

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2014*

Article 3

February 2014

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Daniel P. Modaff
University of Wisconsin, La Crosse

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Recommended Citation

Modaff, Daniel P. (2014) "Leadership Trails: Lessons from the Lakota Sun Dance," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol7/iss1/3>

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Leadership Trails: Lessons from the Lakota Sun Dance

DANIEL P. MODAFF
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – LA CROSSE

Abstract

This essay argues that while having a vision as a leader is important, that often means that the future is afforded more value than the past and the present. The past demonstrates the leadership trails, or the evidence for what has and has not worked for the organization as the leaders and members enact the leadership vision. Here I offer a leadership model that embraces leadership trails, one based on a decade of research on traditional Lakota life, particularly their most sacred ceremony, the Sun Dance. The Lakota-based leadership model consists of six elements: mitakuye oyasin (“we are all related”), respect, bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom.

Leadership Trails: Lessons from the Lakota Sun Dance

The ability to conceive, articulate, execute, and motivate others to follow a vision is a persistent quality of an effective leader. Quigley (1994) argued, “A leader’s vision implies an understanding of the past and present. More importantly, it offers a road map to the future and suggests guidelines to those in a given enterprise” (p. 37). Quigley’s preferential treatment of the future as it relates to the role of vision in effective leadership is certainly not uncommon or harmful; however, this preference minimizes the importance of understanding the past.

There are at least two reasons to focus attention on the past when discussing vision. First, leaders must learn, understand, and appreciate the history that brought them and their organizational members to their current situation. This does not dictate that the organization’s future must follow its past, but it should be recognized that the culture of any organization is a matter of socio-historical construction, where people have interacted throughout history to create and recreate the current organizational structures (Modaff, Butler, & DeWine, 2012). That



sense of what is past will naturally influence the vision for the future and the organizational members' willingness and ability to follow it. Second, as we examine the past in relation to vision, we begin to see the trails that have been created as the leader and the organizational members negotiated the daily struggles and successes of the enterprise. These trails are markers of where the leader has tread and how closely (if at all) the organizational members have followed. It is this sense of the past — these leadership trails — that is the focus of this essay.

Here I offer a perspective of leadership trails based on research I have been conducting on traditional Lakota philosophy, communication, and organizing. This perspective is deeply rooted in the values and behaviors I observed during the Lakota Sun Dance and that I learned through interviews with Lakota elders. The values articulated here are not unfamiliar to those concerned with values-based leadership (e.g., Best, 2011; McKenna & Campbell, 2011), but understanding their traditional Lakota roots and modern applications does require “a shift in attitude” (Hester, 2012, p. 48).

Trails of Prayer: The Lakota Sun Dance

It was 104 degrees on the fourth and final day of the Sun Dance on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. After four days of observing the ceremony, I noticed that the grass had been trampled flat in the shape of a circle by the dancers. This trail represented not only the vision and path of the medicine man leading the ceremony, but the actions of the dancers who followed his direction and believed in his vision and power. The trail was a circle — a sacred shape for the Lakota — as it represents the interconnectedness of all things. The trail was there not because the dancers blindly followed the medicine man, but because they were deeply entrenched in the traditional values and beliefs that make up who they are as Lakota people, and marked the journey they individually and collectively had been on for the past four days.

The Lakota Sun Dance

The Sun Dance is the most sacred ceremony of the Lakota, and I was fortunate to be invited to observe this particular one from beginning to end based on the relationships I formed during ten years of research on the reservation. The Sun Dance is a ceremony characterized by individual and group sacrifice during which the dancers, led by a medicine man, do not eat or drink for four days, and dance staring at the sun from sunrise to sunset with only short breaks throughout the day. They dance to pray; to pray for the health of themselves, their families, their community, or to ask for the strength to endure the hardships that permeate reservation life. One of the defining features of the Sun Dance is that several of the dancers are tethered to the Sun Dance tree in the center of the Sun Dance circle by a long rope that is secured to the dancer by a buffalo bone that pierces the dancer's chest. Some dancers remain tethered and pierced for just a few minutes, while others spend up to four days sacrificing themselves in this way.

