



Leading with Intentionality: The 4P Framework for Strategic Leadership

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Leading with Intentionality: The 4P Framework for Strategic Leadership

Faculty Research Working Paper Series

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Leading with Intentionality: The 4P Framework for Strategic Leadership¹

ROB WILKINSON AND KIMBERLYN LEARY

Introduction

Challenges such as political hyperpolarization, social unrest, and climate change, among others demand leadership. In the face of uncertainty and societal turbulence, people also make new demands of leaders. When there is turmoil, individuals and communities often look explicitly to leaders to “save” them, even though different communities have different ideas about what this should mean.

The tendency to believe in a heroic leader who can save the day is widely shared. However, such a mythical figure does not exist. Leadership, once we study it, isn’t one thing exercised at the top by one person, as our colleague and leadership expert Ron Heifetz first observed; it is an activity exerted by people at all levels, and by noticing certain less obvious aspects of leadership, anyone can improve at it.²

Over the last twenty-five years, we have been privileged to lead organizations and public initiatives, consult to global organizations, and teach public policy graduate students and senior executives. This experience enabled us to identify four key elements that seem to improve the odds of leadership success—what we call “four Ps”: perception, process, people, and projection. In our classrooms, often through the use of case studies, we teach leadership stories of successes as well as failures or ambiguous situations where the leader experienced an unexpected outcome. In fact, talent and good ideas can come from previously marginalized groups or people. Your organization’s success may well depend on being open to them. The “four p” framework (perception, process, people, and projection) described in this paper offers a new understanding of strategic leadership that, among other things, underscores the importance of these previously under-utilized sources of talent.

In your organization or community, for example, there is probably a young woman like Tarana Burke was fifteen years ago. Now a national figure, thanks to the #MeToo movement she created from her early empowerment workshops for young Black girls in the South, there was no one moment when Burke became “a leader.” Years of inspiring girls in small community settings to see themselves as valuable and agents of their own future meant she was leading all along.

How does the “four P” framework explain Burke’s every-day leadership, in the way it would for someone in your organization or community? She juggled matters of **perception**, one being the fear of false accusations against Black men and concerns for family privacy that meant many in her community were instinctively wary of focusing attention on sexual violence against girls. Her **process** was inclusive and sequential, understanding that empowerment couldn’t happen without first addressing survivors’ trauma. Fundamental to Burke’s approach was a skilled use of empathy and an understanding of the power of emotion in human beings—the **people** component—that meant meeting participants where they were, addressing the shame survivors

¹ For further information about the 4P Leadership Framework, see the podcast series here: <https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/podcasts/4p-model-for-strategic-leadership>.

² Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

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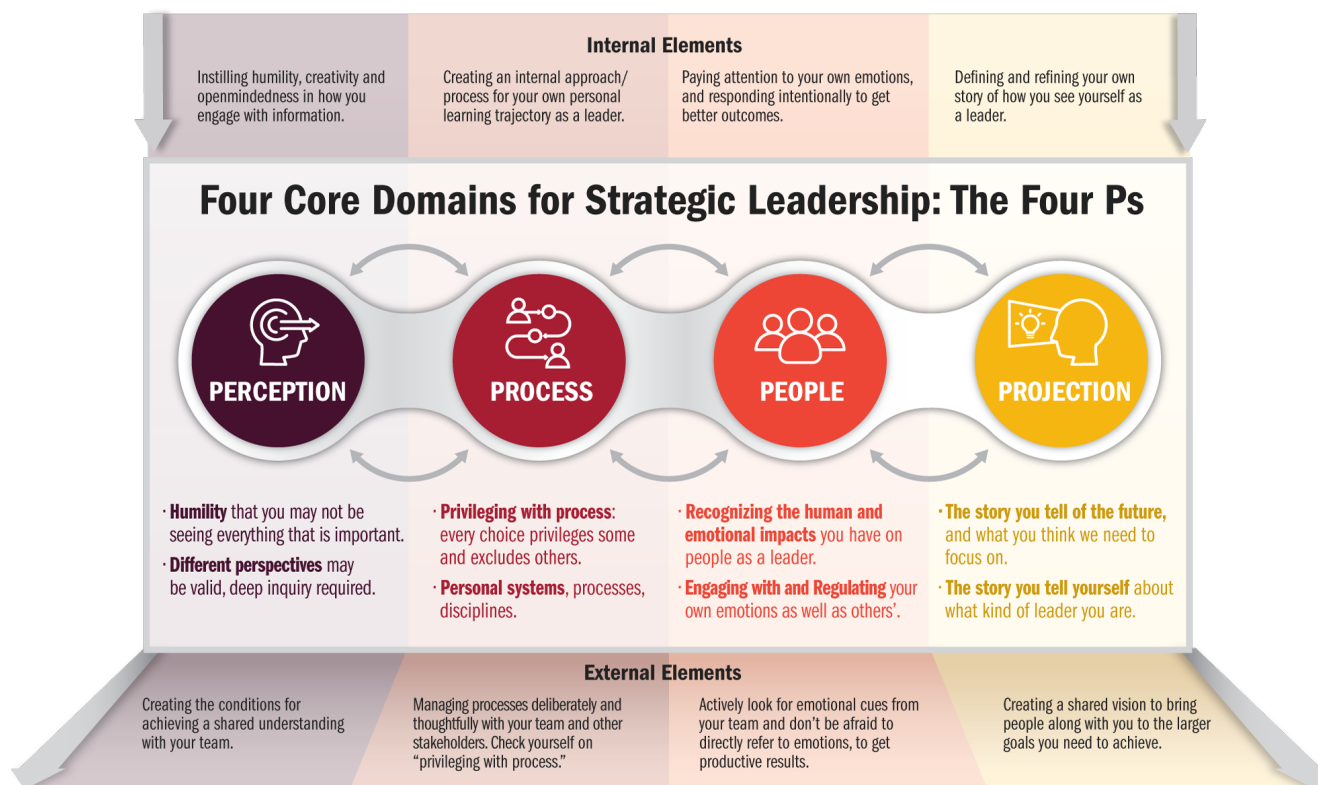
carried with them, and assuring them that they were not alone. Finally came her **projection**—the way she told a story. Burke turned the narrative of sexual abuse from being victim-based to survivor-based, so girls and women who had endured sexual violence could tap into their inherent power and move forward.

We expect innovation from people we call leaders. However, as workplaces deal with countless complex, interdependent tasks, some people, including those without formal titles, are waiting for their opportunity to create change. How will you recognize them and remove the barriers they face? In truth, the ability to exercise leadership effectively requires skills and capacities that must be developed; they are not innate. Leadership is rarely making one decision and sticking to it, or making a grand development happen with a touch. Mostly, leadership is non-heroic and involves painstaking work, paying attention, and being able to learn quickly and in real time.

A “Four P” Framework

Leadership involves intentional work. It is not just, or even necessarily, about charisma or a powerful personality unleashed. It involves a great deal of reflection, challenging the self, and respect for others. And leadership always remains an approach; a way of engaging problems and working with people. It is a constant learning journey that requires practice, deliberation, repetition, and growth over time.

Each of the Ps outlined here draws from existing literature and incorporates multiple academic and practitioner frameworks. Each one involves looking inward (turning the spotlight on your choices, emotions, and messages you send yourself) as well as outward, at other people, so we are, in fact, studying eight domains of leadership. With **perception**, you expose and examine your own assumptions. With **process**, yours matters as much as the team’s—how you manage your regular routines, habits and individual reflection. With **people**, your emotions and your understanding of them matter as much as those of others. With **projection**, you are thinking of your own story as much as the group’s—the story you tell yourself about who you are in the world about what you see around you.



Perception

We’ve all had the experience of attending the same meeting, listening to the same speech, or watching the same movie only to discover that our colleagues or family members saw something different. Our default assumption is that everyone sees it the same way we do, and we tend to push forward in that conviction. Leadership requires the discipline to slow down and think about multiple perspectives before acting; a discipline that requires inquiry and curiosity.

In the summer of 2020, the Memorial Day killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers prompted widespread protests against racial inequality and aggressive policing, and a reckoning with racist symbols including Confederate statues and monuments. In many cities, protesters demanded that statues be torn down, and many were. Although notable in terms of its scope and scale, this movement did not come of out of nowhere; instead, it built on a series of similar if limited developments, reflecting the long arc of social justice conflict in U.S. history as well as the role played by many different people and communities to advance a cause. For instance, five years before, when a young white supremacist murdered nine Black parishioners at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, similar protests arose, culminating in the removal of the Confederate flag from the State House Grounds. These struggles brought new momentum to address long time discontent.

