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Anticipate, Innovate, Transform

**The 21st-Century Team Member
Is a Leader of One: Themselves**
By Bill Fox

Reimagining
Leadership & Teams

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The 21st-Century Team Member Is a Leader of One: Themselves

by Bill Fox

> It is true leadership — leadership by everyone —
> chaordic leadership, in, up, around, and down that
> this world so badly needs, and Industrial Age,
> dominator management that it so sadly gets.
>
> — Dee Hock, founder and CEO emeritus, Visa[1]

We all want our teams to perform at their very best, but this is particularly challenging in today's tumultuous world. Amid so much change, especially the shift to remote work, we need to rethink what it means to be a team member in the 21st century. Some still expect a return to normal, but turbulent times may be the new normal. How can we manage with this new reality?

The real problem isn't our tumultuous world, rapid change, and a global pandemic. The real problem is that we're accustomed to living and working based on Industrial Age thinking and practices. When everything is changing so quickly, things like command-and-control leadership, managing change, best practices, working harder, or even working smarter are no longer enough. Worse, they keep us stuck in the past.

We have been unknowingly programmed by our parents, schools, society, and the media on how to think, live, and work in a world that no longer exists. Today's ever-changing world requires us to enter into a quest to transform ourselves and learn new ways of living and working together that elevate everyone.

Imagine each of us is being called upon to step into our own leadership — whether or not we are formally in a leadership position.[2] The ideal team member of the 21st century is a leader of one: themselves. It is someone who can lead themselves (and others) in every interaction with another team member, regardless of location or circumstances.[3]

We Strongly Agree

We need to help people see how Industrial Age rules and thinking are limiting us and start living in today's reality. At the time this article was written, 25 people in my social media and professional network, representing roles from entry level to the CEO, had responded to my survey for this article.[4]

Fully 100% agree or strongly agree with this statement: In tumultuous times, it's important for team members to have the ability to lead themselves and others, regardless of location or circumstances (see Figure 1).

Eighty percent believe it is very feasible or feasible to expect team members to *develop or have the ability to* lead themselves and others regardless of location or circumstances. Only 8% believe it is not feasible; 12% are neutral (see Figure 2).
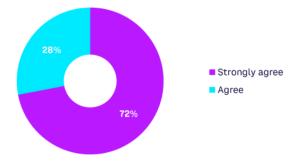

Figure 1. How important is it for team members to lead themselves?
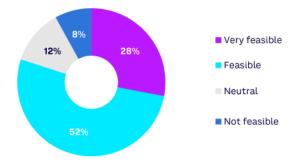

Figure 2. How feasible is it to expect team members to develop or have the ability to lead themselves and others regardless of location or circumstances?

Getting There Is an Inside-Out Journey

Change — real change — comes from the inside out.

— Stephen Covey[5]

When I left my corporate job in 2009 with the intention of discovering better ways of introducing change to improve organizations, I didn't realize what it would set in motion. In hindsight, I realize I had started on a path many call an "inner-leader journey."

Perhaps one of the most well-known and recognized authorities on that journey is Joseph Jaworski, author of *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* and two other books and chairman of Generon International.[6] In *Synchronicity*, Jaworski shares the story of his escape from an inauthentic life and his journey to a deeper understanding of leadership. Leadership, he discovered, has more to do with our being — our total orientation of character and consciousness — than with what we do.

From Jaworski, we learn that people and organizations can pass through a journey of inner transformation that enables them to shape the future instead of simply responding to events and circumstances. In *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, Carl Jung defined synchronicity as a "meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved."[7] In effect, leaders can learn how to create the conditions for "predictable miracles," or synchronicity.
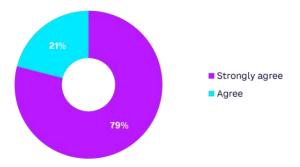
One of the most intriguing things we learn from Jaworski is that anyone can choose to be a leader through new capacities that are brought forward when we begin the inner journey. This shifts the conversation on leadership beyond formal power hierarchies. And increasingly in today's world, hierarchies are weakening throughout most businesses and organizations. Much of the work today now occurs through informal networks and self-managed teams that form, do the work remotely, then dissolve, making the need for leadership at every level and in every person even more critical.
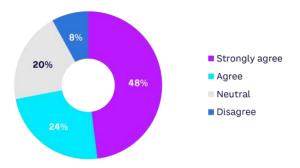
We also learn that most of us aren't very good at perceiving reality as it is. Rather, we relate to internal remembrances of our own history evoked by whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. When we open ourselves up to begin an inner transformation, we begin to see things as they truly are. When we see what is true, we allow something new to show up. We begin to think and act in new ways and interact differently with others. Change happens naturally as a consequence and flows through us to our outer experience.