The Sun Dance is one of the seven sacred rites brought to the Lakota by the White Buffalo Calf Woman (Brown, 1989). It is a yearly event, typically taking place in mid- to late summer, and is led by a medicine man with the assistance of other spiritual leaders in the *tiyospaye*, or extended family group (Powers, 1975). Hull (2000) described the Sun Dance as follows:

The convocation is often brutal because the participants dance barefoot for four days without benefit of food or water while staring at the sun, each blowing in a whistle made from the ulna bone of a golden eagle. My Lakota friends recognize several major ceremonies, of which the sun dance is the biggest, the granddaddy of all the ceremonies, the one that ensures the life of the oyate, the people, for another year (p. 2).

Albert White Hat, Sr., a Lakota spiritual leader, described the Sun Dance to me as an extended prayer, “a once a year gathering of all the energy in the world – the universe... At that time we either express our need or appreciation” (personal communication, July 25, 2005).

The ceremony is conducted in the Sun Dance circle – a circle about 100 feet in diameter. As the dancers move around the circle, they are led by the medicine man in charge of the ceremony. He leads them in rounds of dancing in which they dance in formation, staring at the sun, at each of the four directions. When the medicine man is ready, he signals the dancers with a simple wave of his hand, and they all move gracefully clockwise around the circle to the next direction to dance some more.

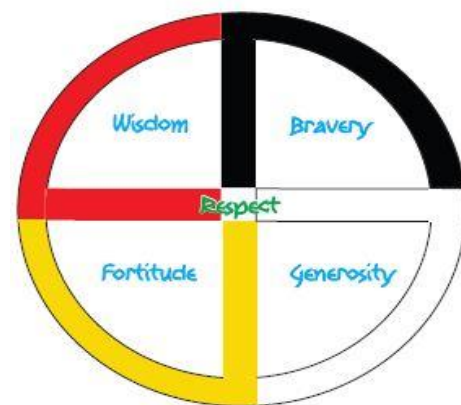
Lakota-Based Leadership Model

As the dancers move around the circle and in towards the Sun Dance tree, they imprint trails upon the grass. These trails are value-laden, representing the vision of the medicine man, the respect the dancers have for him and his vision, their acceptance and understanding of the cultural and spiritual lessons he has been sharing, and the strength and sacrifice each dancer musters throughout the four day ceremony. These trails and the values inherent in them form the basis of the Lakota-based leadership model.

I am not the first to recognize the wisdom of the traditional Lakota and the applicability of their value system and philosophy to modern leadership. Marshall (2009), for example, in his treatment of the great Lakota warrior, Crazy Horse, described how the Lakota valued the following traits in their leaders: selflessness, morality, experiences, honesty, responsibility, and a cultural insight. Allen (1993) summarized his understanding of Lakota values and philosophy (some of which overlap with the current project), and provided a useful workbook for implementing them into modern management. Bryant (1998) and Gambrell and Fritz (2012) reported how contemporary Lakota people articulated what Lakota leadership meant to them in commendable attempts to broaden the scope of how we understand leadership by including non-Western conceptualizations. The Lakota-based leadership model described here supports much of the prior work in this area, but differs in that it focuses on the lessons learned particularly from the Sun Dance.

Figure 1
Lakota-Based Leadership

Mitakuye Oyasin



Lakota leadership meant to them in commendable attempts to broaden the scope of how we understand leadership by including non-Western conceptualizations. The Lakota-based leadership model described here supports much of the prior work in this area, but differs in that it focuses on the lessons learned particularly from the Sun Dance.

The Lakota-based leadership model consists of six components, and is represented by a circle – the same type of circle found on the Sun Dance grounds. One important quality of a circle is that it does not have a beginning or an end, and so there is no inherent value of one point of the circle over another. The same is true of the components of the Lakota-based leadership model. The model should be treated as a nonlinear representation of the interrelationships of the six components, with no beginning or ending point. Approaching leadership from this perspective means that the leader should embrace all components, and attempt to live them in thought and action.