Christopher Columbus received new scrutiny as well. In New Haven, Connecticut, and Boston’s North End—where many elderly Italian-Americans remembered the prejudice against their families—Columbus was an Italian-born explorer to be proud of, not someone who brought genocide to North America as many young protesters of color claimed. Clearly, people were not going to agree. But could they empathize?

The inevitable human tendency to see things a certain way and not consider how differently others might see it is a perennial test of leadership. On a team, it can be confused with disloyalty: “I thought we were on the same page,” someone might say, as if the mere fact of disagreeing signals that you are not part of the team. Similarly, “We are all part of the same team” often means “If you don’t agree with me, you aren’t being a team player.” A common response when confronting an opposing view is to think agreement is demanded as the only way

forward: “You’re telling me that I have to agree with or accept what the other side is saying, which is anathema to everything I stand for.” But **perception** is not about reaching agreement, it’s another proposition: Before you reach your conclusion, you have work to do, to try to deeply understand and be curious enough to inquire before you know how to proceed.

“PERCEPTION”

The research: Psychologists have studied our inclination to see the world as we want to see it and our tendency to dismiss information that contradicts our default positions. “Naïve realism,” as described by R.J. Robinson, means we assume everyone sees the world the same way, because in front of our eyes we believe there is just an objective reality. We assume a “false consensus” that others naturally share our views. Furthermore, our opponents who don’t share our understanding are irrational or biased.³ All three judgments are dangerous in leadership. They suggest skipping from “here is where we are” to “here is where we are going” and leaping to the end of the story where everyone on the team has bought in. But the skipped steps can derail the project, wasting time and money.

What you can do: Moving past the perception block requires a willingness to ask questions and an openness to enter into difficult conversations; it’s a deliberate process that is the opposite of avoidance or a heedless path where the leader blindly carries on doing things her or his way. In *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen came up with three questions: First, what did the other person actually say or do? Second, what impact did they, in fact, have on me? Third, what assumptions did I make about why they did what they did? Did I separate the fact of what they said from what I assumed about it—my assumptions being, perhaps, that they were untrustworthy, incompetent, or some other value judgment?⁴ Because inevitably we began to tell a story—if only in our head—about this person reflecting our larger world view. And the separation grows.

Internal Perception: In 2017, when an earlier wave of protests erupted over Confederate statues, Mayor Jim Gray of Lexington, Kentucky, had the authority to remove two of the monuments from outside the county courthouse. He made the decision not to, partly on account of historic preservation tax credits he thought he would lose, but renewed pressure from a coalition of Lexington community groups forced him to reconsider. As a leader, Gray realized he would have to revisit his view by carefully considering others’ perspectives—never an easy thing to do, when we are so attached to our own perspective. These monuments displayed in front of a historic site with a new visitor center in the heart of Lexington were not welcoming. One Black pastor told the mayor he avoided walking by the statues and suggested they be moved to a place where visitors had to make an effort to see them.

The sustained advocacy—an act of collective leadership accessible to all of us—of many Lexingtonians made the difference. Eight months after his initial rejection, Gray reversed his stance. Where the statues ended up, however, required more pivoting and again taking varying perspectives into account. One site was the city-owned Veterans Park, but Gray said, the “veterans, Black and white, were vigorously opposed to putting these men who they considered traitors in Veterans Park.”⁵ Finally the statues were relocated in the historic cemetery where the two men were buried.

³ R.J. Robinson, “Errors in Social Judgment: Implications for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution,” Part 2: Partisan Perceptions, *Harvard Business Review*: 9-897-104 (February 6, 1997).

⁴ Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

⁵ Gaylen Moore, Christopher Robichaud, Kimberlyn Leary, Jorrit de Jong, and Anna Burgess, “Reckoning with History: Confederate Monuments in American Cities,” HKS/BHCLI case study (2019, revised 2020), <https://www.cityleadership.harvard.edu/cases/reckoning-with-history-confederate-monuments-in-american-cities->

Over time, Gray came to demonstrate humility, creativity, and open-mindedness in reasoning with data or facts on the ground; the embodiment of **internal perception** (shaped by engagement with others) used to move people forward into a deeper appreciation of the equity impact of public decisions.

