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Connective Leadership: Leading in a New Era By Jean Lipman-Blumen

Thank you very much for that kind introduction. I want to thank both Barbara Kellerman and Scott Webster, who really made it possible for me to be here today.

I'd like to begin on a note of levity because the one thing I really dislike about starting a keynote address on leadership immediately is that there isn't anything very funny about it. (Laughter). I hate things that don't have humor. I hate boredom, can't stand it. So in an effort to find something a little humorous about leadership, I surfed the Internet and unearthed a few things. Now don't get your hopes up. They're not all that great. (Laughter). The first one comes from Tacitus, sometime between 55 and 120 A.D., who said, "No one would have doubted his ability to reign had he never been emperor." Think about it. The feminists in the audience will realize why I didn't say, "He or she."

Lewis H. Lapham, an American essayist in the early part of this century, wrote, "Most of the people who mourn the passing of the nation's leaders wouldn't know a leader if they saw one. If they had the bad luck to come across a leader, they would realize at once that he might demand something from them. And this impertinence would put an abrupt and indignant end to their wish for leadership."

But then the Chinese have another take on this. Liu Shao-ch'i suggests, "There's no such thing as a perfect leader, either in the past or present, in China or elsewhere. If there is one, he is only pretending, like a pig inserting scallions in its nose in an effort to look like an elephant."

Not great, but that's as great as it gets.

On a more serious note, the economist and diplomat John Kenneth Galbraith made an astute observation about leadership: "All the great leaders have had one characteristic in common. It

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was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership."

Had I known that quote when I was writing *Connective Leadership: Managing in a Changing World* (Oxford University Press, 2000), I would have included it because I think it speaks directly to some of the issues that I try to raise in that book. But let me lead into my remarks with one last quote from one of my favorite connective leaders, Václav Havel: "Something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble....We are in a phase when one age is succeeding another, when everything is possible."

"Indistinct" is the operational word in that quotation; I would put that up in neon lights. One thing I like very much about that quotation is that it concludes on an optimistic note - the sense that this isn't the end. I think that there's real reason for optimism, and I hope that by the time I finish today you will share my opinion.

A quick overview of where we're going. First, I'd like to talk about the fact that we are entering a new era. We are just at the end of one stage of leadership history - which I dub the "Geopolitical Era," or "Stage Two" - when the conditions for leadership were shaped in certain ways. And we're just at the very beginning of a new era in leadership. There are no sharp cutoffs between one age and the next. It's like waves on the beach. Just as one wave hits the shore and begins to recede, another wave is already breaking over it.

Then, I'd like to move on to the new leadership conditions that are shaping this new era that I call the "Connective Era," or "Stage Three." After that, I shall describe the paradigm shift that will be absolutely essential for leaders who wish to be effective in this period. I call this new paradigm "connective leadership."

If we have time, which we probably won't, I'd like to consider some very down-to-earth behaviors that, taken together, constitute connective leadership. These everyday behaviors that we all use to accomplish our goals provide a repertoire of "achieving styles" available to everyone. I make the assumption - and I'm sure that everybody in this audience probably has had this thought before me - that leadership is not something that only a few gifted, outstanding, charismatic people possess. I think everybody has a reasonable, if untapped, reservoir of leadership ability. Achieving styles create pathways to connective leadership for anyone who chooses to take that direction.

The Geopolitical Era

Let's start quickly with the leadership period that is just drawing to a close. I call that stage the "Geopolitical Era" (or "Stage Two") because it was shaped by the geographic boundaries and the political ideologies that existed for long, long periods of time. Here, in the United States, one of the most characteristic aspects of this period was that long-term coalitions were put together on the basis of political ideology and geographic propinquity. NATO and the New Deal were good examples. They represented coalitions that stayed together for decades. They tended to be dominated by the member of the coalition who had the greatest relevant resources: political, military, and/or economic. The leader expected these coalitions to act in concert, to move in unison. Anybody who resisted was viewed as a disloyal troublemaker.