Mitakuye Oyasin

Mitakuye oyasin is a Lakota phrase roughly translated as “all my relatives” or “we are all related.” This is a central tenet of Lakota philosophy and represents their worldview in which everything in nature is related and should be treated like kin. Sicangu Lakota elder, Lone Quigley (personal communication, September 15, 2003), explained the concept further:

We treat equally, as in a circle. We look at the concept of mitakuye oyasin, all my relatives, and that everything in a circle is related. And when you're related and connected you're not higher, you don't look at something or someone as being higher, or the other way, lower. You see everything as being equal in life. I need the plants. I need the air. I need the water. I even need you. That is how we look at things, is that life is the concept mitakuye oyasin – we're all connected and related.

In the Lakota-based leadership model, mitakuye oyasin is best represented by the circle itself. The circle reflects the interconnectedness of all people and things, and compels the leader to treat them all as relatives, with the same kindness, compassion, and concern that are typically reserved for kin in Western society. The shift in attitude that this demands is significant for most people, and easily dismissed as implausible in a capitalist society; however, it is no different in degree as when management theory evolved from Taylorism to Human Relations based on the work of Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), Barnard (1938), and McGregor (1960), among others. The shift in attitude at that point in time from treating employees as dispensable and replaceable parts of a machine to living, breathing, caring human beings needing to be attended to and empowered was titanic. Mitakuye oyasin asks leaders of all types to shift attitude a bit further, and extend their attention and genuine concern to all aspects of the relevant environment, including customers, clients, competitors, and the communities in which the organization conducts its business.

At the first Sun Dance I attended, my wife and I were outside of the Sun Dance circle under the arbor and were sitting next to a Lakota grandmother and her grandchild. The grandchild had turned his attention to a bee that was flying around him, and he was starting to swat at it to kill it. The grandmother calmly stopped him and said, “No, let him alone, we are at Sun Dance, we don't harm anything. Let him go.” The grandmother gave us a lasting impression of exactly what mitakuye oyasin looks like in practice. You have to stop yourself from responding automatically to the things around you as inherently negative, become mindful of their relationship to you, and treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Respect

Closely aligned with mitakuye oyasin is the concept of respect. Respect is the outward manifestation of mitakuye oyasin, and is a precursor to the four values that make up the remainder of the Lakota-based leadership model. According to Oglala Lakota elder Calvin Jumping Bull (personal communication, September 23, 2003), “You have to have respect in order for the other values to work.” For this reason, respect is placed in the center of the circle in the model, tying the remaining four values together.

Respect for the Lakota is a relational concept, such that it is not demanded by or inherently awarded to a leader, but given to them in appreciation for their wisdom, vision, and teachings. The dancers at the Sun Dance respect the medicine man leading the ceremony because he has demonstrated his respect for the culture and traditions, and has done everything he can to help prepare each dancer to fulfill his or her own personal commitment. Respect is shown in actions toward each other, the members of the community, the environment, and the traditions.

The depth of respect that is present among the participants in the Sun Dance ceremony was most evident to me on the third day of the ceremony I attended in July, 2011. It was over 100 degrees, and the dancers had been struggling with the heat since sunrise many hours before. At approximately 2PM, the typical dancing and piercing gave way to a healing ceremony. In a healing ceremony, any member of the community who wants to can enter the Sun Dance circle from the East gate, drink medicine created by the medicine man based on a vision, and walk through the Sun Dance circle with the Sun Dancers forming a channel from one end to the other. The dancers would pray for the people as they walked through, stopping them occasionally so that they could gain strength from the circle. The ceremony took hours because so many Lakota people had come for healing. As the line dwindled and the sun grew hotter, I was invited in to the ceremony. Despite being white and an academic — the latter of which automatically meant I was not to be trusted — the dancers prayed over me as if I was just another member of the community. Their respect for the medicine man and his decision to allow me to be there and the respect they had for their traditions meant that they unquestioningly treated me with respect. They were hungry, thirsty, and exhausted from giving what little energy they had left to the members of the community, and yet, they invited me in and prayed for me and my family as if I were a relative. Respect for the leader made that happen, and that respect was not earned out of fear or authority.

