognize you"" (Furumoto, 2006). These events give us a very interesting field to analyze. In a traditional situation, when a teacher recognizes one of his students as his successor in the presence of his other students and they agree, this may look like a social contract or a display of leadership on the part of the teacher - the students obey him just as they have done on other matters related to teaching or community. But if there is no such public recognition by the teacher, the question arises: what exactly is it that the rest of the students are recognizing by naming one of their own as the next leader?

In order to answer this question, we will propose to define leadership as a meaning-volitional impulse that has its own existence. Will is present in this definition as a sign that this impulse has the energy that allows it to manifest itself through people's actions and relationships and meaning makes us realize that it is not a blind will, not just an impulse spreading along a random "trajectory", but a purposeful effort that has a certain goal in a certain context. In other words, we argue that the next Grand Master would have appeared anyway because the impulse had not run out and would therefore have found a person through whom it could manifest itself to realize the meaning embedded in it. Another quotation from the Fourth Grand Master's article may be cited in support of this idea: "It is not the work of the Grand Master or Lineage Bearer to be a dictator or a guru, but to be a focal point for the energy of the system as it meets the student's real world practice in a given time/space context" (Furumoto, 2006).

Another confirmation of this idea is the Reiki tradition's treatment of its own history (Furumoto & Mitchell, 1985). It mentions rather simple life situations, such as Dr. Usui's response to a student's question, Mrs. Takata's illness and healing and Reiki community meetings, in the complete absence of the historical information familiar to the Western reader, such as dates and important social events. This approach echoes Martin

Heidegger's understanding of history, according to which such history “acts as a kind of 'elicitation' and 'discovery' of the meaning of the past for the present, which is accomplished in historical being” (Gubman & Anufrieva, 2021) and the discovery of meaning does not require dates and small, inconspicuous events are sometimes much more filled with being than wars, dynasties' changes or economic crises. Perhaps the first lines of the essay on the succession of the Japanese teacher Dogen (2017) have a similar meaning: “All buddhas among themselves necessarily transmit the Law by inheritance from buddha to buddha, all patriarchs among themselves necessarily transmit the Law by inheritance from patriarch to patriarch”. The real history of the spiritual tradition consists of events connected with the transmission of the Law, but by the Law we understand here not information formalized in any way, but teaching as (returning to Plato's four genera by means of which all things can be described) the mixing of that which has a limit with the limitless (teacher with pupils) and the cause of which is the meaning-volitional impulse.

9. Conclusion

Leadership in a social context can manifest itself in many different forms. Above we postulated the need for a leader, followers and purpose. Although, for example, in the group dynamics of a children's collective, the goal uniting all the participants of the collective may not be traced. In such a situation, we can assume the action of some archetype of group behavior of people, the purpose of which is the survival of the group. In this case, it is logical that the strongest, most experienced and/or knowledgeable person becomes the leader.

Adult teams tend to be united by a common purpose. To formulate the first definition of leadership we took advantage of the social context of the organization and defined the phenomenon of leadership in contrast to management, saying that the activity of the leader is carried out in relation to the people whom the leader influences and leads to a certain goal. This activity involves imagination, creativity and ethical behavior on the part of the leader and is particularly relevant in times of change. However, it is obvious that in a situation where change is coming, not every member of a group with imagination, creativity and ethical behavior will become a leader. On the one hand, the aforementioned archetypes continue to work and strength, experience and knowledge play an important role. We cannot but recognize that communication skills - the ability to persuade and influence emotions - play an equally important role.

All these characteristics can be key in a situation of democratic elections or less formalized analogues of such - when a group of people decides to recognize someone as a leader in the context of performing certain tasks. Analyzing a spiritual community gives us the opportunity to highlight an aspect of leadership that is invisible in other social situations. Something is handed down from the previous leader of the community to his successor and this handing down must be recognized by both the predecessor and the community. We took a further step by assuming that this “something” has an existence of its own and called it the meaning-volitional impulse. Taking this as a hypothesis and extending it to any social situation where leadership is manifested, we can say that the key questions for such a situation (both for the leader and for the followers) are: a) what exactly is the meaning realized through the behavior of the leader and the followers? and b) why is this person the leader? In other words, what can the leader do in the context of achieving the goal that his followers cannot?

Application of the proposed structure to any group of people united by a common goal will help to determine what is the reason for their activity (what is the meaning-volitional impulse and how it is realized) and based on this, to build the right relationship between the leader and the rest of the group members. Focusing on the realized meaning and proper distribution of roles and responsibilities will help to make the process of achieving any goal much more effective.

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