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Let me give you a very concrete example. During the Cold War, NATO frequently found it

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problematical to gain France's agreement on various issues. France often balked at hewing the line, preferring instead to act individualistically. Consequently, the other NATO members perceived France as quite "difficult."

During Stage Two, authoritarian leaders demanded orthodoxy. They wanted obedient followers. They didn't care about "constituents," in John Gardner's sense of the term. They also had grand visions, if you can bear hearing the "V" word one more time. The decisions they made usually were autonomous. They rarely consulted others. Instead, they made a decision and then announced it. Followers were supposed to be swept away by these wondrously decisive ideas and the actions that followed. That was then.

The Connective Era

Now, however, we are living at the very beginning of a new era. I'm not referring to the millennium. In fact, by now, we have been in the opening stages of this new era for several years. I call this period the "Connective Era" (or "Stage Two"). I use the term "connective" because everyone and everything are connected.

The Internet is a wonderful metaphor for our current era. Of course, we have always been connected. Connectivity is hardly brand new. Still, the ways in which we are connected now are much more intense and complex than they have ever been. These tightening connections contribute to the changing conditions of leadership. Even if you had been a successful leader in the previous authoritarian era of Stage Two, if you were to use those same leadership behaviors in the new era, it's unlikely that you would still succeed. Using Stage Two strategies in a Stage Three world would be akin to fitting a round peg into a square hole.

As a result, we need to think about letting go a little bit. We need to loosen our attachment to the directive leadership methods that we relied upon previously because they simply won't be effective in the Connective Era. Leaders who can't make that shift, who can't move their groups forward in that way, who don't think connectively and globally are in a serious bit of trouble.

Two Leadership Conditions: Interdependence and Diversity

I spoke earlier of leaders addressing the leadership conditions of their times. Now there are two major leadership conditions that are shaping the Connective Era. The first condition is interdependence. Although it's always existed, interdependence is a major force of our time. Today, technology is exacerbating this tension. Interdependence drives us toward collaborating and creating various alliances: partnerships, joint ventures, strategic alliances, all kinds of networks and temporary coalitions (which are quite different from the kinds of coalitions that Stage Two demanded). We'll return to that issue of shifting coalitions in a few minutes.

Interdependence also calls for building community. This means creating spaces where everybody can feel a sense of membership. People who are very diverse, have very different needs, and come from very different backgrounds can still feel that they belong. Interdependence calls upon leaders to create and act through a politics of commonality. By that I mean seeking the common ground that very diverse groups may share. If you think of multiple, overlapping circles, usually there's a very small space where they all overlap and larger spaces where they don't. Connective leaders see that little space, and they understand how to bring together the various groups on the basis of that shared set of needs and goals. We might say that they have a connective eye.

The second force, diversity, propels us in exactly the opposite direction. Instead of calling for collaboration and joining together, it demands individuality, uniqueness, even separateness. Diversity also pushes us, not simply toward independence, but toward isolation. It urges us to

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find our unique identity. Some psychologists maintain that we are hardwired for seeking to create our own identity. Moreover, some insist that lacking a sense of who we are as unique human beings spells trouble for our mental health.

This tug of war leaves us in a curious state. On the one hand, interdependence compels us to be part of the group, connected to other people. On the other hand diversity is whispering, "Be who you are, be your independent self." Otto Rank, the famed psychoanalyst, and Ernest Becker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural anthropologist, both devoted their lives to understanding this human struggle.

The curious thing about these two forces is that, even though they pull in opposite directions, each stimulates the need for the other. When you've been embedded in a group for some time, it is not uncommon to wonder if you're getting lost in that faceless crowd. On the other hand, when you work mostly alone, you begin to feel a sense of isolation, the chill of loneliness. This thrusts you back toward the group. Each force, in and of itself, increases your yearning for its opposite - an interesting paradox, indeed.