In 2014, when I read Jaworski's *Synchronicity*, I recognized immediately that it was my journey as well. I sought him out and began to learn from him. Since then, I have met many others who are traveling this path, and I have helped others get on the same path.

The inner-leader journey begins within yourself and your state of being. One hundred percent of survey respondents strongly agree or agree with this statement: By enhancing our ability to look and listen within, we access greater awareness and creative power to shape our world and be a force for good (see Figure 3). Frankly, I was a bit surprised at the level of support for this statement, although my experience is that most people publicly support traditional business values (more growth, profits, and performance) but privately yearn for a softer, more humanistic, more sustainable approach to work and business. Figure 3 also reveals that 72% of respondents are in agreement with Dee Hock, founder and CEO Emeritus of Visa International,

By enhancing our ability to look and listen within, we access greater awareness and creative power to shape our world and be a force of good.

Do you agree with this quote from Dee Hock, founder and CEO Emeritus, Visa International: "Synchronicity [the inner path of leadership] is the path we all must follow in the 21st century"?

Figure 3. Is the inner path the way forward in the 21st century?

who said: "Synchronicity [the inner path of leadership] is the path we all must follow in the 21st century."[8]

Having traveled this path myself, I agree. Again, I found the level of support among respondents to be surprising, especially since these statements expand the scope to include everyone. While the inner path of leadership is not a mainstream business topic, it is a form of leadership that I have observed is gaining more awareness as people become disenchanted with existing forms of leadership and a younger generation moves into leadership positions.

> *When we're relying on past knowledge, best practices, and more activity in the face of relentless change and disruption, we're living in the past.*

Meeting the Future Requires Break from the Past

A lot changed in 2020, and much has changed since then. Marilyn Jacobson, author of *Turning the Pyramid Upside Down,* foresaw these times back in 2014, writing, "Meeting the future will soon make what was done yesterday seem like ancient history."[9]

At present, we find ourselves in a constant state of needing to get more done with fewer resources while taking on more challenging work, making everyone's contribution more critical than ever. How do we get out of our comfort zone, step up to the challenges, and be more effective and innovative?

Rather than listening for the correct answers, we must enhance our ability to see what's real and have the freedom to act on it. When we're relying on past knowledge, best practices, and more activity in the face of relentless change and disruption, we're living in the past. We need to design ourselves and our organizations to be more forward thinking.

For example, for much of my career in corporate America, I prided myself on being a person of action and getting things done. I updated my to-do list perpetually throughout the day. Countless meetings resulted in even more action items and lists. But what if I instead chose to jump off the hamster wheel for a few moments? What if, as Professor Patricia Shaw suggests, I paid a little less attention to generating yet another action plan and more attention to the ways forward that were opening up in front of me?[10] I'd definitely see more new and better ways forward, as would anyone following this advice.

In early 2020, I began an exercise to identify what had changed as a result of my inside-out journey. How had I and my work changed? Figure 4 highlights the key areas of change over the past 10 years. The 11 shifts displayed on the right side of the figure is how I now live, work, and teach.

For example, when I started on this inner-leader journey, one of the first opportunities I had to show up as my "real self" versus "fitting in" was in 2012 when I wrote an article for *Cutter IT Journal* (renamed *Amplify*).[11] In that article, I questioned why so many companies were continuing to focus on Agile, Lean,

Figure 4. 11 key shifts that resulted from my inside-out journey

CMMI, and so on, with so few results to show for their efforts. It felt risky to speak out against what so many supported and advocated, and I didn't believe the article would be published. To my surprise, not only was the article published, it resulted in many new opportunities to work on exciting engagements and speak at conferences. The inner-leader journey will help you see reality more as it truly is and give you the insight, wisdom, and courage to share it with others.