Process

“Process” refers to the manner in which we include people in our work. Generally, we make quick judgments about process choices; often, we don’t even choose, we just do. A typical teambuilding exercise might end with a social component like taking the group out for drinks. But does this risk excluding the non-drinkers, the single parent rushing to get home, the person with an evening job or class? An early-morning meeting may also leave out colleagues who take their children to school.

Every process choice privileges certain people. As with the perception challenge, the practice that we need to develop starts with slowing down, thinking about the people whom we are “privileging with process,” who’s being overlooked, and what the impact will be. How do you include people in the work you’re trying to do? Group dynamics are always in play, and nothing succeeds without a process. Without leadership’s explicit engagement on how to manage the process, we tend to get suboptimal outcomes, illustrated by Harvard psychologist Richard Hackman in a famous experiment.

“PROCESS”

The research: Hackman, who studied teams, formed four groups to perform a task. Two groups were composed of “experts” in the task, and two groups of “amateurs.”⁶ In the two expert groups, one was given a process-intervention and the other was not; Hackman then did the same with the two amateur groups. Then the four groups performed the task. The experts with a process did the best, by far. The group of experts with no process did the worst—much worse than both amateur groups. The experiment showed that process cannot just be managed or enabled on its own, results don’t merely arrive from assembling experts, and there are pitfalls to avoid.

A central problem of assembling or working on a team is the tendency toward “groupthink,” which happens among experts and amateurs alike. As Yale psychologist Irving Janis discovered, the desire for consensus often takes precedence over the quality of the decision process.⁷ Agreement within a group can feel like progress and can also be a kind of overconfidence. More, groups that lack a process by which to utilize their collective expertise, knowledge, and creative ideas experience a missed opportunity, or a “hidden profile” problem.

What you can do: Consider your process early. Ask yourself, “Who’s kept in? Who’s left out? Who’s privileged?” In a program where we both teach, the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, Mike Bloomberg tells the program’s participant mayors a story from his first term as mayor of New York City. When the media asked about his first hundred days in office, Bloomberg replied, “Well, I put my team together and we decided who would have what responsibility and how we were going to manage our decision-making process.” Impatient, they would push: “Yes, but what did you *do*?” Bloomberg would give the same answer: He built his team. If they asked a third time, he’d say it again. This was separate from knowing what tasks they would face and the solutions they would offer. “If I hadn’t set up the process early,” Bloomberg said, “we wouldn’t have had the outcomes we got.”

An international climate and forest expert and negotiator for the government of Mexico, Josefina Braña-Varela brought attention to forest preservation before the 2015 Paris Climate Summit. Remarkably, even though deforestation accounted for more greenhouse gas emissions than the total combined emissions from cars,

⁶ J. Richard Hackman, *Collaborative Intelligence: Using Teams to Solve Hard Problems* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2011).

⁷ Janis wrote many papers on groupthink; some are collected in *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

trucks, trains, planes, and ships worldwide, it wasn’t on the summit’s agenda. Braña-Varela had most recently been hired as policy director for forests and climate at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), a leading environmental NGO; national delegations had greater pull in international deal-making than NGOs, so she would have to adjust her profile and expectations to reflect her new “outsider” status.

Braña-Varela began with an unusual “perception” problem. Everyone in the global environmental movement in which she had spent thirteen years was in favor of protecting forests. But the meaning of the word “forest” seemed to be different for all. It appeared that a vital climate agreement could be written without even mentioning the word. For some negotiators, for instance, the term “carbon sink” was one of many that encompassed “forests.” The imminent arrival of the most important climate summit in years required Braña-Varela to identify and define the central terminology needed for a shared understanding of forests and forests’ needs. Braña-Varela needed to finalize the definition by weighing a range of perceptions. But her main concern was **process**.

