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## In Praise of the Incomplete Leader

by Deborah Ancona, Thomas W. Malone,  
Wanda J. Orlikowski, and Peter M. Senge

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We've come to expect a lot of our leaders. Top executives, the thinking goes, should have the intellectual capacity to make sense of unfathomably complex issues, the imaginative powers to paint a vision of the future that generates everyone's enthusiasm, the operational know-how to translate strategy into concrete plans, and the interpersonal skills to foster commitment to undertakings that could cost people's jobs should they fail. Unfortunately, no single person can possibly live up to those standards.

It's time to end the myth of the complete leader: the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out. In fact, the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be. In today's world, the executive's job is no longer to command and control but to cultivate and coordinate the actions of others at all levels of the organization. Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete—as having both strengths and weaknesses—will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others.

Corporations have been becoming less hierarchical and more collaborative for decades, of course, as globalization and the growing importance of knowledge work have required that responsibility and initiative be distributed more widely. Moreover, it is now possible for large groups of people to coordinate their actions, not just by bringing lots of information to a few centralized places but also by bringing lots of information to lots of places through ever-growing networks within and beyond the firm. The sheer complexity and ambiguity of problems is humbling. More and more decisions are made in the context of global markets and rapidly—sometimes radically—changing financial, social, political, technological, and environmental forces. Stakeholders such as activists, regulators, and employees all have claims on organizations.

No one person could possibly stay on top of everything. But the myth of the complete leader (and the attendant fear of appearing incompetent) makes many executives try to do just that, exhausting themselves and damaging their

organizations in the process. The incomplete leader, by contrast, knows when to let go: when to let those who know the local market do the advertising plan or when to let the engineering team run with its idea of what the customer needs. The incomplete leader also knows that leadership exists throughout the organizational hierarchy—wherever expertise, vision, new ideas, and commitment are found.

We've worked with hundreds of people who have struggled under the weight of the myth of the complete leader. Over the past six years, our work at the MIT Leadership Center has included studying leadership in many organizations and teaching the topic to senior executives, middle managers, and MBA students. In our practice-based programs, we have analyzed numerous accounts of organizational change and watched leaders struggle to meld top-down strategic initiatives with vibrant ideas from the rest of the organization.

All this work has led us to develop a model of distributed leadership. This framework, which synthesizes our own research with ideas from other leadership scholars, views leadership as a set of four capabilities: *sensemaking* (understanding the context in which a company and its people operate), *relating* (building relationships within and across organizations), *visioning* (creating a compelling picture of the future), and *inventing* (developing new ways to achieve the vision).

While somewhat simplified, these capabilities span the intellectual and interpersonal, the rational and intuitive, and the conceptual and creative capacities required in today's business environment. Rarely, if ever, will someone be equally skilled in all four domains. Thus, incomplete leaders differ from incompetent leaders in that they understand what they're good at and what they're not and have good judgment about how they can work with others to build on their strengths and offset their limitations.

Sometimes, leaders need to further develop the capabilities they are weakest in. The exhibits throughout this article provide some suggestions for when and how to do that. Other times, however, it's more important for leaders to find and work with others to compensate for their weaknesses. Teams and organizations—not just individuals—can use this framework to diagnose their strengths and weaknesses and find ways to balance their skill sets.

## Sensemaking

The term "sensemaking" was coined by organizational psychologist Karl Weick, and it means just what it sounds like: making sense of the world around us. Leaders are constantly trying to understand the contexts they are operating in. How will new technologies reshape the industry? How will changing cultural expectations shift the role of business in society? How does the globalization of labor markets affect recruitment and expansion plans?

Weick likened the process of sensemaking to cartography. What we map depends on where we look, what factors we choose to focus on, and what aspects of the terrain we decide to represent. Since these choices will shape the kind of map we produce, there is no perfect map of a terrain. Therefore, making sense is more than an act of analysis; it's an act of creativity. (See the exhibit "Engage in Sensemaking.")

