



A Grand Theory of Corporate Vitality

By Lance H. K. Secretan, Ph.D.

There are 244,000 leadership books, DVDs and other items on Amazon.com, countless MBA programs and courses, consultants, gurus, athletes, entertainers, authors, academics and motivational speakers who are trying to teach leadership. The US spends \$170 billion a year in leadership training—yet leadership is broken in many places—in Wall Street, Washington, the Church, Corporate America, Healthcare, Education, the Family.

Our current model of “Leadership” is broken. One of the (many) reasons is that we have been teaching it as a technical subject, like engineering. For example we are urged to learn:

- Leadership Competencies
- Leadership Best Practices
- How to Lead Millennials (or Generation Y, etc.)
- How to lead women
- The Top 10 Qualities of a Great Leader
- How to Use Leadership Software
- Using Leadership Assessment Tools
- The Difference Between Leadership and Management
- Trait Theories of Leadership versus Process Theories of Leadership
- The US Army’s Leadership System - “Be, Know, Do” (1983)

We also have a herd mentality amongst leadership teachers, practitioners, academics and consultants and trainers who feel that unless they adopt the latest leadership fad they will be seen to be out of step with the world. As Barbara Kellerman, James McGregor Burns Lecturer in Leadership, at Harvard University, has said, “...there is scarcely any evidence that all this spending...is producing better leaders.” She continues:

“The ‘Leadership Industry’ has failed in its roughly over forty-year history to, in any major, meaningful, measurable way, improve the human condition. The rise



of leadership as an object of our collective fascination has coincided precisely with the decline of leadership in our collective estimation.”

We have infinite definitions of leadership, most of which fail because leadership is numinous—we are trying to describe the indescribable, and then teach it with industrial era methods. Leadership is like time—as St. Augustine said, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.”

Here are some frequently used, but unscientific, definitions of leadership:

“The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.” (Peter Drucker)

“Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.” (Warren Bennis)

“As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.” (Bill Gates)

“Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less.” (John Maxwell)

Perhaps the best and closest definition of leadership is:

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” (John Quincy Adams)

My own definition is:

“Leadership is a serving relationship with others, which inspires their growth, and makes the world a better place.” (Lance Secretan)



In recent years (and after writing 15 books about leadership) I have come to realize that “leadership” is a chimera—not only is it non-teachable, it is nonessential.

What we are all yearning for—even more than leadership—is “Inspiration”. Inspiration is the life-force that connects us to our desire. We listen to music and watch movies that inspire us, and we eat foods, travel to places and pursue hobbies that inspire us. We



work with companies and with people that inspire us. We buy products and services from organizations that inspire us. We vote for people and join religions that inspire us. We seek friends that inspire us. We marry people who inspire us. And when, after our best efforts fail, any of these no longer inspire us, we no longer support or engage with them. When inspiration ends, so do marriages, and that's why employees leave organizations and customers stop supporting companies. We are drawn to leaders who inspire and are repelled by those who are uninspiring. (Motivation, a core, old school, leadership concept, is [not the same as inspiration](#). Motivation, which is fear-based, is lighting a fire *under* someone; inspiration, which is love-based, is lighting a fire *within* someone.) Great organizations inspire, and they inspire everyone.

In my book [The Spark, the Flame, and the Torch](#) I have written that the process of inspiring has three phases: 1) **The Spark**: First becoming inspired ourselves—we cannot inspire others if we ourselves are empty, so we must first fill up our own tanks and become inspired first in order to inspire others; 2) **The Flame**: once we are inspired, we are then able to inspire others and lastly, 3) **The Torch**: when we are inspiring others, we are able to inspire the world.



But there is more.

Friction in organizations is caused wherever relationships are uninspiring, and where success and dreams are achieved it is always through the seamlessness of inspiring relationships. Therefore, great organizations are those built on inspiring relationships and mediocre ones rest on the unstable quicksand of a dysfunctional culture of weak or broken relationships. Countless examples exist of weak strategies that have turned into successes through inspiring partnerships or relationships, and, conversely, strong strategies that have failed due to ineffective and uninspiring relationships.

We are in a new era in which our models and metaphors for leadership have become obsolete. Unless we rethink our approach to leadership, we risk losing an entire generation of employees (and future leaders) who will be so disenchanted with the corporate world that they will seek alternatives. Today's organizations and their leaders

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are ill-suited for the shift that is occurring in our society. Structure, hierarchy, pay levels, endless (and boring) meetings, assessments, PowerPoints, bureaucracy and the like are asphyxiating for the new wave of employees who are creative, digital, socially and environmentally conscious, independent thinkers. They are free spirits who don't think of work and play as separate domains, any more than they separate their work and personal or social life. For them, everything is connected—[it is one](#).

For example, the Performance Review, long revered and universally applied in most organizations, is seen by most as an affront, a mark of disrespect and a dispiriting experience for all of the parties involved. Ask yourself this question, “Would you do this with your spouse?” In an inspiring marriage conducting an annual Performance Appraisal would probably crash a relationship. If we wouldn't do it at home, why would we do it in the workplace?

