Take Me Out to the Ball Game: Postmodern Organizations and Transformational Leadership

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In the famous song written in 1908 by Jack Norworth, baseball fans celebrated the implicit meaning of their beloved national pastime.

Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and cracker jack,
I don’t care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don’t win it’s a shame.
For it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out,
At the old ball game.

Clearly, part of the joy in the game was sharing the collective experience and supporting the unifying identity of the team. According to Keidel (1987), team sports offer a generic organizational framework for understanding organizations. Baseball, in particular, is characterized by autonomy of players and teams, decentralized decision-making, and postmodern styles of leadership (Hawkins & Tolzin, 2002). Baseball affords a glimpse into the needs of postmodern organizations and opportunities for transformational leadership.

Postmodern organizations share a number of common characteristics: turbulent external environment and upheaval; diversity in the workforce; high rates of relocations, transfers, and job modifications; greater worker autonomy; interdependence in semiautonomous work groups; preference for highly skilled generalists; fewer managers and a flatter, more flexible organizational structure; and the need for a clear organizational vision or mission (Hawkins & Tolzin, 2002, p. 99). Due to the excesses of individualism (e.g., personal greed) and lack of systemic vision, the United States has pushed the global economy to the brink. In the aftermath of the housing bust and the shadow of looming financial failures, we are afforded the opportunity to move beyond modern management approaches in order to embrace an informed, postmodern leadership. Baseball affords a glimpse into the future of leadership in times of decline. Will (1990) observed how batters in baseball expect as many as three slumps in a season. Slumping is a common problem due to the highly uncertain nature of the external environments and the internal resources. Coaching may help, but not resolve a slump. Managers rally various groups of players to the cause within the prevailing context of teamwork. The permeable boundaries of baseball allow leadership to confront the central dialectic of postmodern organizations: autonomy and interdependence. According to Will (1990), “Baseball exemplifies a tension in the American mind, the constant pull between our atomistic individualism and our yearning for community” (p. 240).

Experienced players assume integrative teaching roles in which they share their keen perspectives at critical moments in the game’s unfolding. Will (1990) reported that Yogi Berra could predict a pitcher’s pick-off move from the tightening of his buttocks. Leaders in postmodern organizations use their perspectives to inform others and cultivate a readiness to seize opportunities in uncertain times. When the right pitcher takes the mound, the leader’s confidence can be contagious. The whole team can relax and allow their natural performances to contribute to the desired outcome (Will, 1990).

I believe that we are at a critical juncture in the ongoing progress of a postmodern America. Fortunately, we have in our president, Barack Obama, a highly competent postmodern leader who is a virtual prototype for leadership at all levels. Watch him walk to the mound and pitch to win. In the process, he is transforming the game.

Retired General Colin Powell, a highly respected Republican, shocked Americans when he endorsed then candidate Obama for the presidency over his friend Senator John McCain in an appearance on Meet the Press (Allen & Martin, 2008).

I think he is a transformational figure. He is a new generation coming…onto the world stage…And I came to the conclusion that because of his ability to inspire, because of the inclusive nature of his campaign, because he is reaching out all across America, because of who he is and his rhetorical abilities—and you have to take that into
account—as well as his substance—he has both style and substance, he has met the standard of being a successful president, being an exceptional president. Colin Powell on Meet the Press (Allen & Martin, 2008).

Philip Berry, a management consultant with experience in global workplace initiatives, observed that the first African-American president’s campaign prevailed because of transformational leadership.

The notion of transformational leadership is not just pertinent, however, to the worlds of politics and the community. It is highly relevant to the corporate world and to organizations as well (Berry, n.d.).

Berry identified three key characteristics of transformational leadership in President Obama: (a) a clearly articulated vision; (b) statements that inspire people to connect; and (c) a detailed plan to execute. Having recently completed his first 100 days in office, President Obama has made significant progress in domestic programs and foreign affairs because the articulation of his visionary plan engages the people in shared meaning making and collective efforts for change. Gergin and Thatchenkery (2004) predicted the demise of modern organizations, which rely on individual agency and empirical knowledge, and the ascendance of postmodern organizational science based on communal rationality, social construction, and language as action. Modernism produced the technological and economic developments that have driven us to the brink of destruction and despair. Postmodern organizations require appreciation of the intersubjectivities of individuals and the evolving pictures of realities arising communally in various life contexts. Postmodern organizations require leaders who appreciate teamwork, value clarification, critical reflection, and social action. These leaders are in the business of co-constructing and articulating new realities that fit place and time.

Transformational leadership in postmodern organizations transcends motivation of members in a network of collectivities. Postmodern leaders manage change within complex systems through systase, movement in an organization without an absolute center or hierarchy in which a patchwork of language pragmatics . . . vibrate at all times (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004, p. 243). Postmodern transformational change is continuous reorganization within emerging contexts. Transformational leadership involves managing change in living, growing organizations that are under constant threat of annihilation.

Living leadership entails phronesis or the provision of resources for individuals to create situated sensibilities to act within the moment for the good of all (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 229). Social constructionism and cybernetics inform the leadership actor to engage in contextual, attributional, and performative processes in which talk and action are viewed as progressing tasks that are important to the collective membership (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 232). The systemic constructionist leader has the following value commitments: communication, connection, uniqueness, emergence, and affirmation (p. 233). These values are expressed through discursive practices characteristic of living leadership: sensemaking, positioning, and play (p. 237). The effective leader is an active performer who enjoys flirting with meaning and keeping some play in the system (p. 241). Ultimately, living leadership represents co-constructed moral activity that transforms a system through its ongoing evolution.

We need to keep some play in the system and find some means for including our membership in a growing and changing profession. Our marriage and family counseling specialization, like most other organizations, has fallen on hard times. Fundamentally, it is unclear who or what we represent. Now is the time for our ACA and IAMFC leadership to learn from the example of President Obama and embrace dangerous opportunities produced by the threat of annihilation. Marriage and family counselors are well-equipped through our systemic perspective and immersion in constructionism and postmodern approaches to embrace transformational leadership and breathe life back into declining organizations.

Transformational leadership inspires change. The transformational leader is the person best equipped to take the mound and inspire the team at this critical moment in the leadership of our collective experience. We are looking for a leader who is ready to win one for the team and keep our season alive.

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REFERENCES