The key for leaders is to determine what would be a useful map given their particular goals and then to draw one that adequately represents the situation the organization is facing at that moment. Executives who are strong in this capability know how to quickly capture the complexities of their environment and explain them to others in simple terms. This helps ensure that everyone is working from the same map, which makes it far easier to discuss and plan for the journey ahead. Leaders need to have the courage to present a map that highlights features they believe to be critical, even if their map doesn't conform to the dominant perspective.

When John Reed was CEO of Citibank, the company found itself in a real estate crisis. At the time, common wisdom said that Citibank would need to take a \$2 billion write-off, but Reed wasn't sure. He wanted a better understanding of the situation, so to map the problem, he met with federal regulators as well as his managers, the board, potential investors, economists, and real estate experts. He kept asking, "What am I missing here?" After those meetings, he had a much stronger grasp of the problem, and he recalibrated the write-off to \$5 billion—which turned out to be a far more accurate estimate. Later, three quarters into the bank's eight-quarter program to deal with the crisis, Reed realized that progress had stopped. He began talking to other CEOs known for their change management skills. This infor-

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mal benchmarking process led him to devise an organizational redesign.

Throughout the crisis, real estate valuations, investors' requirements, board demands, and management team expectations were all changing and constantly needed to be reassessed. Good leaders understand that sensemaking is a continuous process; they let the map emerge from a melding of observations, data, experiences, conversations, and analyses. In healthy organizations, this sort of sensemaking goes on all the time. People have ongoing dialogues about their interpretations of markets and organizational realities.

At IDEO, a product design firm, sensemaking is step one for all design teams. According to founder David Kelley, team members must act as anthropologists studying an alien culture to understand the potential product from all points of view. When brainstorming a new design, IDEO's teams consider multiple perspectives—that is, they build multiple maps to inform their creative process. One IDEO team was charged with creating a new design for an emergency room. To better understand the experience of a key stakeholder—the patient—team members attached a camera to a patient's head and captured his experience in the ER. The result: nearly ten full hours of film of the ceiling. The sensemaking provoked by this perspective led to a redesign of the ceiling that made it more aesthetically pleasing and able to display important information for patients.

### Relating

Many executives who attempt to foster trust, optimism, and consensus often reap anger, cynicism, and conflict instead. That's because they have difficulty relating to others, espe-

cially those who don't make sense of the world the way they do. Traditional images of leadership didn't assign much value to relating. Flawless leaders shouldn't need to seek counsel from anyone outside their tight inner circle, the thinking went, and they were expected to issue edicts rather than connect on an emotional level. Times have changed, of course, and in this era of networks, being able to build trusting relationships is a requirement of effective leadership.

Three key ways to do this are *inquiring*, *advocating*, and *connecting*. The concepts of inquiring and advocating stem from the work of organizational development specialists Chris Argyris and Don Schon. Inquiring means listening with the intention of genuinely understanding the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. Here, the listener suspends judgment and tries to comprehend how and why the speaker has moved from the data of his or her experiences to particular interpretations and conclusions.

Advocating, as the term implies, means explaining one's own point of view. It is the flip side of inquiring, and it's how leaders make clear to others how they reached their interpretations and conclusions. Good leaders distinguish their observations from their opinions and judgments and explain their reasoning without aggression or defensiveness. People with strong relating skills are typically those who've found a healthy balance between inquiring and advocating: They actively try to understand others' views but are able to stand up for their own. (See the exhibit "Build Relationships.")

We've seen countless relationships undermined because people disproportionately emphasized advocating over inquiring. Even though managers pay lip service to the importance of mutual understanding and shared commitment to a course of action, often their real focus is on winning the argument rather than strengthening the connection. Worse, in many organizations, the imbalance goes so far that having one's point of view prevail is what is understood as leadership.

