Wisdom in the Waves: Surfing and the Art of Leadership

Preconference Workshop
Wednesday, 24 October
09:00 - 16:00 | Offsite - Beach

Overview

Surfing is known for many things: fun, healthy exercise, communion with nature, camaraderie among friends, and a cool lifestyle, to name a few. But could surfing possibly teach us something about the practice of leadership? As a life-long surfer and seasoned leadership educator, I help you to explore this question and more in this highly experiential workshop. We begin by taking a trip to the source: the beach. After getting an insider’s feel for the surfing experience, the workshop will transition into more reflective and practical activities aimed at helping you apply surfing lessons and metaphors to the daily practice of leadership.

In the first part of the 20th century, the ancient Hawaiian cultural practice called he’e nalu (meaning “ride the waves”) was undergoing a resurgence of interest in Hawaii. The descriptions of surfing reported by visitors, of which Jack London was one, took place in an era and population ripe for incorporating more leisure and recreation into modern life (Westwick & Neushul, 2013). In a few short years, reports of surfers riding waves had a profound effect on the imagination and activities of people, beginning in the emerging coastal communities in the U.S. and Australia, and eventually around the world. In 2011, it was estimated that there were approximately 35 million surfers in 70 countries across the globe (“Surf Economics: Beach Rush,” 2012).

More than a new form of recreation, modern surfing eventually became central motif of western society. The adoption of the surfing lifestyle in fashion, language, and film are primary examples. Consider how deep and extensive the use of the phrase “surfing the net” is in our contemporary lexicon, or the imagery that is immediately conjured up by the word “dude.” Despite its presence as a cultural practice and metaphor in modern western society, the meaning of the surfing experience continues to evolve with the times (Severson, 1970; Westwick & Neushul, 2013).

During the same century riding waves evolved from its ancient Polynesian origins to a globally pervasive form of recreation and cultural metaphor. Similarly, the construct and practice of leadership has undergone a similar evolution and metamorphosis. Like surfing, it too has captured the imagination of people worldwide and has been the subject of much examination and description. Also like surfing, its meaning reflects the context of the place and time (Grint, 2010).

Over the past 100 years, leadership has expanded to not only reflect the changing landscape, but to be more responsive to it (Rost, 1993). No longer do the heroic efforts of individuals of enormous charisma
and power account for the sole conceptualization of leadership. While ‘great leaders’ such as Henry Ford or Winston Churchill remain relevant, increasingly there is a recognition and appreciation for the smaller, non-linear, and distributed theories and conceptions of leadership (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling & Taylor, 2011). Consider the following statement by leadership scholar Donna Ladkin (2010): “In a world of constant flux and change, individuals need to know what to pay attention to in order to accomplish the pragmatic necessities of living and working” (p. 150). For her, one key function of leadership is to recognize and bring attention to the trends and patterns “amidst the swirl of concrete experience” (p. 140). We posit that these more recent forms of leadership share many common traits with the practice of surfing.

For example, being able to recognize patterns is at the heart of the surfing experience. On this point surfer and writer Daniel Duane (1996), describes surfing as the “unself-conscious participation in patterns of energy, in a constant physical response to a changing medium” (p. 115). In other words, what makes a wave a surfing wave, where one needs to be in order to catch it, and what part of the wave can be ridden all depend on recognizing patterns in a dynamically changing and somewhat mysterious surrounding.

Beyond that fact that both surfing and leadership occur in a complex and dynamic environments, there are many other parallels that we would like to share. These include, but are not limited to: the interplay of awareness and action, the whole person and multiple ways of knowing, and focused attention both inwardly and outwardly. Given these parallels, exploring and cultivating them in the realm of the water can help to make them more pronounced in other realms.

To the surfer, the ritual of getting into the ocean stands apart from ordinary life. Yet it offers one the possibility to play in the liquid manifestations of life’s patterns and principles—providing what Joseph Campbell referred to as the “as if” realm (Campbell, cited in Cooper, 1998, p. 52). In other words, a surfer riding waves in the ocean, if she makes herself available to it, transfers that learning to riding waves in another realm, such as those found in professional/organizational life. This will be the focus of the workshop: what can surfing teach us about the practice of leadership, or perhaps more importantly, about enhancing our practice of leadership?

Other kinds of experiences participants might want to explore include: immersion in the rich sensuous experience of the coastal zone; learning about waves, wind and tides—knowledge any serious surfer acquires; and the pleasures and benefits of totally unproductive time hanging out at the beach!

The workshop begins in a designated hotel lobby at 8:30 am when gather and get ready to drive to a nearby surfing beach. At the beach we attune ourselves to the ocean elements, meet the surfing instructors, and get acquainted with our equipment before heading out into the water.

At around 12noon following our surf session, we eat lunch together and discuss the links between surfing and the practice of leadership. We also include attention to how different recreational, body/mind, and adventure practices can be resources for enhancing one’s practice of leadership.
We leave the beach about 2:30 and arrive back at the hotel lobby by 3pm.