Respect for the leader as demonstrated above is not unique in leadership theory. However, given the underlying philosophy of mitakuye oyasin in the current model, respect must be mutual. The Sun Dance demonstrates this mutuality in that it is not just the dancer that respects the medicine man, but the medicine man exhibits respect for each individual dancer. For example, through the four days of the Sun Dance, individual dancers can find themselves struggling with heat exhaustion, mental and physical fatigue, hunger, thirst, and the deep desire to give up. The medicine man, while dancing himself, senses these struggles and steps over to the waning dancer to provide the support s/he needs to continue. The medicine man has a deep respect for the individual commitments each dancer has made, knows the motivation and personality of each dancer, and offers the support that is needed. For some dancers, he pats them on the back with his eagle feather, encouraging them with positive attributions. For other

dancers, he stands sternly behind them, almost with a disciplinarian persona, letting the dancer know that they are not living up to their potential in that moment. The medicine man respects each dancer individually, and instead of offering a homogenous and collective message of support, uses his power and vision to motivate each individual.

What makes the Lakota perspective of respect even more intriguing is that the respect does not end at the boundaries of the relationship between the medicine man and the dancers or even at the perimeter of the Sun Dance circle. Throughout the days and nights of the Sun Dance, community members come to support the dancers. They sit outside of the perimeter of the circle under a shade arbor, and demonstrate their respect in all of their activities. For example, they do not eat or drink in sight of the dancers out of respect for the sacrifices the dancers are making. The medicine man does encourage them to eat and drink between rounds of dancing (down the hill and out of sight of the dancers) because he believes this will help nourish the dancers. There are helpers in the community who volunteer every year to feed the community every meal during the ceremony. There are other community members who walk through the campsites sharing traditional Lakota stories, and reminding members of what the medicine man demands of supporters out of respect for the ceremony. For example, an elder Lakota woman will remind the community that any woman who is on her “cycle” needs to leave the Sun Dance out of respect because they are considered to be too powerful and the spirits will not come to help the dancers. The elders invoking these reminders (or teachings) do so out of respect, and the women who stay away from the ceremony do so as well. Perhaps the best way to think about the respect at the Sun Dance is to think of ever-widening circles. The inner circles represent the respect exhibited between the medicine man and the dancers, while the outer circles represent the respect that the community members have for the dancers, the ceremony, and the traditions as related to the vision and power of the medicine man.

The lesson to be learned about respect from the Lakota is complicated. Modern organizational leaders must realize that respect is not inherent in a position; organizational members expect their leader to live the vision asked to be followed. The medicine man, despite being one of the oldest dancers in the ceremony, never faltered under the heat of the sun, never asked the dancers to do anything he was not doing himself, and always encouraged them to persist despite the odds against them. He respects and understands their individual commitments as much as they respect his vision and power. Organizational leaders would benefit from understanding the individual motivations and personalities of their workers, and tailoring communication and motivation to them. But the deeper lesson to be learned from the Sun Dance about respect is that respect does not end with the leader-member relationship. Instead, respect should extend to the broader community in a reciprocal fashion. Leaders should strive to demonstrate respect for the people and resources outside of the physical boundaries of the organization. Lakota-based leaders will find that the community will respond to this with respect and support of their own.

The remaining four components of the Lakota-based leadership model are four traditional Lakota values that were regularly articulated to me by Lakota elders during my time on the reservation and were also demonstrated during the Sun Dance. O’Toole (2008) unknowingly described the Lakota perspective of the connection between values

and leadership when he wrote: “[E]ffective leaders set aside the culturally conditioned “natural” instinct to lead by push and — particularly when times are tough — always to adopt the “unnatural” behavior of leading by the inspiring pull of common values” (p. 86).