Effective relating does not mean avoiding interpersonal conflict altogether. Argyris and Schon found that "maintaining a smooth surface" of conviviality and apparent agreement is one of the most common defensive routines that limits team effectiveness. Balancing in-

## Engage in Sensemaking

1. Get data from multiple sources: customers, suppliers, employees, competitors, other departments, and investors.
2. Involve others in your sensemaking. Say what you think you are seeing, and check with people who have different perspectives from yours.
3. Use early observations to shape small experiments in order to test your conclusions. Look for new ways to articulate alternatives and better ways to understand options.
4. Do not simply apply existing frameworks but instead be open to new possibilities. Try not to describe the world in stereotypical ways, such as good guys and bad guys, victims and oppressors, or marketers and engineers.

quiring and advocating is ultimately about showing respect, challenging opinions, asking tough questions, and taking a stand.

Consider Twynstra Gudde (TG), one of the largest independent consulting companies in the Netherlands. A few years ago, it replaced the role of CEO with a team of four managing directors who share leadership responsibilities. Given this unique structure, it's vital that these directors effectively relate to one another. They've adopted simple rules, such as a requirement that each leader give his opinion on every issue, majority-rules voting, and veto power for each director.

Clearly, for TG's senior team model to work, members must be skilled at engaging in dialogue together. They continually practice both inquiring and advocating, and because each director can veto a decision, each must thoroughly explain his reasoning to convince the others' that his perspective has merit. It's not easy to reach this level of mutual respect and trust, but over time, the team members' willingness to create honest connections with one another has paid off handsomely. Although they don't always reach consensus, they are able to settle on a course of action. Since this new form of leadership was introduced, TG has thrived: The company's profits have doubled, and employee satisfaction levels have improved. What's more, TG's leadership structure has served as a model for cooperation throughout the organization as well as in the firm's relations with its clients.

The third aspect of relating, connecting, involves cultivating a network of confidants who can help a leader accomplish a wide range of goals. Leaders who are strong in this capability have many people they can turn to who can help them think through difficult problems or

support them in their initiatives. They understand that the time spent building and maintaining these connections is time spent investing in their leadership skills. Because no one person can possibly have all the answers, or indeed, know all the right questions to ask, it's crucial that leaders be able to tap into a network of people who can fill in the gaps.

## Visioning

Sensemaking and relating can be called the enabling capabilities of leadership. They help set the conditions that motivate and sustain change. The next two leadership capabilities—what we call “visioning” and inventing—are creative and action oriented: They produce the focus and energy needed to make change happen.

Visioning involves creating compelling images of the future. While sensemaking charts a map of what is, visioning produces a map of what could be and, more important, what a leader wants the future to be. It consists of far more than pinning a vision statement to the wall. Indeed, a shared vision is not a static thing—it's an ongoing process. Like sensemaking, visioning is dynamic and collaborative, a process of articulating what the members of an organization want to create together.

Fundamentally, visioning gives people a sense of meaning in their work. Leaders who are skilled in this capability are able to get people excited about their view of the future while inviting others to help crystallize that image. (See the exhibit “Create a Vision.”) If they realize other people aren't joining in or buying into the vision, they don't just turn up the volume; they engage in a dialogue about the reality they hope to produce. They use stories and metaphors to paint a vivid picture of what the vision will accomplish, even if they don't have a comprehensive plan for getting there. They know that if the vision is credible and compelling enough, others will generate ideas to advance it.

In South Africa in the early 1990s, a joke was making the rounds: Given the country's daunting challenges, people had two options, one practical and the other miraculous. The practical option was for everyone to pray for a band of angels to come down from heaven and fix things. The miraculous option was for people to talk with one another until they could find a way forward. In F.W. de Klerk's famous speech

## Build Relationships

1. Spend time trying to understand others' perspectives, listening with an open mind and without judgment.
2. Encourage others to voice their opinions. What do they care about? How do they interpret what's going on? Why?
3. Before expressing your ideas, try to anticipate how others will react to them and how you might best explain them.
4. When expressing your ideas, don't just give a bottom line; explain your reasoning process.
5. Assess the strengths of your current connections: How well do you relate to others when receiving advice? When giving advice? When thinking through difficult problems? When asking for help?

in 1990—his first after assuming leadership—he called for a nonracist South Africa and suggested that negotiation was the only way to achieve a peaceful transition. That speech sparked a set of changes that led to Nelson Mandela's release from Robben Island prison and the return to the country of previously banned political leaders.

