

LC WHITE PAPER SERIES

THE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE A BRIEF HISTORY

Bob Anderson

Founder, Chairman & Chief Development Officer

LEADERSHIP
CIRCLE®

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BASEMENT BEGINNINGS

I was planning to be an engineer. My dad was an engineer. One of his ways of being in relationship with me was through work. We had an entire steel fabrication shop in the basement of our home. I spent my young years with blueprints, cutting torches, grinder, welders and more. I loved it! I planned on building things the rest of my life.

Then the Jesuits got a hold of me. They did their job. I found myself on the compulsory Junior-year weekend retreat. To this day, I do not know exactly what happened, but I left with a group of jerks, jocks and potheads, and returned with a closely knit group of friends—friends who shared a deep connection to each other and to the Profound. This was my first people development experience. It was the most powerful event of my young life. The next school day, I knocked on the Principal's door and said to Father Libens, "Father, I don't know what happened over the weekend, but it seems important. I want to pursue it, but don't know how or even where to begin. Can you help me with that?" He smiled and said, "Come on in. Let's talk." Father Libens was my first coach.

HOW WILL THIS COME TOGETHER?

I spent my college years studying, Economics, Statistics, and Business. Yet, all of my spare time was spent in some form of personal, spiritual and people development. I did not know how these two focus areas of my life would merge, but I trusted that one-day, they would.

A few years later, I launched my career managing a livestock and pet food plant—I made hog food and dog food. The facility I managed was the most technologically advanced feed manufacturing plant in the country at the time it was built—which is code for nothing worked as it should. We were in start-up and it was chaos. I was in my element. Technical problems were everywhere. My basement days served me well.

One night, working late to get the plant back on-line, I was inside a rail car unloading some much-needed feed ingredients. When I finished, I propped my feet up inside the hopper bottom to catch my breath. Out of my mouth, unrehearsed and un-reflected, came the words, "I am not becoming who I am." I spoke them out loud and with such inner authority that it startled me. I knew in that moment I was speaking a truth I could not ignore.

I began to sift the database of my life. I knew life had been speaking to me. It had been leaving clues as to what I was to do with my life. I began to write down, describe, and distill learnings from the times in my life that I felt most alive (excited, deeply moved, engaged). I did the same for the times I felt least alive (bored, restless, disengaged). The themes of my life became all too clear. I cared about the development of people from the inside out. I wanted to help people grow and develop emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

Now I was really stuck. "How do I get from making hog and dog food to helping people grow and develop? The only way I knew how to pursue my fragile sense of purpose was to be a Priest, but celibacy was definitely not an option. A few months later I attended my first company sponsored management training. There I met a team of people who were doing what I wanted to do. They recommended I enroll in a Masters Program in Organizational Development, which it just so happened, began the following week. I did not know anything about Organizational Development, but I found myself in class the next week.

INTEGRATING THE WORK OF GIANTS

Early in my career as an internal Organization Development Director, I set about to learn from some of the very best in the field. This choice put me in close working relationship with people like Peter Block, Peter Senge, Robert Fritz, Marv Weisbord, Clay Laugherty, David Whyte, Robert Kegan, and a host of others. I had the good fortune to be learning from and being mentored by the best of the best. What I noticed, however as I got deeper into the thinking of each of these thought leaders, was that the field of Leadership and Organization Development is a random collection of really great stuff. The field is littered with useful theories, frameworks, models and research that is largely unconnected and unintegrated. I am not sure why, perhaps it was just out of personal interest, or it stemmed from my basement days of loving to see things come together, but I set out to find the threads that wove all this powerful theory and research together.

Over a 20-year period, an integrated model emerged. It became a Unified Theory of Leadership. It integrated into one coherent framework most of the best theory and research that has emerged in the field of leadership and psychology over the last half-century. As the Unified Theory evolved, I began using it as the basis for my work with senior leaders and with senior leadership team. The work was very deep, life changing, and yet connected to the business of running a business. The inside-out work that I had longed to do with leaders was translating into higher levels of leadership effectiveness and, as a result, increased business performance.

CONCEIVING THE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

At this time, I needed to use a whole set of assessments in order to help leaders gain insight that was both practical enough improve their effectiveness and deep enough to help them shift quickly and sustainably. I could not find an optimal set of assessments because, like the leadership field, these assessments were largely unrelated to and unintegrated with each other. However, I had learned how to work with the leader within the context of the Unified Theory. This helps them connect the dots from the various assessments and thereby get powerful insight. But, I wasn't satisfied. I could not find an assessment that was capable of working with leaders at the level of depth at which we work working. I also could not find an assessment that fit seamlessly with the unified framework I had developed. So, I naively set out to create one.

A few months into the process of creating what is now the Leadership Circle Profile, I was having a conversation with a colleague, David Womeldorff, who was certified to use most of the big 360 assessments in the field. He said to me, "Bob, the world does not need another leadership 360. They are a dime a dozen. It is a mature market. I don't understand why you want to waste your time doing this." I said, "Well, you may be right, but I can't find one out there that I like, nor one that gets to the level of depth at which I am working with my clients."

