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Frame Breaking Leadership

Keith Merron

The concept of a paradigm is no longer new in organizational parlance. It is, in fact, quite commonplace to talk about paradigms and the importance of shifting paradigms in shaping an organization and keeping it fresh and alive. However, talking about and acting are two different things. Many leaders can talk about the importance of shifting paradigms, but few leaders truly know how to lead in a way that a shift occurs.

For three years, I engaged in an on-going process of meeting and interviewing remarkable leaders, people who are extraordinary in the way they approach their leadership and also the way they approach life. I was interested in learning what are the forces that give rise to great leadership, and why in the face of so much research and literature on the subject of great leadership does such a gap remain between what we know about leadership and how leaders act. So far, to date, I have met with well over 35 extraordinary leaders from all walks of life. The criteria for being among the leaders I interviewed were:

1. They must be a current or former COO, President, Managing Partner, Executive Director or CEO, with significant responsibility for developing the strategy and culture of their organization.
2. Their organization must be doing something unique or distinct within their industry.
3. They must have distinguished themselves in some way. They must be path creators, not pathfinders or path followers.

4. Their leadership must be inspiring, empowering, or both.
While I did not go out to meet with people who shift paradigms, I did go about finding remarkable leaders—leaders willing to take risks and live on the edge. What I got was so much more. I got to meet leaders who are Frame Breakers. They are leaders who break out of the molds that traditionally bind the people in their industry. In contrast to most people who are path followers, these are path creators, and the qualities that it takes to “boldly go where no one has gone before” mark and define the leaders that are truly remarkable in this day and age.

Take Michael Dell, for example, the founder and leader of what is now the largest personal computer company in the world. As a college student, he struck on a very simple idea that it might be better to build computers to the unique specifications of the buyer and sell it directly. His simple notion was to get rid of the “middleman” which in this case is the retailer. This idea enables him to reduce costs associated with retailing and thereby get the same product to the buyer at a lower price point. He created a new way of selling computers and risked it all to make it happen.

Take Henry Ford as well. He had the idea that cars could be built much more efficiently if done on an assembly line and if you build them all the same. “They can have any color, as long as it is black,” was his famous saying, one that was part and parcel of his new and hugely successful strategy. What Dell and Ford have in common is simply this: they broke out of the prior paradigm and they had the courage and determination to stick with their conviction.

A paradigm or a frame is simply a model or construct that defines how we do things or how things are understood. It is not real. It is simply the way people understand things, and if enough people understand it in a certain way, it becomes a paradigm or a frame. I like the term “frame” because it implies that like the frame of a picture, the border defines what is out and what is in. If enough people buy into this paradigm or frame, it almost appears as it is truth, and therefore, to break a frame requires the willingness and

courage to go against the crowd.

To understand the power of framing, look at the medical industry. Thousands of years ago, diseases or illnesses were typically understood as caused by demons or a bad relationship to god. Hence, if you wanted to get healed, you sought a spiritual leader to rid you of unhealthy or demonic forces. Later, in medieval times, it was believed that sickness was caused by bad blood. If you wanted to get healed, you would go to a doctor or a “leech” who would suck out your blood using leeches. Seems silly now, but at the time, it was their truth. So many people bought into the frame it was self-validating. The discovery of germs or undesirable bacteria and viruses shifted the frame once again, and doctors administered multiple remedies to get rid of “bad germs.” For the past 100 years or so, this model, paradigm, or frame has governed our understanding of illness. Now the frame is shifting again to discover how the natural immune system plays a role in illness as well as one’s genetic makeup.

In the span of 1,000 years, we have gone through at least 4 major shifts in the frames by which illness is understood and medicine applied. In each case, the doctors who offered a different frame than the one governing the times were seen as lunatics and often ostracized for their crazy methods. And yet, their theories significantly improved upon the prior ones that ruled the times. To continue on their path required great courage and fortitude. To put it rather simply, great leaders break frames and create new ones.

That is what I began to see in the leaders I was meeting. About half way through my interviews I began to see the thread that connects them all, much more sharply than before. Each leader, in their own way, was a frame breaker, a person who breaks out of the frames of their peers and creates new ones. They may not have described themselves in this way, and in fact the hubris necessary to claim oneself as a path creator was rarely if ever evident. Instead, they simply had a different idea and went after it with fierce determination and uncommon heart.