Few of South Africa's leaders agreed on much of anything regarding the country's future. It seemed like a long shot, at best, that a scenario-planning process convened by a black professor from the University of the Western Cape and facilitated by a white Canadian from Royal Dutch Shell would be able to bring about any sort of change. But they, together with members of the African National Congress (ANC), the radical Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the white business community, were charged with forging a new path for South Africa.

When the team members first met, they focused on collective sensemaking. Their discussions then evolved into a yearlong visioning process. In his book, *Solving Tough Problems*, Adam Kahane, the facilitator, says the group started by telling stories of "left-wing revolution, right-wing revolts, and free market utopias." Eventually, the leadership team drafted a set of scenarios that described the many paths toward disaster and the one toward sustainable development.

They used metaphors and clear imagery to convey the various paths in language that was easy to understand. One negative scenario, for instance, was dubbed "Ostrich": A nonrepresentative white government sticks

its head in the sand, trying to avoid a negotiated settlement with the black majority. Another negative scenario was labeled "Icarus": A constitutionally unconstrained black government comes to power with noble intentions and embarks on a huge, unsustainable public-spending spree that crashes the economy. This scenario contradicted the popular belief that the country was rich and could simply redistribute wealth from whites to blacks. The Icarus scenario set the stage for a fundamental (and controversial) shift in economic thinking in the ANC and other left-wing parties—a shift that led the ANC government to "strict and consistent fiscal discipline," according to Kahane.

The group's one positive scenario involved the government adopting a set of sustainable policies that would put the country on a path of inclusive growth to successfully rebuild the economy and establish democracy. This option was called "Flamingo," invoking the image of a flock of beautiful birds all taking flight together.

This process of visioning unearthed an extraordinary collective sense of possibility in South Africa. Instead of talking about what other people should do to advance some agenda, the leaders spoke about what they could do to create a better future for everyone. They didn't have an exact implementation plan at the ready, but by creating a credible vision, they paved the way for others to join in and help make their vision a reality.

Leaders who excel in visioning walk the walk; they work to embody the core values and ideas contained in the vision. Darcy Winslow, Nike's global director for women's footwear, is a good example. A 14-year veteran at Nike, Winslow previously held the position of general manager of sustainable business opportunities at the shoe and apparel giant. Her work in that role reflected her own core values, including her passion for the environment. "We had come to see that our customers' health and our own ability to compete were inseparable from the health of the environment," she says. So she initiated the concept of ecologically intelligent product design. Winslow's team worked at determining the chemical composition and environmental effects of every material and process Nike used. They visited factories in China and collected samples of rubber, leather, nylon, polyester, and foams to

## Create a Vision

1. Practice creating a vision in many arenas, including your work life, your home life, and in community groups. Ask yourself, "What do I want to create?"
2. Develop a vision about something that inspires you. Your enthusiasm will motivate you and others. Listen to what they find exciting and important.
3. Expect that not all people will share your passion. Be prepared to explain why people should care about your vision and what can be achieved through it. If people don't get it, don't just turn up the volume. Try to construct a shared vision.
4. Don't worry if you don't know how to accomplish the vision. If it is compelling and credible, other people will discover all sorts of ways to make it real—ways you never could have imagined on your own.
5. Use images, metaphors, and stories to convey complex situations that will enable others to act.

determine their chemical makeup. This led Winslow and her team to develop a list of “positive” materials—those that weren’t harmful to the environment—that they hoped to use in more Nike products. “Environmental sustainability” was no longer just an abstract term on a vision statement; the team now felt a mandate to realize the vision.