A case study I (Wilkinson) co-authored tells the story of how Braña-Varela successfully managed this process right up through the two-week Conference of Parties (COP21) session to get the relevant language on forests incorporated into what would become known as the Paris Agreement.⁸ Process usually begins even before you know the work just by assembling your partners or teams. Well before COP21, her NGO group (that dubbed itself the “Nameless Coalition”) made exhaustive efforts to be useful by sharing information and cultivating lesser-heard voices, even before they could be sure what opportunities existed.

At a forests and climate change meeting in London one month before COP21, she had a chance to move from her seat near the main table to a seat *at* the main table, which afforded her the opportunity to speak. She wasn’t lucky: Her extensive preparation and collaborative work had primed her for such a moment. Forests *had* to be included in the Paris accord, she argued: “When you put forests up against economic interests, forests are always the loser, so we need to have all the tools, and all the force . . . to elevate the profile of the forest.” After her talk she was approached by many delegates who thanked her for giving them a new understanding of the issue. Weeks later, the forests language would be sealed into the Paris agreement.

Internal Process: If Josefina Braña-Varela hadn’t established a process of long and painstaking teambuilding, she may not have succeeded. Simon Sinek, an author and speaker on leadership, explores “consistency versus intensity.”⁹ Progress doesn’t always come by making a huge effort in a short time, like going to the gym for nine hours one day instead of one hour weekly for a year. If our habits, practices, discipline, and behaviors are consistent—if we have internal process management—we are more likely to reach our goals.

In Lexington, Kentucky, DeBraun Thomas, a young musician and descendant of slaves, was a prime mover in the campaign to pressure Mayor Gray to move two Confederate monuments away from his downtown neighborhood; his “flash mob” turning from a onetime protest to a sustained neighborhood activist network. He was praised not just by Gray but by Lexington’s police chief. In Thomas’s words, “process has to happen first, before you can really push to enact change. . . . Being mad is fine but if you’re just mad, and not channeling that rage, it’s not going to do anything.”

People

As one of the four Ps, “people” is distinct from perception and process in that it is about emotional management—considering both your own emotions, as well as those of others. Emotions are often overlooked by professionals, but they are always present and have a significant impact on how we interact, our judgments, our behavior, and how **people** feel about working with us in the future. The likelihood of agreements being

⁸ Pam Varley and Rob Wilkinson, “Negotiating Toward the Paris Accords: WWF and the Role of Forests in the 2015 Climate Agreement,” HKS Case 2218.0 (Feb 2018).

⁹ “Simon Sinek: *Why You Only Win with Consistency*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBQb1SVPbol>.

upheld is linked firmly with emotion. There's a growing understanding of this concept, but, biased as we are toward thinking of leadership as cognitive work, leaders often don't acknowledge their own and others' emotions or consider their management as part of the work. All human beings are emotional all the time. Yet somehow, we are expected to put them aside—as if irrelevant or unseemly—instead of considering emotion, as psychologists Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer describe, as a source of productivity and creativity.¹⁰

“PEOPLE”

The research: Yale psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey were among the first to bring scientific rigor to studying everyday emotions, coining the term “emotional intelligence” and showing it to be no less significant than cognitive intelligence or IQ. More recently, our Harvard colleague Ron Heifetz depicted our internal thought patterns as “lines of code” (i.e., an algorithm) laid down early in life as a consequence of growing up in a certain family, culture, community, and so on. The lines convey instructions regarding such behaviors such as whom to trust or fear, or what it means to be a man or a woman. Encountering others with very different lines of code can sometimes provoke a strong emotional reaction. Part of coming into one's own involves identifying the lines of code from which one's responses emerge, and either adding in new lines of code or extracting the old ones. Until we understand the code—and we can renegotiate our loyalties—it's hard to make any progress or have a real sense of freedom or choice.