Scott Johnson, the founder of the Myelin Repair Foundation, was a wonderful example of this. Stricken with multiple sclerosis in his early adulthood, he coped with the disease just like anyone else for a long time, and like everyone else, hoped for a cure. Six years ago, he came across a brief article in Business Week that literally changed his life. He had learned from his biology class back in high school that you couldn't repair the central nervous system. It just wasn't something that you could consider. Hence, multiple sclerosis did not lend itself to any known solution. Yet in this brief article was a claim that repair was indeed possible. Scott immediately picked up the phone and called the scientist that was mentioned. The scientist said, "well, you've got to talk to this other scientist." Talking with the next scientist led to a third, and so on for 1.5 years of continued exploration. At this point, Scott came to two important conclusions:

I found some breakthroughs in understanding of the central nervous system so that it looked like if you could bring more focus and money to those areas you could accelerate coming up with treatment. [More importantly] I realized I had no idea how medical research is done. The more I talked to these scientists and learned about what the process was like, the more I found that there were no treatments coming out of the money that was being spent. Let me explain. The NIH spends about \$27 billion funding health research in this country. And there's other money from every disease foundation that gives money to scientists to do research as well. Yet if you look at almost every disease foundation out there and ask them to show how many treatments have resulted from the research they've funded over the

last 20, 30, 40 years, I think there would be few, if any.

The problem, Scott eventually deduced, was not in the intentions of the scientists, nor in their knowledge. The problem was in the whole social system in which science gets advanced. Too often scientists break down system medical problems into their discrete parts to understand their functioning. Or they focus on specific symptoms, and seek solutions that address the symptoms but not the cause. However, when the problem is systemic, as are most significant medical problems, solutions don't come forward too well from this analytic process. Here are Scott's own words:

When you come to understand how the system works, it's completely understandable. One reason for the problem is that every incentive in academic medical research is for individual efforts because every scientist out there is competing with every other scientist for funding. There's a limited pool of funds out there so they're all writing research grants; they're all trying to get that money, so they're competing with each other for money. They're also competing to publish in the best journals. The better the journal, the better the notoriety. So you're competing to get into that journal. And, then, you're also competing for recognition in general—to get the Nobel Prize or something like that. Another reason for the problem is that scientists tend to start to focusing very narrowly and if you're going to be trying to get grants you've got to be a real expert in that one

specific narrow area. But you can't solve any of the big problems just with expertise in one area. Any medical problem, almost no matter how narrow, is going to require expertise across several areas of expertise. That makes it very hard for any scientist in a lab even if he's got a pretty good-sized lab. His lab specializes in specific areas. They can't come up with something that will truly create a breakthrough.

As a result of this insight, Scott decided to go after the disease of multiple sclerosis differently. While simple on the surface of it, its ramifications are quite profound. For the past 5 years, Scott and his team have attracted millions of dollars of research money targeted for the sole purpose of bringing top research scientists together to understand multiple sclerosis from a systemic standpoint. His foundation has targeted the best minds in the area and asked them to work collaboratively. In the highly competitive world of medical science research, this is almost unheard of and represents a powerful shift in the paradigm that has defined and limited medical research to this point. Scott has chosen to devote his life to nothing less than a shift in the way medical science approaches its craft. In the arena of multiple sclerosis, there are signs he is succeeding.

Scott was one of the many leaders who demonstrated the qualities that frame breaking requires. The qualities are imagination or vision, and the courage and determination to back it up. Such is the stuff of great leadership and it is what creates inspiration. The ability to offer alternative frames that empower, inspire, and embolden us to go beyond what we believe is our capacity defines the leaders I have met. These people are seen as great leaders precisely because they cause us to see differently, to go where we would ordinarily not have even seen it was possible to go. Frame breaking leadership not only defines great leadership in this day and

age, but it will likely shape the great leaders of tomorrow. As the world is changing at an increasing pace, no longer is it workable to react to the changes around us. To lead, one has to get in front of the curve. If you wait for a key event to occur and then respond to that event, in the time it takes for your organization to mobilize its forces to respond or adapt, often it is too late. Great leaders understand this and are constantly anticipating and even creating change in the world around them.