Diversity is linked to a politics of differences. I think everybody will recognize the phenomenon whereby a leader identifies an external group, and says, "They're different. They're the bad guys, and we're the good guys." Any psychologist will tell us that one sure way to develop cohesion within a group is to find an outside enemy who, by definition, is different.

In sum, these two forces, interdependence and diversity, push us in very different directions. To be successful in the Connective Era, leaders will need to integrate these very divergent forces into coherent, meaningful action.

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Connective Leadership

Let's move now to the changes that these conditions promote in leaders' behavior. Before I say another word about connective leaders, however, let me emphasize that they are not any warmer or cuddlier than Stage Two leaders. They are not preternaturally ideal or idealistic. Maybe some of them are but, by and large, they aren't. Nor is there any compelling reason for them to be. Nonetheless, I just wanted to alert you to their human ordinariness. That's relevant, so that when I describe connective leaders as we go forward, you won't think I'm painting a picture of sainted individuals. Now, let's return to our discussion of connective leaders and what they bring to the leadership table.

First, leaders are expected to make decisions. They were then; they are now. Yet, decision-making is different now. Again and again, we see that autonomous decisions don't work very well in the Connective Era.

Let me give you an example. This is another French example, although I don't mean to pick on the French. You may recall that, in 1995, President Jacques Chirac announced that France was going to detonate seven nuclear devices to assess its nuclear capability - not in the suburbs of Paris, I might add, but in the South Pacific. Do you recall what happened? There was an outcry worldwide. Moreover, much to Chirac's surprise, there were demonstrations in the streets of Paris. What happened? He had to back off from that Stage Two decision midway through its implementation. Chirac learned a fundamental lesson of the Connective Era: many stakeholders are involved in the Connective Era. This means that persuasion, negotiation, and mediation must replace unilateral, autonomous decision-making.

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Now we come to the heart of connective leadership. Connective leaders may have a vision, but they know that your vision and your neighbor's vision are just as vital as their own. They seek ways to bring together those multiple visions. It may be that, in the first instance, your vision is not totally satisfied. Yet, in the next round, more of your vision may be addressed. Eventually, all stakeholders achieve some, if not all, of their dreams.

Connective leaders not only connect their vision to other people's visions. They also connect themselves to other leaders and to their constituencies. The visual image that comes to my mind is that of Martin Luther King, a connective leader in a Stage Two world, walking arm and arm with an entire row of leaders in Selma, Alabama. King didn't feel the need to be out in front of everyone else. Connective leaders create networks and link them to still other networks. They share networks with others and in a very connected, global way.

The next aspect of connective leadership that I want to explore involves reaching out to traditional opponents, to parties or groups whom Stage Two leaders would have perceived as the "enemy." Connective leaders frequently use this very effective strategy whose impact derives from its unexpected or counterintuitive quality. Reaching out to long-established opponents has its dangers. Neither the opponent nor the leader's own constituents expect any rapprochement. That is exactly where the danger arises. For leaders to communicate their intent to their own people without destroying the surprise value of reaching out to the opposition is a high wire act. Lacking skillful communication with their own constituents, leaders who use this strategy run the risk of being rejected as traitors to their own cause.

Here are several examples: Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, meeting Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams; Anwar Sadat, unilaterally announcing his intention to visit Israel; Yitzhak Rabin negotiating with the Palestinians; Mikhail Gorbachev extending the olive branch to his opponents just weeks after President Ronald Reagan denounced him as the leader of an "evil empire." Robinson was roundly criticized by the leadership of her own party. Sadat and Rabin fell at the hands of assassins from within their own groups. Gorbachev still suffers the rejection of the Soviet people. Connective leadership is not for the timid.

Reaching out to the enemy is only one expression of the counterintuitive behavior that connective leaders use. They do many things that we don't expect. Because counterintuitive action defies our expectations, it flies below the radar of the ordinary rational defenses we use to identify and analyze events. To use two other metaphors, counterintuitive action makes an end run on the observers' rationality and scores a hit in their "emotional solar plexus" - that is, where they really live and feel. This dimension of connective leadership catches us off guard and thus creates the possibility of change. That is not so surprising, since counterintuitive action makes use of symbols, which speak so eloquently to people's hearts. The drama of counterintuitive action captivates the audience's imagination and inspires them to move beyond their routine responses.