I (Leary and colleagues) have written about the way negotiators' own emotions serve as a signaling function that provides important information about the self and the other person. In leadership meetings it's critical to prepare emotionally in the same way that you would prepare for the substantive issues. Many times, there is no getting around the people you work with. As my colleagues and I have written, “separating the people from the problem is neither possible nor desirable.”¹¹

What you can do: “Don't jump over others” is how retired U.S. admiral James Stavridis—the first admiral to lead NATO—recounted early failings with people in his command. Interviewed for a (Wilkinson) case study, Stavridis recounted episodes of “jumping over people” by imposing plans in a new environment without drawing on the insight of the people already there. Stavridis was in a superior role, but that didn't mean he had earned loyalty or commitment. “Not jumping over people” is more than a procedural recommendation; the act is an emotional trigger that challenges people's status, autonomy, confidence in their role, identification with the project, and sense of feeling appreciated.¹² As Stavridis elaborated, “I learned to be very respectful of how people feel . . . to be cognizant of the feelings, the emotional attachments of people to the structures they've worked in and that they're comfortable with.”¹³

Internal People: Leaders must also manage their own emotions—the internal aspect of “people”—which demands the emotional intelligence to understand and motivate the people on their team, all of whom are emotional creatures. I (Wilkinson) can remember a dire situation in Angola when, as a United Nations official, I pleaded with a pilot to allow me on a plane evacuating people from a war zone. It wasn't working: He didn't trust me and had no reason to give me special treatment. Managing to calm down, I was able to think my way through and move from advocacy (“I need to get on!”) to inquiry (“What are your issues about me getting on?”).

¹⁰ Cited in Kimberlyn Leary, Julianna Pillemer and Michael Wheeler's, “Negotiating with Emotion,” *Harvard Business Review* (Jan-Feb 2013).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* (2006), Roger Fisher and David Shapiro identify the key aspects of working with emotions as showing appreciation, conveying autonomy, inviting affiliation, being aware of status, and matching people for the correct role.

¹³ Pam Varley and Rob Wilkinson, “Winning Hearts and Minds: Admiral James Stavridis and The Art of Wrangling NATO,” HKS case study (2020), <https://case.hks.harvard.edu/hearts-and-minds-admiral-jim-stavridis-on-the-art-of-wrangling-nato/>

The pilot reeled off several reasons—he didn’t know me, he was worried about liability and overloading the plane, etc.—but it was the beginning of a conversation. In the end, we resolved each issue and I did get on the plane; I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t changed my approach.

Projection

Projection, distinct from how it is understood in clinical psychology (i.e., a defense mechanism where people protect themselves by seeing qualities in others that they deny in themselves), is the idea that we all, whether we realize it or not, are telling a story about where we think we are headed in the future and what we need to focus on. At the same time, we’re telling a story about who we think we are as leaders, projecting our vision of what we think is important, and where we want people to focus. And it is accompanied by self-reflection.

Serving as an advisor to President Obama’s White House Council on Women and Girls, I (Leary) was charged with developing a data-driven initiative to address gaps in opportunity and careers to enhance life outcomes for women and girls of color. Deciding on five areas to focus—exclusionary discipline in schools for girls of color; juvenile justice and foster care; STEM engagement; reducing teen pregnancy; and improving prospects for economic prosperity—we looked for evidence-sensitive interventions that could be scaled up.

But what we realized over time was that the five pillars needed a sixth—one that wasn’t part of the official portfolio—that we described as enhancing the “affirmative visibility” of women and girls of color. This was **projection**, based on President Obama’s reflection that, too often, when women and girls of color are mentioned or considered they’re either invisible or seen in the harsh light of scrutiny. In the White House Council, with every story we would tell about girls of color—even the disparities or challenges they faced—we wanted to enhance with affirmative visibility: to highlight stories of striving girls in the juvenile justice and foster care system; to elevate the leadership of girls who were taking on schools with respect to dress code policies that resulted in exclusionary discipline, and so forth. We wanted to project the positive view of Black American girls so it could become the dominant one, to change the age-old story that had damaged so many lives.

“PROJECTION”

The research: John Kotter, formerly of Harvard Business School, described leadership as the work of taking an organization into the future.¹⁴ Leadership is about vision, empowerment, and producing useful change but it also means that a leader must tell a story to people about where they’re going if she wants followers. Warren Bennis, a leadership scholar and once president of the University of Cincinnati, described a leader’s first job as defining a vision for an organization.¹⁵ **Projection** means that we’re signaling what we are focusing on in the future, what our vision is, and the story we are telling about what that vision means.

