

Leading Through the of the Storm



BY
Sheila Ramsey & Barbara Schaefti

Abstract: Mark Southern is presented as an exemplar for global leaders in 2011. Responsible for a multinational and multi-disciplinary team in a rapidly changing industry, he is stressed, physically tired, with less time than he wishes for family and friends, yet called upon to provide inspiration, vision, and an internally motivated authentic leadership. With context provided by the leadership literature, Mark's story shows us how, during an unexpected challenge, he is able to create a life-enhancing, professionally effective response. He uses the principles and practices of the Personal Leadership methodology, and emerges wiser and more energized than when he began.



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We begin with a story. Our protagonist is Mark Southern, a U.S.-American working for a mid-size global corporation with primary activities in the chemical, plastics, and pharmaceutical industries. Mark is the Global Head of quality assurance for the pharmaceutical division. Based in the US, he travels on business 60% of the time. Five hundred people worldwide work in the company on quality assurance. Mark has five direct reports, and himself reports to a member of the senior leadership who in turn reports to the CEO. As Mark describes it,

After decades of rising profits, my company is facing serious challenges. The day of the “blockbuster drug” is long gone, established markets no longer provide double-digit growth, per capita income in the emerging markets limits possibilities, unions continually proscribe action, and the regulatory environment is increasingly complex and demanding. One result for our industry is an increasing number of mergers and acquisitions (M&As). My own company’s efforts to reposition for success have generated either an M&A or a serious reorganization (and the former has always involved the latter) approximately every two years for the last five.

My direct reports and I are responsible for testing new products before they are released for sale, for overseeing and participating in clinical and pre-clinical studies, and for conducting all inspections and meeting all standards as required by regulatory agencies around the world. We work across eight manufacturing sites with concomitant global time-zone challenges. Multi-national and multi-lingual (not to mention multi-religious and multi-gender) teams are also multi-disciplinary. The vast majority of our work takes place virtually.

A Perfect Storm

The circumstances Mark describes above represent the standard for leaders today. They

stand in the midst of “a perfect storm,” a “critical or [potentially] disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors” (Merriam-Webster, 2011).

Indeed, as we enter his story, Mark is facing significant challenges, even threats. He is charged with leading a complex team in a wildly changing world. At a macro-level, his realities include an industry in flux with no stable future in sight. At a micro-level, he is managing globally located team members working virtually with maximally diverse paradigms, experiences, and expectations. These perfect-storm conditions position Mark to be blown in many directions by a variety of stakeholders and company objectives. He is set up to be highly stressed, to be physically tired, to have less time than he wishes for family and friends—and, of course, to be exhilarated by team success.

In the midst of these conditions, Mark is expected to be the calm center. This is what meteorologists call the eye of the storm. Surrounded by a ring of towering thunderstorms, the eye is a place of light wind and clear skies that offers relative calm. Employees look to their leaders to provide them with these still waters in the midst of a complex world. They expect their leaders to call forth and guide a clear vision, to inspire them, and to ensure that services and products stay relevant and even exceed expectations no matter how “perfect” the storm.

Mark’s story today is different in intensity and scope than a story he might have told 10 or 20 years ago. Yet our professional lives have always been a context for stress and the competing demands of work-life balance. What is it, then, that makes leading in 2011 any more difficult than leading in 1991? Although leadership contexts are today certainly more multi-dimensional and more uniquely complex in their diversity and unpredictability, there is also another factor at play: Today, more than ever before, Mark is set up to realize that his leadership style, and his ability to inspire and engage others, begins from the inside out.

Twenty years ago, Stephen Covey (1990) first told us of the value of self-renewal and the importance of leading from within. Since then, the work of Daniel Goleman (2006) in emotional intelligence has built a foundation for legitimizing the time and attention that leaders give to de-constructing their habitual, unexamined assumptions about human motivation and creativity. We are now acutely aware that:

A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and move and have their being—conditions that can either be as illuminating as heaven or as shadowing as hell. A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good (Palmer, 1990, p. 7).