Frame breakers are inventors, creators, pathfinders. They are not change managers. To understand more fully, let's make the distinction between four levels in which one can play in relationship to any phenomenon in the world around us. One can create, anticipate, adapt or resist. To illustrate, let's go back to the late 1800s when the automobile had just been invented.

Up until that time, people either walked or rode on a horse or in a carriage. Then someone had a better idea and invented the automobile. The first inventors of cars were leaders—they defined a new frame. The people who built the cars for others to buy anticipated that the world would eventually want these things. This took courage too, but not quite the same level of foresight of the first inventors. Those that bought and rode the cars were the acceptors, adapters and followers. Those that remained on horses scoffing at the silly people in their horseless carriages, as well as the builders of those carriages who eventually went out of business, were the resisters—they resisted the new frame.

You can be at any place along this continuum, but given how much the world is changing, if you want to be a great leader, you've got to push yourself all the way to the right. The remarkable leaders I met, either by virtue of their nature or by the force of their own will, live on the right hand edge.

14,000 Miracles

Mimi Silbert is the poster child for frame breaking leaders. She is a leader who defies convention and has chartered a new path in her industry, with grit, determination, and each of the 6 qualities exemplified by remarkable leaders. Her story needs to be shouted from the rooftops. It is both remarkable and inspiring.

Without any map to guide her, but possessing a powerful belief in herself, a healthy dose of moxie, and an abiding appreciation for the family environment she grew up in, Mimi started an institute dedicated to putting troubled souls back in society—able to function, survive, and even thrive. Among the people who eventually became residents of her organization are multiple felons, addicts, drug dealers, and gang leaders. She will take in all kinds, and operates with a deep and abiding belief that all of them can change if given the right kind of conditions and a lot of love. Her residential home and the multiple businesses that are staffed by the residents are based on two presuppositions which Mimi seems to know instinctively. First, if you just give people a handout, it might temporarily help them, but it will not produce a fundamental change. Second, most of these folks did not grow up in a healthy family. If you could provide a healthy family-like environment, then the conditions embedded in it might just cause a shift in thinking. With this in mind, what she created was a sociological and business miracle.

Beginning in 1971 with a thousand dollars, and a deep desire to help others in dire distress, she created a remarkable social system, one so radical that it indeed reforms troubled souls with amazing consistency. 35 years after its inception, Delancey Street, named after the section of New York where immigrants assembled at the turn of the century, is now considered the nation's leading self-help residential education center for the underclass in need. It has transformed the lives of over 14,000 graduates into productive members of society.

Mimi's Vision

I met with Mimi for about three hours at her restaurant, one of the many businesses she has founded. I was deeply moved by her palpable enthusiasm for her work and for life. The stories she spun about her foundation put me close to tears numerous times. In meeting with her, three things became abundantly clear: she was powerfully determined, she cares deeply about the people who work for her, and her work is a labor of love.

Mimi's model for working with the underclass is, by its very nature, a framebreaking model. Our country, and many others in Western society, operates in a paradigm about people who are felons, drug dealers, etc. (let's call them troubled souls for short) that in most ways keeps them in that state. We shame them and we treat them with derision, scorn and judgment. Our whole Western socio-political system for dealing with troubles souls can be broken down into two fundamental views or frames. The more conservative view would say that the cream rises to the top and anyone who is impoverished did it to themselves; if they just took more responsibility, they would be fine. Under that view, at the extreme, people in difficulty should fend for themselves like anyone else. The more liberal view would say that people are impoverished due to the social system in which they grew up. Therefore, they are not to blame and we should help them. We do this in the form of welfare.

Mimi's view is closer to a blend of these two competing frames, with some important differences. Her system takes the view that the environment has a huge amount to do with how people turn out. Her organization creates an environment much more able to produce healthy, vibrant, responsible citizens than our society seems to be able to do. At the same time, she holds people 100% responsible for their lives. They must fend for themselves in her system, and must take responsibility for their choices. The final ingredients she adds to the mix is a whole lot of love, a powerful belief in these people's capacity, and a feeling like we are all in this together and so we must help each other out, just like a

healthy family does. In fact, Mimi lives there at the apartment complex with her family, just like everyone else. In her view, everyone there is like an extended family and needs to be treated as such.