I believe it is critical for our teams and team members to make this shift in order to thrive and achieve success in a turbulent world. In *The Medium Is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan wrote:

> Our time is a time for crossing barriers. Emotionally, it is much more gratifying and secure to live in Bonanza-land. It is the old environment. Every time a new environment forms, people go back and live in the old one.[12]

We need to recognize this perspective and become the type of leaders who can help the current changes become real to our teams and organizations.

How important is it for team members to make the shift from Industrial Age thinking and practices that keep us stuck living in the past? All survey respondents agree or strongly agree with this idea (see Table 1). They also agree (to one degree or another) with the need to make the 11 key shifts shown in Figure 4, described in more detail in Table 1.

Do these results suggest a mandate to adopt these changes? Quite frankly, I was surprised at the overwhelming support for the ideas presented in this article. Thus, I believe there is a deep sense among many people that we need to make major changes in the way we work and interact with each other.

ITEM	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Shift: It's important for team members to make the shift from Industrial Age thinking and practices that keep us stuck living in the past.	76%	24%	0%	0%	0%
Narrative: It's important for team members to engage in narratives because they inform and define one's perspective.	29%	71%	0%	0%	0%
Authenticity: It's important for team members to show up as their real selves versus fitting in.	60%	36%	4%	0%	0%
Intention: It's important for team members to be more directed by intention rather than reacting to circumstances.	56%	36%	8%	0%	0%
Inclusion: It's important for team members to consider how they can make this work for everyone.	48%	44%	8%	0%	0%
Dialogue: It's important for team members to listen and ask more questions to seek understanding and wisdom.	76%	24%	0%	0%	0%
Self leadership: It's important for team members to understand they don't have to wait for leadership to show up and can be a leader in every interaction with another team member.	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
Reflection: It's important for team members to understand and appreciate the value of creating space for reflection in the face of more and more action.	56%	36%	8%	0%	0%
Questions: It's important for team members to understand the power of questions and the value of seeking out new questions and living in the question.	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
Synchronicity: It's important for team members to understand that synchronicity is the organizing principle of the universe, and there is value in allowing things to unfold.	44%	28%	28%	0%	0%
Open, curious & committed: It's important for team members to understand that it's more valuable to be open, curious, and committed rather than working harder and smarter.	48%	36%	16%	0%	0%
Next practices: It's important for team members to understand that best practices that worked somewhere else under different conditions may not be the ideal practices for today and tomorrow.	68%	28%	4%	0%	0%

Table 1. Making the shift away from Industrial Age thinking and practices that keep us stuck in the past

Opening Up Space Beyond Our Boundaries

Also in early 2020, I began an exercise to review all the insights, people, and books that had influenced my inner-leader journey, which I had documented over the years. This initiative resulted in the publication of a collection of more than 150 forward-thinking designs and images that accompany each concept or idea.[13] The intention behind the designs is to make the invisible more visible and the immeasurable more tangible, thus making them more accessible, real, and actionable.[14] The following six areas of growth are key:

1. **Forward thinking.** Forward thinking involves thinking, planning, and actions that consider the future as well as the present. In today's fast-changing world, the future is already here. That means we need to look beyond traditional ways of living and working based on Industrial Age thinking and practices.

2. **Conscious/self leadership.** Traditional forms of leadership are grounded in command and control and in doing the things that good leaders do. Traditional leadership is often thought of as the domain of a select few individuals with the "right stuff" at the top of the pyramid. We are now discovering that insight for leadership resides not only in the "other" but is accessible to everyone through newly honed sensibilities of looking and listening within.

3. **Inner awareness and intuition.** By enhancing our ability to look and listen within, we access greater awareness and creative power to shape our world and be a force for good. If you don't know what awareness truly is and how to use it, then your awareness is random. When we learn how to direct our awareness, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

ITEM	RANK
Inner awareness and intuition	1
Questions, listening, and dialogue	2
Understanding of how the mind works	3
Conscious/self leadership	4
Forward thinking	5
Inner-leader journey	6

Table 2. A ranking of the six key dimensions of growth

4. **Inner-leader journey.** The inner-leader journey is a personal journey where there is no path. However, there are guides to help us better understand the nature and challenges of the journey.

5. **Questions, listening, and dialogue.** We can learn how to ask new questions that harness our more powerful intuition, helping us discover surprising new answers. A new understanding of how the mind works quiets the mind and opens us up to deeper and more effective levels of listening. In dialogue, we move beyond discussion and championing our point of view to learning how to suspend our opinions, listen more deeply, and then see what that all means for breakthrough vision and action.