With the admonition to "Know Thyself" as valid a directive today as it was in ancient Greece, Mark is expected to use self-knowledge to sharpen his leadership skills. Ultimately, Mark's success in 2011 depends on the extent to which he is able to lead not just through the "eye" of the storm, but through the "I" of the storm.

This, then, is the focus of this chapter. We will begin by reviewing what the literature tells us about leading through the "I" of the storm. We will then follow Mark as he navigates stormy waters using a leadership methodology known as Personal Leadership: Making a World of Difference™. In so doing, we will consider the relevance of Personal Leadership's two principles and six practices to 21st century leaders who must lead through the "I" of the storm.

Leading Through the "I" of the Storm

The fields of leadership, intercultural communication, education, psychology, and the wisdom traditions help us understand the demands of leadership today. A review of this

literature tells us that leading through the "I" of the storm requires that Mark adopt three central orientations: (a) an appreciative orientation, (b) a receptive orientation, and (c) a learning orientation (Schaetti, Ramsey, & Watanabe, 2008; Schaetti, Ramsey, & Watanabe, 2009).

*An appreciative orientation:
Engagement in the context
of positive psychology.*

Leaders today, like Mark, know they need to have a heightened capacity for resilience, an inner strength and calm that comes to their service when they are de-motivated by yet one more challenge. Mark knows it is his responsibility to manage his emotional reactions, as well as any negative self-judgment or fears of inadequacy he may experience. One way to do this is by cultivating an appreciative orientation.

There are three dimensions of leadership, each of them necessary to high performance. In the transactional dimension, Mark places his focus on ensuring that organizational tasks are achieved (Burns, 1978). In the transformative, he places his focus on building efficacy and sharing power so that others also develop as leaders (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). In the transpersonal, he puts his focus on discovering more about his own possibilities, and on structuring a way of engaging with change that leaves him more creative and energized than when he began (Ramsey, 2004). It is especially this third and most encompassing dimension that requires an appreciative orientation.

With an appreciative orientation, Mark augments what is working. He makes decisions, solves problems and encourages dialogue in alignment with his own unique expressions of creativity and insight (Lewis, 2011; Schaetti, et al., 2008; Schaetti, et al., 2009). He is curious; he questions the ways his common sense and automatic reactions influence him (Wheatley & Chodron, 1999). With minimal hesitation, he expands into a state of presence from which insight and creative direction is more readily accessed (Scharmer, 2009). He cultivates the

capacity to flourish (Fredrickson, 2009), to manage his energy and not just his time (Loehr & Schwartz, 2004), and to be fully present "to the larger space or field around us, to an expanded sense of self and, ultimately, to what is emerging through us" (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworsky, & Flowers, 2004, p. 19).

As this orientation becomes set in Mark's internal world, it becomes easier and more natural for him to identify what lies at the positive life-giving core of a team or larger enterprise, and to find opportunity and possibility in even the most negative of scenarios (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stravos, 2003; Schiller, Riley, & Holland, 2001; Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006; Wright, 1998). When Mark leads in this kind of appreciative way, he is better able to stay in touch with his calm center and thus to lead through the "I" of the storm.

*A receptive orientation:
Competence in the context
of difference.*

Leadership today calls for sophisticated competence in leading across differences of nationality, ethnicity, language, and more. Mark is working in eight different locations around the globe, leading multicultural teams comprised of a variety of professional competencies.

Seeking "to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett, 2007, p. 1), a leader such as Mark typically begins by taking what is called a "culture-specific" approach. He searches out information about dynamics of decision-making or information-sharing that are broadly said to pertain to a particular group, and seeks to understand the value orientations that might drive the specific behaviors of colleagues, customers, or vendors from various cultures (as seen, for example, in Crouch, 2004; Condon & Masumoto, 2010; or Asselin & Mastron, 2010). Building on this, ideally, Mark also takes a "culture-general" approach, learning about cultural contrasts, the patterns that describe differences in how people behave regardless of the specific cultures involved (see Hall, 1959; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1980).