Connective leaders have mutual goals, not mutual enemies. You don't have to have common enemies to unite people. Connective leaders can bring diverse group together because they see (even when the parties themselves do not) where their goals overlap. They create shifting coalitions, bringing together diverse parties to solve specific mutual problems. Once the initial problem is resolved, the coalition disperses. Subsequently, some of those members, along with brand new stakeholders, may be called to action to address a different issue. Permit me two examples of shifting coalitions, one from each political party, because I like to maintain my bipartisan credentials. During the Gulf War, President George Bush assembled a coalition of countries, many of which had not enjoyed diplomatic relations for years. He did not think they were going to stay together permanently. He just needed to accomplish a task, which is exactly what the coalition did before splitting apart once more.

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Consider another example, from the other side of the aisle: after Bill Clinton's initial election, he convened a very successful economic summit. The press loved it. They hailed it as a tour de force. Then, they complained (and this is where I would take them to task), "But he'll never be able to keep that coalition together throughout his administration." To me, that is quintessential Stage Two thinking, straight from the Geopolitical Era. Why should he want to maintain that coalition? These particular participants probably are not the most appropriate stakeholders to deal with other national issues, such as health, education, or the environment.

Connective leaders use themselves to attract others to their cause. What is very interesting and inspiring about connective leaders, as opposed to leaders from earlier leadership eras, is that they don't simply ask you to sacrifice yourself. Good leaders have always called us to sacrifice ourselves, and that's meaningful because it speaks to our more noble instincts. Sacrifice inspires us to do something that transcends our limited self-interest. Old-fashioned leaders usually asked us to sacrifice ourselves, while they sat safely behind their desks issuing orders. They didn't lead the charge up the hill. What's different here is that connective leaders are willing to sacrifice themselves first, before asking us to follow. They act as models for us to emulate.

Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi, another connective leader ahead of his time, offers us an instructive example. Gandhi resorted to death fasts in his zeal to convince Hindus and Muslims to find their common space, where they could address the oppression they both experienced from the British Government. Today, we may take hunger strikes as quite commonplace. In Gandhi's day, however, that startling counterintuitive gesture of self-sacrifice made the world catch its breath. Nelson Mandela, a current connective leader, serves as an astounding example of self-sacrifice that strengthened his cause.

Connective leaders bring others into the leadership process. They don't feel that they have to be the only leader. I know you've heard a great deal about empowerment. I'm not going to talk about that, but I am going to focus on "entrusting" because entrusting is a somewhat different phenomenon. It means that you take your vision or your goal and simply hand it over to somebody else who may not necessarily have had any previous experience with such an assignment. You entrust your task to that person with the expectation that she or he will succeed. You do not micromanage; you do not tell that person how to do it. You just say, "Do it any way you want to, with two simple constraints: the action has to be ethical and legal. Beyond that, do it however you wish."

Think of what that means! You have to be a leader with so much ego strength - not ego - that when that person creates a solution far more magnificent than anything you ever envisioned, you're exhilarated, not threatened by it. That's easier said than done, but I think it's absolutely bedrock to connective leadership. That is a little bit different, as you can see, from traditional empowering leadership. Anita Roddick, from the Body Shop, is a good example of an entrusting and vicarious connective leader who relishes the accomplishments of her employees and her associates.

Let me say one last word about entrusting crucial tasks to others because I think many people are afraid to try it. This is particularly so in organizations where people are judged by the performance of those who report to them. In every society, there's a rule of reciprocation. That means if I give you a gift, our relationship will be out of balance until you reciprocate with something of equal or greater value. Think about the gift of confidence that the leader gives to another person when that leader says, "Take my vision and make it better. Do anything you like!" That is an extraordinary gift. The only way you can repay that gift of confidence is to meet or exceed the leader's expectations!