6. **Understanding how the mind works.** A new understanding of how the mind works from the inside out is based on the principles of mind, consciousness, and thought. With this new understanding, we realize our experiences and feelings are created by our own thoughts, not our circumstances. This new understanding lifts us up beyond where we find ourselves and gets us in closer touch with our wisdom and deeper intelligence.

How important are these six themes? The survey asked responders to rank the list based on how important it was for team members to increase their understanding and competence in each area (see Table 2).

I found it very interesting to see that all themes were largely rated important to very important (see Table 3). I was expecting some topics might rate much lower in importance. For me, it was a signal that there is growing recognition of the need to "look inside" and develop our softer skills.

Reimagining Teams, Leaders & Workplaces from the Inside Out

> Once you see the boundaries of your environment, they are no longer the boundaries of your environment.
>
> — Marshall McLuhan[15]

To meet today's challenges, we must move forward with synchronicity. It's time to allow the collective voice, wisdom, and energy of everyone to emerge for the benefit of all.

ITEM	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	NEUTRAL	NOT IMPORTANT	VERY NOT IMPORTANT
Forward thinking	40%	40%	16%	4%	0%
Understanding how the mind works	44%	36%	12%	8%	0%
Inner awareness and intuition	64%	28%	8%	0%	0%
Inner-leader journey	24%	56%	12%	4%	4%
Conscious/ self leadership	60%	36%	4%	0%	0%
Questions, listening, and dialogue	88%	12%	0%	0%	0%

Table 3. How important are the six key dimensions of growth?

Insight for new leadership resides not in the "other"; rather, it is accessible to everyone. By enhancing our ability to look and listen within, we shape our world from the inside out.

My survey results hint at the overwhelming need — and support— for the types of changes discussed in this article. Now it's your turn. Join me in reimagining teams, leaders, and workplaces from the inside out. We have the power to shift our world in ways that work better for everyone.

References

[1] Hock, Dee. "The Art of Chaordic Leadership." Meadowlark, 2000.

[2] Fox, Bill. "Communication Is the Most Important Leadership Skill You Possess." Forward Thinking Workplaces, 8 February 2022.

[3] Fox, Bill. "How to Be a Powerful Agent in the World to Create the Forward Thinking Workplace." Forward Thinking Workplaces, 27 June 2021.

[4] Unfortunately, there was a very limited time to gather survey responses for this article. However, the results are significant given the wide range of roles, experiences, and backgrounds of respondents. Nonetheless, I plan to keep the survey open to gather more data. I invite you to take the survey at https://billfox.co/teams-survey; I will publish an updated analysis from a larger data set in the future.

[5] Covey, Stephen R. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Simon & Schuster, 1989.

[6] Jaworski, Joseph. Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership. Routledge, 1996.

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[8] Jaworski (see 6).

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[12] McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. The Medium Is the Massage. Ginko Press, 2001.

[13] Fox, Bill. Forward Thinking Pro Portfolio: Discover the Space Beyond Your Boundaries. Bill Fox, 2020.

[14] These concepts and the real-life stories behind them and how they changed me from the inside out will be published in my upcoming book, Space Beyond Boundaries.

[15] "Marshall McLuhan Quotes." Quotefancy, accessed February 2022.

Bill Fox is the founder of Forward Thinking Workplaces and Space Beyond Boundaries. At Forward Thinking Workplaces, he leads a global narrative that's uncovering exciting new perspectives to help people succeed and be forward-thinking leaders building workplaces of the future — today. At Space Beyond Boundaries, Mr. Fox helps people enhance their ability to lead and work from the inside out. He believes forward-thinking narratives will define the great workplaces of the 21st century, and the inner path is the way forward.

Mr. Fox has more than three decades of experience in project management and leading successful transformation and software development projects in the financial, technology, and manufacturing industries. He is author of The Future of the Workplace *and Editor of the interview collection* 5 Minutes to Process Improvement Success *and the ongoing interview series* Exploring Forward-Thinking Workplaces. *Mr. Fox also blogs about what he's learning at Forward Thinking Workplaces and Space Beyond Boundaries. He can be reached at bill@billfox.co or via Twitter @BillFoxStrategy.*

Cyber resilience & countermeasures

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