While these culture-specific and culture-general approaches are necessary, they are not sufficient: "knowledge of content does not automatically translate into mastery of process" (Bennett, 1998, p. 10). Mark must be able to apply cultural knowledge without stereotyping or over-generalizing. This is only possible by knowing that each person and situation he encounters is unique, and that cultural information serves, but cannot pre-determine, his interaction.

Success requires that Mark take a receptive orientation. He pays attention to the details of his interactions and his habitual behaviors. He is open to opinions or behaviors that make him uncomfortable. He has an ongoing internal conversation about what he is experiencing as he is experiencing it. He has learned both to consider an encounter after it is complete to mine it for what he can learn, and to apply similar attention in the very moment that an interaction is occurring (Nagata, 2004). He makes moment-to-moment choices based on what he observes in others and in himself, and can change his direction in order to immediately improve the quality of a relationship or a communication exchange. He can be creative, letting each moment speak in its unique voice, rather than simply responding from assumptions about what worked or did not work in the past.

This kind of self-management requires a whole-person approach to building competence across difference. Working with those who do not share our worldview is an emotional and physical experience as well as an intellectual one (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004; Schaetti, et al., 2008; Schaetti, et al., 2009). When Mark is receptive to his full intelligence, he is leading through the "I" of the storm.

*A learning orientation:
Practice in the context
of sustained development.*

To "practice" something means doing it, rather than merely thinking about doing it, with the deliberate aim of learning and improving competence. It requires the interest and ability

to observe, self-reflect, and self-monitor, and to incorporate ongoing feedback (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). It implies a sustained focus on becoming, rather than on the achievement of a final end state, and is key to the third central orientation in which we are positioning Mark.

Mark learns to re-label what he might otherwise be tempted to judge as a mistake. He sees that every event and experience offers information to be used as feedback—or feedforward (Goldsmith, 2002). He transforms his lived experience, not just his professional life, into a “living laboratory” (Schaetti, et al., 2008; Schaetti, et al., 2009). This requires tremendous commitment and honesty.

This idea that effective leadership requires a learning orientation—an intentionally developed personal practice—has gained increasing acceptance over the last 25 years. It is likely that as a leader of the 21st century, Mark has participated in many ventures intended to help him understand what’s going on inside himself. He has received data from several 360-degree feedback instruments. He knows his MBTI profile and the results of similar assessments. He has a detailed individual development plan set within the context of his company’s performance management system. He has attended several high-level leadership development seminars and has had a coach to help him interpret and apply all the data he has received.

And yet, we continually encounter what we call “the Monday morning phenomenon.” This is the litmus test for all the avenues that Mark has explored: To what extent is he able to integrate and apply on Monday morning what he learned during the previous week’s intense learning event or evaluation process? Leaders seeking to lead through the “I” of the storm, regardless of where in the world they find themselves, always seem to ask very much the same questions: How do I actually do this? How do I start? When Mark leverages his learning orientation to practice what he’s learning, he is leading through the “I” of the storm.

Stormy Waters

Let’s return to Mark’s story, as he encounters the stormy waters of his own Monday morning phenomena:

After the latest corporate reorganization, a Danish woman I’ll call Helga, who knows very little about quality assurance, became my new boss. She met with my peers and me to clarify the new objectives coming out of the reorganization, and then we were off and running.

Perhaps because she was new to the job or perhaps because three of her five team members were new to theirs, I was left to get on with things quite independently, which, frankly, I like. I have a strong sense of what it means to lead: having a measure of freedom to act on my own initiative and to make my own decisions, including about how best to work with my team to have a positive impact on their abilities to deliver.

The first year went by quickly, and now Helga and I have scheduled my annual performance review. She begins by saying “Great job,” and “You and your team are really delivering,” but adds, “If I had one thing to complain about, it’s that you don’t communicate enough with me.” She then tells me that there is to be another reorganization, and that she is thinking about promoting someone else into a position for which she knows I, and many of my colleagues, think I am better qualified. She says she needs somebody in the position who will communicate well with her, and that she wants to give me time to improve on this before she makes her final decision.