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After I've given a talk like this, many people tell me that they have leaders who have thrust tasks upon them that they've never done before. I'm very interested in this topic, so I query them. I always ask, "How did you feel when this first happened?" Almost uniformly people will say, "Well, I was very nervous because I'd never done anything like that before, and I didn't really know how I would do it." My next question is always, "But did you do it?" This is where I wish I had a video camera because you can see something very fascinating. They draw themselves up taller and report, "Of course, I did. I did the most creative thing I've ever done in my life."

Connective leaders also mentor other people. They seek out people who are willing to assume responsibility at every level. They see leadership potential in everyone and the need for leadership everywhere. So they are eager to devote some of their efforts to grooming the next generation of leaders.

A few more things about connective leadership: I mentioned that connective leaders demand ethical behavior in others, but they, too, are consistently ethical. They have two very central touchstones for themselves. One is authenticity. And here I use the term "authenticity" somewhat differently than the way it is usually used. I mean the consistent dedication to something beyond the self: commitment to the group, organization, or the cause.

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Authenticity is especially imperative for connective leaders. Because connective leaders may not act exactly the same from day to day, they need authenticity, more than consistency, to sustain belief. Otherwise observers can say, "Well, last week Mary was collaborating, and this week she's doing it by herself at her computer. What's going on here?" Still, if they know that Mary's behavior is grounded in authenticity, they probably will give her the benefit of the doubt. So authenticity is key.

Accountability, which regrettably seems to be in short supply among current American leaders, is also crucial in the Connective Era. Accountability is the expectation that you will be called upon to explain and the willingness to do so. That means even when you mess up, it is essential to accept responsibility. At best, traditional leaders would say, "I'm responsible. Now let's get this behind us." Connective leaders work harder at accountability. A quick warning is in order here: allowing our leaders to avoid examining their missteps is a sure recipe for future repetitions.

Let's talk briefly about opportunities that leaders create for their supporters to ennoble themselves. It seems to me that this is fundamental to leadership in general, but even more so to connective leadership. In the turbulence of twenty-first century living, we often find ourselves encumbered by trivialities. We easily forget that there's something beyond our families, our friends, our colleagues, and ourselves. Nonetheless, at a certain point in life (some people get to it earlier than others), we come to a moment when we hear the intimations of our mortality. We begin to wonder about what our lives mean, whether or not we have accomplished anything that makes a difference to anyone beside ourselves. Most of us, I think, would not like to come to the end of our days feeling that we had spent our lives on trivial, egocentric pursuits. Connective leaders offer their constituents opportunities to commit themselves to larger, altruistic causes that benefit their neighborhood, their society, maybe the world. By participating in such enterprises, we find ennoblement and enrich the meaning of our lives.

This is a slightly macabre story. Maybe I shouldn't tell it, but it has a crucial point. Some time

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ago, I attended a funeral where the husband of the deceased person, who had been a highly placed Washington bureaucrat, delivered the eulogy. This is what he said; I kid you not: "These were her great accomplishments. She never took a bus when she could walk and save money. She never took a taxi when she could take a bus and economize. She never wrote on fresh paper; she always used recycled paper."

This was the measure of her talents as a leader as he saw them. Not to malign the dead, but I hope no one ever says that about me when I die. I might write on recycled paper to help preserve the environment, but I would like to think that I also did something more, not just for myself, not even for my children, not even for my close personal friends. I would like to leave some small altruistic mark so that I wouldn't have lived all these years devoted primarily to selfish or trivial purposes. Leaving the seeds of a future generation is not sufficient. One ought to do something that goes beyond oneself, that says, "I did something, even sacrificed, for a larger purpose." I think this is exactly why we look to connective leaders: they create ennobling enterprises with which we can identify and to which we can commit ourselves. In this way, at the end of our days, we can feel that our life counted for something.