Bravery

Historically, for the traditional Lakota, bravery was deeply connected to their warrior culture and was most readily visible during battle, but the value was not limited to warriors or times of physical confrontation. Charles Eastman (a native born Lakota) posited that bravery, as practiced by the Lakota in everyday life, referred to the degree of risk involved with a particular activity, and with risk came honor (Eastman, 2001). Further, Eastman forwarded, “Our own concept of bravery makes of it a high moral virtue, for to us it consists not so much in aggressive self-assertion as in absolute self-control” (2001, p. 43).

Enacting the value of bravery is both a physical and a mental process. In the Sun Dance, for example, when dancers commit to dancing, they commit for four years, not for just one. That commitment to a choice is an incredible act of bravery in and of itself, as it means that the dancer is committing to hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and physical pain. That commitment is especially brave because the purpose of dancing in the Sun Dance is often not for self-interest, but for the health and well-being of the community.

The Lakota-based leadership model asks leaders to exhibit bravery in their thoughts and actions. Leaders are faced with difficult choices every day, and how they approach and respond to those choices is a matter of bravery. How different organizational life would be right now if leaders and all other members practiced bravery? Bravery implies being accountable, and many of our current organizational leaders seem less than willing to do so. Perhaps the reason that bravery is in short supply is because leaders do not have role models for acting bravely. Marshall (2001) offered advice on what leaders could do to develop this value:

If you don't think you know how to be brave, look around; you'll find someone who does know. Follow him or her. If you follow long enough, you'll learn to have courage, or the courage within you will rise to the top. When that happens, turn around, and don't be surprised if someone is following you (p. 158).

Generosity

The second traditional Lakota value in the model is generosity. The Lakota word for generosity, *canteyuke*, means “to give, to share, to have a heart” (Marshall, 2001, p. 180). For the Lakota, possession of excess material goods was only useful to the extent that they could be shared with the community. The Lakota would enact this value in many ways in everyday life, but perhaps none more striking than the giveaway. Giveaways were done as a way of honoring someone in the family (for example, a loved one who had recently passed away). The members of the sponsoring family would quite literally give everything away that they owned — tipi, horses, utensils, and even the clothes on their backs. All of this was done to honor the individual. There was no greater way to honor someone than to be generous to the community.

Giveaways are still prevalent on the Rosebud reservation, and often occur at the conclusion of the fourth day of the Sun Dance. This outward manifestation of generosity is perhaps the most explicit, but the Sun Dance itself is predicated on the value. It is clear when you observe the Sun Dance that the dancers and the medicine man are there not for their own personal gain, but for the good of others in the community. They readily give of themselves in order to attempt to ensure the health, happiness, success, etc., of those around them. Despite the abject poverty on the reservation, the participants in the ceremony give what they do have – their bodies and minds – to pray for the community.

Modern organizational leaders should consider what they have to give, and decide with what they can be generous. Leaders should alter their attitude, such that they should seek opportunities to share their time, energy, dedication, motivation, care, concern, and certainly knowledge with their organization and members of their environment. The value of generosity asks the leader to think of the community first, so that the bounds of generosity are not constrained by a line item on a tax form.

Fortitude

The third value, fortitude, is similar to bravery, but refers more to internal strength than to external acts of courage. Marshall (2001) referred to fortitude among the Lakota as “quiet strength” that comes with flexibility (p. 178). To demonstrate the relationship between flexibility and fortitude, Marshall recounted the story of walking with his grandfather near a river bottom when a great wind arose. A sandbar willow tree bent in the mighty wind but did not break, while a tall oak, rigid and strong, snapped in several places. Fortitude, as the story teaches us, does not come from physical strength, but from flexibility and the ability to remain mentally strong in the face of adversity. Lakota elder Calvin Jumping Bull (personal communication, September 23, 2003) taught me how fortitude is necessary to participate in the Sun Dance:

Fortitude is probably the hardest. I used the Sun Dance as example; how a person denies his own needs to do that ceremony. Because they don't drink any water or eat any food for at least seven days that they have to take part in that ceremony. They dance four days and three nights, and the only thing that he could offer to the creator was his own body, so that's the reason why he does whatever he needs to do. And he must suffer for the people so that people have a better way of life. So he's not dancing for himself, but he was dancing for the people. So he had to endure all these hardships.