My immediate (internal) reaction is [expletive deleted]! I am flying out the next day to the other side of the world, where I will be presenting the quality aspects of a safety-related investigation. I can’t believe Helga has sprung this on me like this. Now not only will I be fighting jet lag, language and cultural differences,

and regulatory minefields, I will also be dealing with this!

How, in this moment, does Mark remember to take an appreciative, receptive, and learning orientation? How does he call forth his full intelligence when he had such a negative reaction, and while Helga is awaiting his response? Since 1998, leaders like Mark at almost all levels of organization and in diverse national, cultural, and industrial contexts have been turning to Personal Leadership to help them (Schaetti, et al., 2008; Schaetti, et al., 2009). This methodology of two principles and six practices is called “Personal Leadership” because it facilitates taking direct and intentional leadership of one’s own experience in all situations. It provides an articulated pathway for those who choose to use themselves as their own instrument (Hall, 1959) and to lead through the “I” of the storm—on Monday morning and every morning.

Leading Through Personal Leadership

Personal Leadership’s two principles are mindfulness and creativity. Mindfulness is about being aware, being “awake,” and paying attention. Creativity is about bringing forth what is right for the particular moment and cultivating a connection to our deepest source of joy and inspiration.

Mark uses a three-phase process to help him take these two principles from theory into action. The first step is to Recognize “Something’s Up.” Helga has just threatened to give the position Mark deserves to someone else all because she doesn’t like his communication style. Something is definitely “up” for him—he’s angry. The next step is to Invite Reflection. He recognizes he’s in stormy waters, where there is as much opportunity as challenge, and that he has just a few seconds to adjust his course. He trusts that this situation can ultimately serve him, in the short term in his relationship with Helga and in the longer term in both his career and his leadership practice. Finally, he must Discern Right Action. He determines what, if anything, he is to do or say, right now, in this interaction with Helga.

Recognizing that something’s up is a relatively easy first step, as long as Mark is willing to be mindful of his experience. But how does he actually invite reflection or discern the right thing to do? How can he transform learning, receptive, and appreciative orientations into action when confronted by such a situation?

This is Personal Leadership’s unique contribution to leading through the “I” of the storm. It offers six very tangible practices with which Mark can work.

- 1. Attending to Judgment**
- 2. Attending to Emotion**
- 3. Attending to Physical Sensation**
- 4. Cultivating Stillness**
- 5. Engaging Ambiguity**
- 6. Aligning with Vision**

Using Mark’s story, we will walk through these six practices, offering a short description of each one and Mark’s accompanying reflection, arriving finally at the “right action” that he discerned.

1. Attending to judgment: Automatic judgments prevent us from mindfully observing and creatively engaging what is going on in the present moment. Watch your thoughts. Examine your judgments, both positive and negative. Inquire about the sources and consequences of your judgments before you act on them.

She really has a lousy sense of timing! If Helga has an issue with my communication, she could have told me anytime in the past year rather than waiting until just before one of my critical regulatory reviews. She clearly isn’t thinking about me at all, is only centered on herself and what works best for her. And she sure doesn’t know how to do a proper review.

I thought we were having such a good year. I wasn't expecting this at all. And I was certainly assuming that if this new position came open, I'd be the one chosen for it. I never really stopped to consider otherwise, even after the last reorg when Helga came on board.

2. Attending to emotion: Emotion paradoxically both blocks and offers an opportunity to learn about the specific situation or encounter. Rather than engage or suppress your emotion, move into the neutral perspective of being a witness, and observe yourself. Follow the emotion to its source and to the insight it has to offer. Notice how your emotion changes.

I feel totally blind-sided and embarrassed. I'm angry with Helga for giving me a good performance review but in the same breath telling me that just because I don't communicate in the way she wants, she's going to give my—my—position to someone else. I'm angry with all these reorganizations, too. Can't we have just a little stability around here for once?!

And I'm angry with myself. I should have made a point somehow of connecting better with Helga throughout the year. Maybe I could have anticipated this issue of hers. I value collaborative working relationships, and it's not okay that Helga has been less than satisfied with ours. And what are the implications of this for my future? I don't want this stress right now!