And so I kept working. When I started, I was simply creating an assessment that I could use in my personal consulting practice. I had no earthly idea, at that time, of what would eventually emerge around this tool. I was simply doing what I do—what I learned to do in the basement: Build things I am interested in building, integrate the best of unintegrated stuff, and then use it with my clients. What emerged from this process still surprises me—The Leadership Circle, a global company with thousands of users.

One of my early clients for the newly developed Leadership Circle Profile (LCP) was The University of Notre Dame Executive Education Department. The Leadership Circle Profile was brand new, and Notre Dame took a risk bringing it into their recently created flagship program, the Executive Integral Leadership program. I remember coming out of my coaching room at the end of the first day of conducting debriefs with leaders in this program using the Leadership Circle Profile. Dave Womeldorff (the colleague who, years earlier, told me I was wasting my time developing yet another 360) was walking down the hallway toward me. His eyes were as big around as saucers. I was immediately concerned. What had gone wrong, I wondered? He said, “Bob, I’ve got to tell you. I have conducted over a thousand 360 coaching sessions in my career, and today I had the five most powerful 360 coaching sessions I have ever had.” I was stunned. I asked him why. He said, that he noticed two things. The Leadership Circle Profile very quickly focuses attention on the key competencies needed for development. It brings the key issues into focus unlike any other tool he had used. But more importantly, it naturally allowed for very deep and significant conversations to open up in ways that rarely happened using other tools. These conversations consistently produced breakthrough insights.

IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME

Shortly after this experience I had another bright idea. I thought, “I wonder if we could sell this thing?” Why not? So, I called a group of my colleagues and enrolled them into a Certification Training for the Leadership Circle Profile. I conducted the first Leadership Circle Profile Certification Training in my home. My living room was our first training room. People wondered why they were coming to Toledo, Ohio, but they came. The word began to spread and The Leadership Circle was born.

I was stunned by the cross-section and caliber of people who showed up in the Certification Trainings. Groups consisted of a rich mix of senior business leaders, senior HR/OD managers, and very credentialed and seasoned leadership development consultants and coaches. As the community of TLC certified organizations and practitioners grew, a new vision began to emerge. It first emerged as a question: “What could we do for the world, with this group of dedicated and talented change practitioners, that we could not do if we played separately?” The vision grew of mobilizing this talented group of people to have global impact. Perhaps, if we could coordinate and marshal this group of extraordinary people we could positively influence the course of events on this struggling planet. I knew, we all knew, that Einstein was right when he said that, “Our current problems cannot be solved from the level of consciousness that created them.” Could The Leadership Circle play a part in elevating the consciousness of leadership globally? Why not? Leadership, especially corporate leadership, is the key to our collective future. The consciousness of our leaders will determine the fate of the planet. The Leadership Circle is the first assessment and development system to evolve the leader’s consciousness as it develops the leader’s capability. A global vision was emerging.

A GLOBAL COMPANY—FROM ME TO WE

At the same time, people began showing up from around the world wanting to represent The Leadership Circle in their region. This was unexpected and quite flattering. Of course, I naively said yes. Our international partners shared a common passion for the deep development of effective leadership. They shared the vision of global reach and impact. Together we worked creatively to build a global business. We had no idea of the challenges associated with creating a global product distribution company. But, it fit with our vision and so we persevered. In every encounter, we challenged each other to practice what we preach. We created business relationships characterized by a genuine love for each other and a commitment to the high integrity interactions that could grow and sustain not only our business, but our relationships. We did all this under the entrepreneurial pressure of successfully growing a complex global operation. Now The Leadership Circle is a global leadership assessment and development company at the forefront of the field with offices around the world.

Together we are striving to do much more than sell assessment. We endeavor to change the global leadership mind. We want to shift the conversation we are in about leadership in the world from one that is primarily focused on what extraordinary leaders do (a competency-based approach) to one that includes how leaders think—think in ways that allows them to become so extraordinary. We know that extraordinary capability arises on a platform of higher-order consciousness. Consciousness is the operating system of performance. Consciousness mediates effectiveness. Extraordinary leadership capability simply cannot “boot up” on a less developed operating system. Consciousness and competence arise together to establish high levels of effectiveness.

We know that our business effectiveness requires consciously evolved leadership in order to meet the demands of today’s complex and volatile marketplace. We know that our suffering world requires the same highly evolved leadership if we are to create a sustainable future. We have dedicated our lives to this Mission:

The Leadership Circle Mission

We exist to evolve

the conscious practice of leadership

to steward the planet

and awaken us all

to our inherent unity.

EPILOGUE—LOOKING BACK

Looking back on my life I can now connect the dots. I am amazed by how all the seemingly disparate threads of my life make sense when I look back over my life in light of what has emerged. The time I put in down in the basement and in the feed mill make sense. So too do the High School retreats and the college years of wondering how my love of people development, statistics, economics and business would ever come together. It has. It makes uncanny sense. So do the years of integrating the best frameworks and research in the field. It all makes sense. If I have done anything right, it has simply been that I followed my nose. I stalked my longing. I paid attention to what I truly cared about and let it lead me into a future I could not imagine. As that future emerged, other like-minded people joined me and together we have taken the vision far beyond where I could ever have taken it alone. This kind of purpose, this soul-lead life is what The Leadership Circle invites leaders to engage. We are all up to a bigger game. The stakes are high. Let's get on with it.