Leaders often receive advice to remain strong and follow their convictions. The value of fortitude asks leaders to be mentally strong and to concurrently be flexible. This dialectic of strength-flexibility will allow the leader the opportunity to meet the demands of the changing organizational environment, while not wavering in the face of adversity.

Wisdom

Wisdom is the final value in the Lakota-based leadership model. Due to its intangible nature, wisdom was considered the most difficult of the four virtues to attain for the traditional Lakota. The Lakota word for wisdom means “to understand what is right and true, to use knowledge wisely” (Marshall, 2001, p. 196). Perhaps the most important thing to remember about wisdom, however, is that those who possess it are valued for

their ability to help the community make informed decisions. Albert White Hat, Sr. (personal communication, September 12, 2003) explained wisdom in this way:

And they always say that knowledge is very important, but experience of that knowledge must go hand in hand. You can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you don't experience it you don't know what you're talking about. So we have people who specialize in different areas they experienced. So if that need arises, they're the ones that are called upon. Not one man or woman can do everything. A long time ago there's no title, as title of authority, just respect. They say wisdom is knowledge and experience together. So if you are a born hunter, when the time comes, they'll call on you. The rest of the time you work to promote and develop, help others to do well with community and your family.

Wisdom is evident in many ways at the Sun Dance. For example, in between rounds of dancing, the medicine man would ask an elder to teach the community about some issue of traditional Lakota life, and this teaching usually took the form of a story. Traditional Lakota values were always embedded in these stories, and the elders considered it their obligation to teach the community. In a less visible way, the wisdom of the medicine man was what allowed the ceremony to take place. His knowledge of tradition and spirituality, which he shared with the dancers in preparation for the ceremony, ensured the safety of all of the participants throughout this arduous event. His spiritual guidance of the community throughout the year led to an event that was highly organized, yet never visibly orchestrated. Because the medicine man shared his wisdom with the community, every aspect of the complicated event — from the drum group and singers to the cooks to the women in charge of smudging the supporters with red cedar smoke at the start of each round of dancing — would fall into place without headsets, flowcharts, or action plans. Wisdom is not to be guarded, but shared for the benefit of everyone involved.

Holding a leadership position certainly affords leaders a claim to wisdom, but the Lakota-based leadership model asks leaders to also value the wisdom of those around them as much or more as they do their own. This, by implication, means that listening becomes the paramount skill for leaders to develop and practice.

Conclusion

We often focus on the vision of the leader and the path that they will take the organization down; however, the lesson I have learned from the Lakota is to focus also on the trail that was created because it is this that gets (re)constructed as the followers enact the vision. The vision provides the roadmap, but the trails provide the paths for others to follow or from which to diverge. As they follow the trails, the members co-construct them, solidifying them or reforming them as the situation demands. Trails are products of interaction, a constant negotiation between the leader and the members.

The Lakota-based leadership model presented here assumes a reciprocal relationship between leaders, members, and relevant environment. The model calls for understanding that all beings in the environment are relatives, worthy of the same respect and concern afforded family members. Respect is mutual and not constrained by the physical boundaries of the organization or limited to members of the organization. To enact the philosophy of *mitakuye oyasin*, the Lakota-based leadership model encourages

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leaders (and members) to act under the guidance of four traditional Lakota values: bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom.

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About the Author

Dan Modaff is an Assistant Professor specializing in Organizational Communication at University of Wisconsin – La Crosse in the Department of Communication Studies. He is the co-author of the textbook, *Organizational Communication: Foundations, Challenges, and Misunderstandings*, with Jennifer Butler and Sue DeWine. He is the author of several articles and book chapters in the areas of organizational communication, language and social interaction, and communication pedagogy. He has been conducting research on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota since 2003.