### Inventing

Even the most compelling vision will lose its power if it floats, unconnected, above the everyday reality of organizational life. To transform a vision of the future into a present-day reality, leaders need to devise processes that will give it life. This inventing is what moves a business from the abstract world of ideas to the concrete world of implementation. In fact, inventing is similar to execution, but the label “inventing” emphasizes that this process often requires creativity to help people figure out new ways of working together.

To realize a new vision, people usually can’t keep doing the same things they’ve been doing. They need to conceive, design, and put into practice new ways of interacting and organizing. Some of the most famous examples of large-scale organizational innovation come from the automotive industry: Henry Ford’s conception of the assembly-line factory and Toyota’s famed integrated production system.

More recently, Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay, invented through his company a new way of doing large-scale retailing. His vision was of an online community where users would take responsibility for what happened. In a 2001 BusinessWeek Online interview, Omidyar explained, “I had the idea that I wanted to create an efficient market and a level playing field where everyone had equal access to information. I wanted to give the power of the market back to individuals, not just large corporations. That was the driving motivation for creating eBay at the start.”

Consequently, eBay outsources most of the functions of traditional retailing—purchasing, order fulfillment, and customer service, for example—to independent sellers worldwide. The company estimates that more than 430,000 people make their primary living from selling wares on eBay. If those individuals were all employees of eBay, it would be the second largest

private employer in the United States after Wal-Mart.

The people who work through eBay are essentially independent store owners, and, as such, they have a huge amount of autonomy in how they do their work. They decide what to sell, when to sell it, how to price, and how to advertise. Coupled with this individual freedom is global scale. eBay’s infrastructure enables them to sell their goods all over the world. What makes eBay’s inventing so radical is that it represents a new relationship between an organization and its parts. Unlike typical outsourcing, eBay doesn’t pay its retailers—they pay the company.

Inventing doesn’t have to occur on such a grand scale. It happens every time a person creates a way of approaching a task or figures out how to overcome a previously insurmountable obstacle. In their book *Car Launch*, George Roth and Art Kleiner describe a highly successful product development team in the automobile industry that struggled with completing its designs on time. Much of the source of the problem, the team members concluded, came from the stovepipe organizational structure found in the product development division. Even though they were a “colocated” team dedicated to designing a common new car, members were divided by their different technical expertise, experience, jargon, and norms of working.

When the team invented a mechanical prototyping device that complemented its computer-aided design tools, the group members found that it facilitated a whole new way of collaborating. Multiple groups within the team could quickly create physical mock-ups of design ideas to be tested by the various engineers from different specialties in the team. The group called the device “the harmony buck,” because it helped people break out of their comfortable engineering specialties and solve interdependent design problems together. Development of a “full body” physical mock-up of the new car allowed engineers to hang around the prototype, providing a central focal point for their interactions. It enabled them to more easily identify and raise cross-functional issues, and it facilitated mutual problem solving and coordination.

In sum, leaders must be able to succeed at inventing, and this requires both attention to detail and creativity. (See the exhibit “Cultivate Inventiveness.”)

## Cultivate Inventiveness

1. Don’t assume that the way things have always been done is the best way to do them.
2. When a new task or change effort emerges, encourage creative ways of getting it done.
3. Experiment with different ways of organizing work. Find alternative methods for grouping and linking people.
4. When working to understand your current environment, ask yourself, “What other options are possible?”

### Balancing the Four Capabilities

Sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing are interdependent. Without sensemaking, there's no common view of reality from which to start. Without relating, people work in isolation or, worse, strive toward different aims. Without visioning, there's no shared direction. And without inventing, a vision remains illusory. No one leader, however, will excel at all four capabilities in equal measure.