Just this morning, the TV in my hotel room ran an ad for an up-coming program. It's about a woman with cancer, who has been told she has two years to live. She has decided to spend those two years in some small, Third World country helping homeless, undernourished children. In the trailer, she says, "Well, if I only have two more years to live, I want to spend them doing something really important."

Allow me one quick quote from Viktor Frankl: "Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."

This ability that connective leaders have to identify ennobling enterprises is truly significant. They find and create meaning in their own lives, but also help their constituents to do the same. Opportunities to engage in ennobling experiences transform self-centered, more power-driven inclinations into selfless acts of accomplishment.

Achieving Styles: The Behavioral Underpinnings of Connective Leadership

In these last few minutes, let's get down to the nitty-gritty. Let's get down to ordinary human behavior. What kind of behavior does it take to be a connective leader? All of these qualities sound great, but how do you do it? Well, connective leadership is based upon what I call "achieving styles," which are simply the characteristic behaviors for accomplishing your goals or your tasks. Very simply, they are the ways in which we go about doing things. You might think of achieving styles as personal technologies or implementation strategies. If you consider the demands for change and innovation in the Connective Era, the leadership strategies we used in the past will need to be expanded enormously. Richard N. Foster, author of *Innovation: The Attacker's Advantage* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), describes how innovation occurs in hi tech organizations. He argues that those organizations that abandoned their current successful technology and devoted themselves to developing something totally different were the ones that produced the greatest innovations.

Now, I am not foolish enough to suggest to any of you in this esteemed audience that you should give up all the behaviors that have brought you success in the past and start again from scratch. I'm not recommending such a radical course. I am suggesting, however, that to be a connective leader one has to relax one's hold on that reduced set of behaviors on which most of us have learned to rely. Achieving styles, I emphasize, are learned behaviors. They offer a broad repertoire of action. You can learn them; you can unlearn them. You can expand your achieving styles; you can change them.

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I'm not going to describe achieving styles in great detail. I will, however, talk about the three major sets of achieving styles: direct, relational, and instrumental. The direct set draws its name from the propensity to attack tasks directly. People who are drawn to the direct achieving styles avoid intermediaries. They either prefer to do it themselves, or they seek the shortest distance between themselves and the task. People who gravitate toward the direct set are focused on their task, on their own business. They tend to be individualists with internal standards of excellence, rarely settling for anything less than perfection. They enjoy both competition and power. You might notice a correspondence between the direct styles, on the individual level, and diversity, at the societal level, because diversity, too, involves individualistic concerns and behavior.

The relational set comprises the second set of achieving styles. People who prefer relational styles achieve their goals by contributing to other people's tasks. They do so by collaborating, helping behind the scenes, or serving as mentors. There are obvious links between relational achieving styles at the individual level and interdependence at the organizational or societal level. Both work through connectedness.

The instrumental set comprises achieving styles that rely upon exquisite political savvy. They engage in behavior that I call "de-natured Machiavellianism." By that I mean they understand all the strategies of Niccolo Machiavelli, but they use them ethically, overtly, and legally. They charismatically use themselves, their networks, and everything that comes their way to promote the cause. Their networks are vast, and they enthusiastically share them with others. They juggle persuasion, mediation, and negotiation with great skill. Instrumental achievers leverage their political know-how for the good of the group, not the benefit of the leader. They entrust their vision to others and enable them to grow. People adept at these styles can weave the contradictory direct and relational styles together, integrating them into coherent action.

There are nine achieving styles, three within each set, that I identify in Connective Leadership. Within each of the nine styles, there are many, many behaviors. Unfortunately, there are too many to describe here and now. Consequently, I shall close with a quotation from Mae West, that esteemed management consultant, who said, "Too much of a good thing is simply wonderful." Then she added another nugget of wisdom: "Whenever I'm confronted by any evil, I always select the one I have never tried before." So I suggest that you try the entire repertoire of achieving styles. Try them. You'll like them. They might even give you the connective edge.

Thank you very much. (Applause).