3. Attending to physical sensation: The routines and patterns that we have developed to get along in the world live in our nervous systems and in our muscular patterns. Values and assumptions are embodied experiences and talk to us through physical sensation. Distinguish the knot in your shoulder, twist in your gut, expansion in your heart. Receive your body's guidance.

I can feel the knot between my shoulder blades and—there it is, I know this

pattern—the desire to punch something hard. There's a building of force inside me that feels like it needs to explode! I can feel the sweat breaking out on my back.

4. Cultivating stillness: Internal stillness makes possible a receptive space through which to receive information from our deep, creative connection. Quiet your mind. Disentangle internal experience from external circumstance. Breathe. Meditate through movement or sitting. Attend to what resonates as truth from deep within.

Let me quit paying attention so exclusively to what Helga is saying, and bring some of my focus to breathing really deeply and evenly, to what's going on inside me. I wonder if Helga would mind if I stood up. . . . I guess that might look odd, or maybe even seem threatening. And besides, I feel a bit shaky. I can at least adjust my position in this chair. I need the movement!

Okay, shifting my position helps. I can feel the blood flow, and I feel a bit calmer. I still don't know what to do, but the knot in my shoulders is easing and I feel more energized, not quite so trapped.

So, taking a few more deep breaths now. . . . It's curious that I got so mad so fast. This really pushed my buttons. And hmmm. . . . It strikes me that this isn't only about me. Maybe this is also about Helga wanting to do her job well. I wonder how this situation might shift if I assume it's being motivated by Helga's good intentions. Maybe it doesn't matter that she's not doing what I want, in the way I want, or in the way I would do it if I were in her shoes.

And, she didn't actually say I wasn't going to get the new position; what she said was only that maybe I wouldn't. So everything's really still wide open.

Wow, that feels energizing now! There's something exciting here, something that I

can leverage, maybe even actually leverage with Helga. . . .

5. Engaging ambiguity: Change and difference create a time of uncertainty, a liminal state between what was and what will be. Embrace that time. Become comfortable with the sense of not knowing what to do. Allow possibilities to arise. Open yourself to inspiration and tap your infinite creativity for constructing appropriate responses.

Well, I don't actually know what Helga means when she says I don't communicate enough with her. I know it's not inherent in my nature to ask questions at a time like this; I've been told often enough that my tendency is to go for immediate action. My first thought is to try and fix this. I can send in monthly reports, as I've been meaning to do. I can make more regular phone calls with project updates. But—wait a minute—maybe I just need to ask Helga to clarify what she means.

And . . . what more can I not know? Well, this thing about my next position, or what's been feeling like mine. Maybe there's some reason she's raised this with me now. It felt at first like a threat, but what if it's just Helga being really direct and up-front. I know Danes tend to have tell-it-like-it-is communication styles. Could she actually be presenting me with an opportunity to show her some new way that I can partner with her professionally? Hmm. That's an intriguing way to think about it.

6. Aligning with vision: Visions provide direct support as we live and work in situations of difference. Craft your guiding vision. Commit to being an expression of your highest and best. Make choices that support you living in alignment with that vision.

My vision of leadership emphasizes working with members of my team in such a way that I have a positive impact on their ability to deliver. I never really thought

about how a quality of collaboration with my boss could foster this vision. Interesting. I'm seeing that there's a whole new possibility opening for me here.

I feel very different than I did just seconds ago. I feel more open, like maybe there are actually some interesting possibilities here for me.

Mark's story suggests that this self-reflection took time. And indeed it did—some one or two minutes as Helga continued to talk about the upcoming reorganization. As a consistent practitioner of Personal Leadership, Mark is able to use a laser-like precision as he moves through the methodology. He is able to engage in the process even while he continues in interaction. (With a larger or more complex Something's Up, even a skilled practitioner like Mark might need more time and less distraction.)

And so, what about Mark's right action? What, if anything, did Mark do or say in response to Helga?