What you can do: In sending a message to get people on board with your plan, experiment with different forms of the message, try them out on different audiences, and use different vehicles for delivering them. Consider, too, that you might not be the best messenger; it might be someone else. Before rejecting a message that you disagree with, ask if there’s any aspect that could be valid or if there’s something you can learn from it. (Because this work is difficult, it requires practice—a lot of it.) You can also try out uncomfortable advice; if it isn’t working, abandon it. This is how we revisit the internal story we tell about ourselves, which allows us to pivot when we work with others to tell the external one.

Internal Projection: Tarana Burke, whose work with young girls spawned a global movement and is the subject of our new case study, was sexually assaulted as a young child. In the regrettable victim-blaming standards of the time, this meant she had, in her words, “passed a threshold of no longer being a good girl” in her

¹⁴ John P. Kotter, “Management is (Still) Not Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review*, Jan. 9, 2013.

¹⁵ Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Perseus Books, first ed. 1989, 2009), p 188.

community.¹⁶ In the past, she had described her long years of internalizing blame and shame for what was done to her, until she realized how many other girls and women around her were fighting the same emotions. For all, it was a major effort of redefining themselves to engage with the world (not overlooking their trauma) with the power of a survivor rather than a victim. Becoming survivor-centered rather than victim-based is where the **internal projection** in Burke’s life met the external one, and it has since been the basis for all of her work.

Strategic Leadership

This article has considered “four Ps,” each with an internal and external component, but this does not mean everything fits in one of eight boxes. Nothing in human life or conduct is that simple. What may be perception can bleed into process or projection. This work is necessary for leadership: As a leader, you can’t *not* be dealing with differences in perception. You can’t *not* be thinking about process, because there’s always a process. You must consider the emotions of those involved. You are always projecting a story, whether you mean to or not.

“Procedural justice” is a concept in philosophy of law that refers to satisfaction with the process—and sometimes the result. In former CIA director Leon Panetta’s memoir, he describes top CIA leaders as dismayed by President Obama’s decision to release the so-called “torture memos” from the Bush administration. They thought it would set a dangerous precedent, but Obama believed the memos would be released anyway and wanted to get ahead of the story. The fact that Obama came to Langley and spent the day listening to the officials’ objections made it easier for them to accept his verdict. In his process, the president brought his critics into the story, too. All “four Ps” can be seen here as further evidence that they are always interactive. They are not four steps in order, but rather held in balance with one another—and continually inviting further refinement.

We have come some distance from the idea of a heroic leader who knows just what to do to save the day. The leader, like any human being, is subject to emotions, past experience with authority, tunnel vision, and blind spots. Leadership is not a solo endeavor or the fruit of one brain; it comes from learning from our own limitations and being more agile in the face of them. Strategic leadership is projecting a clear story and vision built from multiple perspectives that comes from a strong, inclusive process. The “strategic” part comes from not just being reactive, but offering intentionality—a genuine understanding that it’s not just you; you are working in an ecosystem with people whose input you need because they’re supplying vital information that augments yours and refines your ability to get things done. Humility is a key part of successful teamwork: as Massachusetts Institute of Technology leadership scholar Peter Senge has written, “It cannot be stressed too much that team learning is a team skill. A group of talented individual learners will not necessarily produce a learning team any more than a group of talented athletes will produce a great sports team. Learning teams learn how to learn together.”¹⁷

Practicing strategic leadership is like sitting in the cockpit of a plane or helicopter. What are the dials telling you? Which levers or paddles are on hand to respond? There is a stepwise component, too: there are issues in work you need to pay attention to *right now*, but you also have to keep your eye on all the dials. In the cockpit, you can’t just check altitude; you also need to know about the wind.

Leadership, in its strategic form, is perhaps akin to flight. Where are you going? What are the problems you’re trying to solve that require others’ input? Mainly, leadership is trying to change the culture—not necessarily in

¹⁶ Anjani Datla and Rob Wilkinson, “Leading with Empathy: Tarana Burke and the Making of the ‘Me too’ Movement,” HKS case study (2020), <https://case.hks.harvard.edu/leading-with-empathy-tarana-burke-and-the-making-of-the-me-too-movement/>.

¹⁷ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

the grandest, most sweeping sense—and move people to their best performance. To do that, you can't pick and choose; you must pay simultaneous attention to at least four dimensions of experience.