I found Mimi to be as human, down to earth, and unpretentious as they come. After a more-than-satisfying interview where we talked more about life than work, I left with a renewed sense of what great leadership is or could be. What if it had nothing to do with clever strategy, acumen, or market timing, but all to do with heart?

Emphasis on Her Purpose

Mimi's sense of purpose is clear. She is interested in nothing less than breaking the frames by which the underclass are held and treated in our society. She offers a systemic model of welfare reform that produces vibrant healthy human beings and responsible citizens. She does not earn a salary—no different than anyone else who lives at the Delancey Street Foundation—and is completely devoted to her cause. Moreover, her foundation does not take any money from others. All of the businesses they have spawned, and all of the grand and attractive living quarters on some of the most expensive land in the world they have erected, were built by Mimi and her residents. They intentionally receive no handouts and no external help from others who do not live in the foundation, with the exception of donations of clothes and supplies that they use. The way Mimi puts it: “I do things I did not know I could do. For example, I am terrible about providing structure, but the place needs structure, so we figure it out. We needed to build a building in which to live, but I had never built a building, so I studied and earned a contractor's license, borrowed some money for the bank, and along with some residents, who had some building skills, build our residential home.” By the way, it is now, after multiple additions, an award winning architectural masterpiece situated at one of the most expensive tracks of land in the world, overseeing the San Francisco Bay.

This intention to “figure it out ourselves,” as Mimi puts it,

turns the whole system of welfare on its head, for the core of the foundation is the belief that for change to occur, it must occur from within, coupled with a social environment that supports self-reliability and self-responsibility. All residents of the foundation come to the foundation voluntarily. No one puts them there. In order to come, they go through an extensive interviewing system that checks to see if they applicant can successfully meet three conditions:

1. They must want to break their habits of cheating, stealing, killing, and being a dope addict.
2. They must become a full time resident—live and work there until they are ready to leave.
3. They must live by Mimi's rules.

Breaking the Habit

No one sends people to Delancey Street Foundation. The residents must come voluntarily. Many have heard about the foundation through a friend, a relative, or on the street in passing. Often, they know of its stringent expectations, or if they don't, they soon find out and are faced with the twin questions: do I really care about my own change? Do I choose, unencumbered by anyone else's demand, to change my own life? I believe this is fundamental to its success. When people, particularly troubled souls, are forced to go anywhere, this often creates resentment. To Mimi, it is all about choice—the choice to live, the choice to contribute, the choice to free oneself of ones own shackles.

Becoming a Resident

Mimi has created a self-sealing social system designed to shift the mindset and conduct of troubled souls. Each resident lives in an apartment, often shared by others, in downtown San Francisco or any of the other residences in other major cities.

To be a part of the foundation, each resident is required to work in one of its organizations. There are many, including:

1. The Delancey Street restaurant—an award winning gourmet

- restaurant situated near the Bay, just north of the ATT ballpark, home of the San Francisco Giants baseball team.
2. The Delancey Street moving company—which has won awards for the best moving company in the area.
 3. The Delancey car service—where residents drive the elderly.
 4. The Delancey limo service—where local business leaders and visiting luminaries are transported in style.
 5. A screening room that local media can use to show movies, documentaries and other films.

Everyone who works in each of these businesses must be a resident, and every resident must work. All new residents start at the most menial jobs, and must demonstrate their desire, through hard work, to contribute to what quickly becomes apparent as their extended family. Everyone roots for the early and quick success of the resident. Because they have been there before, they act like no task is beneath anyone. Every role contributes to the success of the whole. In other words, while many roles are routine, none are treated, nor The money earned by these businesses pays for the costs of living for the residents. It pays for the housing, the food, clothing, everything. Hence, the residents live in a self-sealing system that supports itself, much like the kibbutzim of Israel, after which much of Delancey Street foundation is patterned.

Mimi's Rules

Mimi's rules are simple and inviolable. Anyone who breaks the rules either gets thrown out, or goes in front of a review board who listens carefully, takes into account all of the factors, and makes a judgment call. The board is made up of the residents themselves, as does all of the governance of the whole system. The rules are:

- 1.No drinking or drugs.
2. No physical violence.
3. No threat of physical violence.
4. Care for each other.
5. Take responsibility for your actions; recognize that everything you do impacts others.