This seems so obvious to me now. My first step is to thank Helga for speaking with me frankly and to let her know that I can appreciate she would want someone in the position who communicates well with her. I can then ask her for one or two examples of what I would be doing if I were communicating with her more effectively. And I need to just keep looking for what's really good about this situation.

That is the end of the story, at least the part that concerns us in terms of leading through the “I” of the storm. In that context, we're more interested in the process of practice than in the results of Mark's decision. At the same time, however, we're aware that some may like to know what happened to Mark, to his relationship with his boss, and to the position he had been hoping to receive.

Mark took his action steps much as described above. He found out that what Helga wanted

in the way of communication was not more reports or phone calls about the job, but the opportunity to discuss corporate direction, leadership philosophy, and Mark's hopes for his ongoing career. It turned out that Helga was eager to mentor him in very practical ways. When he mentioned the upcoming regulatory meeting, she offered some useful questions that helped him reposition his approach. That may not be the only reason the regulatory review went well, but it certainly helped. As to whether Mark got the new position with the next reorganization: he did not. One year later, however, in no small part due to Helga's endorsement, Mark was recruited by a small but very well-funded start-up company. His work there brings him great personal and professional satisfaction.

Leaving behind the "what" of Mark's decision, let us now focus on the "how" of his leadership practice. If you review this story, you'll see that his practice of Personal Leadership helped him lead from the inside out. He took an appreciative orientation, expanding into a quality of presencing in which he identified with his positive and life-giving core, believing throughout that there was an opportunity being offered to him if he could only find it. He operated from not only the transactional dimension of leadership (getting the job done), but also the transformational (developing collaborative relationships), and the transpersonal (aligning with his unique vision and creative wisdom).

He also took a receptive orientation. He realized that Helga might be operating from a different cultural orientation than his own. He translated that knowledge into competence because he stepped back from the "stuff" of the problem to reflect with clarity. He paused, breathed deeply to create the space that allowed him to access more of his knowledge and wisdom. In using the six Personal Leadership practices to guide him, he was able to go beyond what he consciously knew to discern his right action.

And Mark took a learning orientation. He understood that every instance, including that interaction with Helga, was an opportunity to

engage his unique leadership practice. He took responsibility for his stylistic preferences. If he had not, rather than engaging with mindfulness and creativity, he would have operated, at best, on the automatic pilot of his own assumptions. He might never have asked Helga for more information, but instead might have simply started submitting more reports and making more phone calls. The results might not have been catastrophic, but it is unlikely Helga would have become a mentor who strongly advocated for his career advancement.

Ultimately, no matter how much we understand about the perfect storms facing leaders today, and no matter how committed leaders are to knowing themselves, it won't make a difference unless we can translate what we know into moment-to-moment competence. With its two principles and six practices, Personal Leadership is a very simple, very powerful methodology that offers us exactly that translation. Applying the Personal Leadership practices to daily interactions facilitates a profound way of leading through the "I" of current leadership storms.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by defining our metaphor of the perfect storm according to its contemporary usage, invoking challenge, threat, and aggravation. But what if we were to reconsider that definition? What if we were to say the storm is "perfect" for leaders today not because of its violent and chaotic nature, but because it presents a perfect opportunity? It calls upon leaders to create their own value-based, compassionate, and life-enhancing responses to the highly complex challenges they must undeniably confront. It encourages them to develop the capacity to find the inherent creative possibilities in such situations and in themselves. As leaders, we are all presented with the invaluable discovery that, rather than succumb to stress or overwhelm, we can emerge wiser and more energized than when we began.

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Names, affiliations, and contact information for the authors:

Sheila Ramsey, Ph.D.
 Founding Partner, Personal Leadership Seminars LLC
 PO Box 1201, Crestone CO 81131 USA
 Telephone: 202 222 5554
 Email: sramsey@plseminars.com

Barbara F. Schaetti, Ph.D.
 Founding Partner, Personal Leadership Seminars LLC
 2448 NW 63rd St., Seattle WA 98107 USA
 Telephone: 206 789 3290
 Email: bfschaetti@plseminars.com