Conclusion

In interviews regarding his long career, Admiral James Stavridis has often spoken about the leader's imperative to “slow down.” He hung a picture in his study of an American naval fiasco: the sinking of the USS Maine that kicked off the Spanish-American war in 1898. At the time it was seen as a terrorist act by the Spanish but was later discovered that it was an accident caused by US incompetence. The naval commander who confronts evidence of naval failure in his own home is issuing a daily reminder to himself: “Slow down” to bring rationality and thoughtfulness to a decision. Slowing down helps with perception, people, process, and projection. In the same interview, Stavridis described the work of building consensus among twenty-nine NATO members where even tiny countries like Montenegro or Iceland can “put a real spoke in the bicycle wheel.”¹⁸ Stavridis offered an example: “You had to slow down, and go see the Bulgarians and understand their concerns.”

For Stavridis, the single idea of needing to engage deeply with each member of the alliance encompasses the four Ps. And it should be noted that slowing down is not the same as being slow and shouldn't be. Action should happen as quickly as it needs to, even when the arc of history may be moving painfully slow. At any rate of speed, however, you can't overlook the “four Ps” without facing consequences.

I (Wilkinson) usually found my role as a teacher as one to help students stop or slow down and listen—the absence of which (listening) we would describe as among the principal leadership challenges facing Americans right now. I think I go as far as anyone in believing there is always something of value in what someone is saying; the line that exists where we say, “I can now confidently dismiss this person,” is usually farther away for me than for others. This brings plenty of difficult discussions my way.

Throughout our society, certain kinds of conversations seem too fraught, immediately challenging or activating people's allegiances—Heifetz's “lines of code”—and instantly narrowing the range of acceptable responses. This is seen in exchanges from the family dinner table to Harvard lecture courses. Recently, my colleagues and I ran a leadership and ethics simulation in our class that went awry. Normally the simulation would be followed by a debrief, but the students were so angry that minutes before the debrief began, we felt we had to scrap our class plan and hold an open conversation with the students. My colleagues asked if I would lead it, where “leadership” would very concretely mean an ability to make course corrections in real time.

It was a difficult conversation, to be sure. Afterward, I would analyze the episode in light of the “four Ps.” There were the competing **perceptions** to deal with; not every student would see the issue the same way. In minutes, I had to manage a **process** to be effective. The deep emotional pain that some **people** were visibly experiencing could not be discounted. Finally, to keep the course on the rails for the rest of the semester, I had to draw upon **projection** to assure the group that we were headed in the right place—but what was the right place?

From my reflections afterwards and subsequent conversations with students, my sense was that it was an uneasy peace—better than no peace—and that perhaps there had been something in my method of letting them speak, asking questions, and recapping (repeated as long as was necessary), that helped us get there. Not every student would agree, and many remained angry. It wasn't something I got “right” or “wrong”—in fact, that wasn't even the correct binary—but across the group something shifted recognizably, and we could move forward as a class. For the classroom, read: the country; furthermore, your company, or community.

The “four Ps” framework of strategic leadership won't solve but does help us analyze the current leadership crisis in America and begin to design leadership activities to promote change while we confront an array of crises associated with climate change, fight for racial justice, and seek to overcome the severe polarization of our

¹⁸ MSNBC podcast “The Oath with Chuck Rosenberg,” October 16, 2019, <https://www.msnbc.com/theoath>

politics. At the same time, the “four Ps” point a way forward. Our **perception** is limited; humility is needed to know that we’re not seeing or hearing everything that’s important unless we do the work to find people who see the situation differently, sometimes for good reason. Our **process** is mainly crisis management and tactical adjustment, not a carefully worked out method of necessary steps and each of their tradeoffs: a true American recovery. In a polarized climate we don’t take the steps to truly include the **people** we need, which starts with understanding their—and our—emotions. As for **projection**, we aren’t all sharing the same story of where we want to go.

But we can do better. Think of any person whose leadership you admire—someone, not necessarily “a leader” (for, as we have suggested, leadership is an activity exercised every day by people with or without titles) who is helping others face down voter suppression or police brutality, fend off chaos and lies disseminated by social media, or trying to move us toward a carbon-free climate. Whether they are explicit about it or not, those people are likely to be effectively engaging all “four Ps” even as they are diving into the most intractable disagreements on major issues that we see on the news every day.