Typically, leaders are strong in one or two capabilities. Intel chairman Andy Grove is the quintessential sensemaker, for instance, with a gift for recognizing strategic inflection points that can be exploited for competitive advantage. Herb Kelleher, the former CEO of Southwest Airlines, excels at relating. He remarked in the journal *Leader to Leader* that "We are not afraid to talk to our people with emotion. We're not afraid to tell them, 'We love you.' Because we do." With this emo-

tional connection comes equitable compensation and profit sharing.

Apple CEO Steve Jobs is a visionary whose ambitious dreams and persuasiveness have catalyzed remarkable successes for Apple, Next, and Pixar. Meg Whitman, the CEO of eBay, helped bring Pierre Omidyar's vision of online retailing to life by inventing ways to deal with security, vendor reliability, and product diversification.

Once leaders diagnose their own capabilities, identifying their unique set of strengths and weaknesses, they must search for others who can provide the things they're missing. (See the sidebar "Examining Your Leadership Capabilities.") Leaders who choose only people who mirror themselves are likely to find their organizations tilting in one direction, missing one or more essential capabilities needed to survive in a changing, complex world. That's why it's important to examine the whole organization to make sure it is appropriately balanced as well. It's the leader's responsibility to create an environment that lets people complement one another's strengths and offset one another's weaknesses. In this way, leadership is distributed across multiple people throughout the organization.

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Years ago, one of us attended a three-day meeting on leadership with 15 top managers from different companies. At the close of it, participants were asked to reflect on their experience as leaders. One executive, responsible for more than 50,000 people in his division of a manufacturing corporation, drew two pictures on a flip chart. The image on the left was what he projected to the outside world: It was a large, intimidating face holding up a huge fist. The image on the right represented how he saw himself: a small face with wide eyes, hair standing on end, and an expression of sheer terror.

We believe that most leaders experience that profound dichotomy every day, and it's a heavy burden. How many times have you feigned confidence to superiors or reports when you were really unsure? Have you ever felt comfortable conceding that you were confused by the latest business results or caught off guard by a competitor's move? Would you ever admit to feeling inadequate to cope with the complex issues your firm was facing? Anyone who can identify with these situations knows firsthand

## Examining Your Leadership Capabilities

Few people wake up in the morning and say, "I'm a poor sensemaker" or "I just can't relate to others." They tend to experience their own weaknesses more as chronic or inexplicable failures in the organization or in those around them. The following descriptions will help you recognize opportunities to develop your leadership capabilities and identify openings for working with others.

### Signs of Weak Sensemaking

1. You feel strongly that you are usually right and others are often wrong.
2. You feel your views describe reality correctly, but others' views do not.
3. You find you are often blindsided by changes in your organization or industry.
4. When things change, you typically feel resentful. (That's not the way it should be!)

### Signs of Weak Relating

1. You blame others for failed projects.
2. You feel others are constantly letting you down or failing to live up to your expectations.
3. You find that many of your interac-

tions at work are unpleasant, frustrating, or argumentative.

4. You find many of the people you work with untrustworthy.

### Signs of Weak Visioning

1. You feel your work involves managing an endless series of crises.
2. You feel like you're bouncing from pillar to post with no sense of larger purpose.
3. You often wonder, "Why are we doing this?" or "Does it really matter?"
4. You can't remember the last time you talked to your family or a friend with excitement about your work.

### Signs of Weak Inventing

1. Your organization's vision seems abstract to you.
2. You have difficulty relating your company's vision to what you are doing today.
3. You notice dysfunctional gaps between your organization's aspirations and the way work is organized.
4. You find that things tend to revert to business as usual.

what it's like to be trapped in the myth of the complete leader—the person at the top without flaws. It's time to put that myth to rest, not only for the sake of frustrated leaders but also for the health of organizations. Even the most talented leaders require the input and leadership of others, constructively solicited and

creatively applied. It's time to celebrate the incomplete—that is, the human—leader.

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