Think about the ingredients of an outstandingly successful marriage. Qualities such as personal growth and mutual learning, being fully present, curiosity, freshness, spiritual passion, maintaining individuality AND (paradoxically) oneness, vulnerability, intimacy, humility, empathy, devotion, love, rituals, transparency, trust, and reliability, come to mind. If these are the attributes that contribute to a successful marriage (which, after all, is the quintessential inspiring relationship) why wouldn't the same attributes create successful relationships at work?



This led me to thinking about the difference between how we behave at home and how we behave at work. So I conducted a study of business literature and management journals to discover the most-often referenced “Top qualities of a great leader”. Then I researched the “Top qualities of a great relationship/marriage”. Here, alphabetically arranged, is a composite of the two lists:



Leadership	Relationships
Accountable	Affectionate
Adaptable	Empathetic
Committed to Goals	Forgiving
Confident	Generous and Serving Selflessly
Creative	Good Listener
Decisive	Growing Together
Delegator	Honest and Ethical
Diligent	Interesting
Focused	Intimate
Good Communicator	Loving
Honest	Makes you Feel Special
Intuitive	Mature
Motivator	Open-minded
Positive	Passionate
Results Oriented	Patient
Strategic	Playful, Adventurous and Fun
Visionary	Respectful and Independent
	Trusting
	Vulnerable

If your leadership heroes are Patton, McArthur, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Julius Caesar, John Wayne and the Terminator, then this will line up nicely with your worldview. (One can even find a top **10 list of characteristics of terrible leaders!**)

It's striking how different these two lists are from each other. It's as if we are expected to behave as two different people—as a leader, on the one hand, and as a spouse, parent and friend, on the other. Of course this is an illusion – as if it were possible for us to wake up in the morning as Doctor Jekyll and then go to work as Mr. Hyde. The list does have one similarity—honesty—but for the rest, they are markedly different.

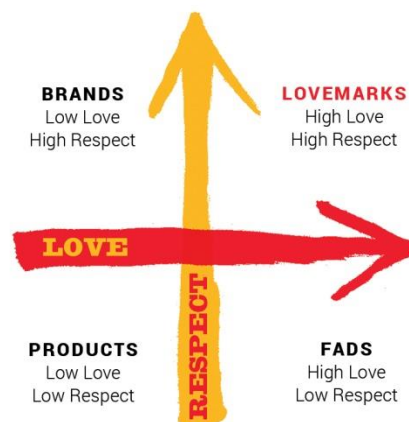
The **Grant Study** is part of the Study of Adult Development at Harvard Medical School. It is a 75-year longitudinal study of 268 physically-and mentally-healthy Harvard college male sophomores from the classes of 1939–1944. Its purpose is to unearth the secrets

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to a happy and purposeful life. The study revealed that the most important component is love and, to quote George Vaillant, the Harvard psychiatrist who directed the study from 1972 to 2004, "...finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away. Says Vaillant, "The seventy-five years and twenty million dollars expended on the Grant Study points to a straightforward five-word conclusion: 'Happiness is love. Full stop.' "

[Kevin Roberts](#) has described the concept of the "[Lovemark](#)", which is a higher order of thinking than a brand, because it inspires "loyalty beyond reason", and incorporates mystery, sensuality and intimacy. In a chart where the vertical axis is "respect" and the horizontal axis is "love", a brand rests at the top left, while a lovemark is in the top right. A lovemark, such as Apple, Trader Joe's, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks or Patagonia, becomes more than a brand—it is an inspired relationship.



Putting this all together, we can see that the evolution of a **Grand Theory of Corporate Vitality** progresses incrementally from "Leadership" to "Inspiration" to "Inspiring Relationships". My life's work has been dedicated to the study and practice of relationships and how to make them inspiring. The success of an organization depends on whether its relationship with its customers is inspiring. Even more, it depends on whether its relationship with its employees is inspiring. [My latest book](#) is about the most inspiring relationship of my life, the one I had with my late soulmate Tricia. It's more



than a book about an inspiring relationship, or even how all relationships could be as inspiring, although it is both of those. It's also a book about how important it is to relate passionately, and in a way that inspires, with every fiber of our being, in every aspect of our lives. When [Michael Bernard Beckwith](#), Author of *Spiritual Liberation* read *A Love Story*, he said, "Far more than a book, Lance Secretan's *A Love Story* is a realm of being, a dimension of consciousness pulsating in the hearts of mystical lovers which outwardly expresses as a blessing upon the world."

55% of marriages fail. Of the remaining 45%, three quarters remain in place for reasons of expediency (financial, the children, fear of loneliness, inertia). Therefore, just 11.25% of marriages can be deemed to be successful. Sixty-five percent of second marriages fail, and 75% of third marriages fail. There are parallels here for corporate life—I routinely ask audiences, "If you had a free hand, would you choose to do something completely different from what you do now?" Typically, 75% of respondents say they will.

The way we think about successful organizations of the future will require that we achieve a better balance between metrics and people, exploitation and stewardship, motivation and inspiration and the utilitarian and the sacred. **The end goal of the modern organization is the same as in a marriage—to build an inspiring relationship. We are yearning for organizations that build inspiring relationships with people, with our environment and with a higher source. These are the workplaces of the future that will be so inspiring they will be able to eliminate their recruiting budgets.**