Surprisingly, few people ever break the rules. The peer support system is so powerful that people get it instantly and

work hard to be worthy of staying in the organization. They know that these rules matter and abide by them.

It is the Whole System that Makes the Difference

Mimi's framebreaking system is a brilliant work of art, and its many components defy conventional wisdom. It is clearly not welfare, for there are no handouts. Her system is much more than workfare as well, even though work is a part of it and people must help themselves in order to be a part of it. Her system focuses on creating a powerful social container, much like a family, where people can become healthy and whole. By living together under house rules designed for social and emotional health, by working together in a way that teaches collaboration, service, and specific skills helpful in the outside world, and by honoring each person's innate ability to live well with one another if given the right conditions, people leave Delancey Street no longer the troubled souls they once were.

They leave with their dignity intact, and with the skills to brave the outer world. When people come to Delancey Street, they care about image. They strut their stuff, but inside, they are not whole. Mimi and her system teaches them the basics of life. In Mimi's words, they teach each other that "to be classy on the outside, you have to be classy on the inside; we teach the importance of helping one another, to take responsibility; we teach that you can't change others, but you can change yourself." These teachings are done not in the classroom, but in the mix of activities that make up all of Delancey Street.

As said, Mimi and her family live there too, just like everyone else. She does not earn one penny from her efforts. She plays an important role—that of President—but her duties do not give her anything that anyone else does not get. She lives with the people, just as they live with each other, she gets a stipend, just like anyone else, and she is subject to the exact same rules as everyone else.

Most would think she is putting herself in harm's way,

exposing herself to people who are murderers, rapists, and multiple offenders. She sees it differently. She sees it as welcoming them into her extended family and home. She extends trust to them and earns their trust. As a result, she feels as safe as can be. And only once or twice in almost 30 years did she feel physically at risk.

Over 14,000 current and former residents and their successes lay claim to the power and potency of Mimi's system. Among the foundation's greatest achievements are:

- It has pioneered new models of education with a remarkable rate of residents achieving a high school diploma and going on to college.
- It has paved the way for people to escape violence, bigotry and hatred by teaching its residents successful means to address frustrations and challenges.
- Through a self-led mentoring program, residents teach each other mediations skills and interracial respect.
- It is completely self-governed: everyone in Delancey Street participates in its own self-governance.
- It has successfully developed over 20 business enterprises run exclusively by the residents, most of which enter the businesses completely unskilled.

The Conditions Within Which Frames Are Broken

All of the leaders I met are frame breakers. They tilt against windmills and they defy conventional wisdom. They come to the world with a powerful idea and an extraordinary belief in themselves. They create conditions where others can step up and perform and extraordinarily high levels and sustain that over long periods of time. They believe in the extraordinary capacity of human beings. Their vision, courage, determination, and care is exemplary, and they do it with humility and an openness to learning that demonstrates that inner strength always wins out over hubris and pride.

They do not "empower" others in the conventional sense, for the term implies that one person has power to give over to another. Instead they challenge others to become more of what they can be, and achieve well beyond what others

believed they could. They believe that others have power, and that their role is to support, encourage, and require others to find their own source of power. In other words, they seek to support others in empowering themselves.

Remarkable leaders are not only role models for learning, but they expect others to learn as well. Frames cannot be broken without the courage to enter into the unknown and engage in a process of learning where knowledge itself is not king, but instead the desire to discover and learn is. Remarkable leaders know this well, and rather than focus on their own results, they create the crucible and cauldron within which the alchemy of discovery can occur.

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About the Author

Keith Merron, EdD, is the founder and Managing Partner of Avista Consulting Group, an organizational consulting and leadership development firm dedicated to helping organizations with bold visions achieve sustainable high performance and industry leadership. He has more than 25 years of experience assisting executives and managers in business, government, and education. In partnership with his clients, he has successfully conducted over twenty-five large-system strategic, cultural, and technical change efforts. His work has positively impacted Hewlett-Packard, Freddie Mac, AmeriGroup Corporation, MedCath, Wang Laboratories, General Public Utilities, WorldCorp, Endocare, CSAA, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and the Healthcare Financial Management Association, as well as over 200 other companies and organizations.

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