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Leadership That Counts

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Alice MacGillivray and Anne Litwin

Are We There Yet?
Are Perceptions of Results Shaped by Gender?

Abstract

This exploratory, conceptual paper looks at perceptions of results through the lens of gender. Leadership implicitly focuses on results. Leadership takes many forms, some of which can be thought of as more masculine or feminine than others. The authors suggest that both feminine and masculine approaches to leadership have value, and that feminine approaches are currently hidden and undervalued in Western society. By embracing a greater diversity of leadership approaches, and by thinking of results in more varied ways, we can become more agile and innovative in our work with complex challenges.

Keywords: leadership, results, gender, Relational Cultural Theory, Theory of Boundary Critique

1 Introduction

This paper explores the concept of results through a gendered lens.

1.1 The Catalyst

In August 2015, about 25 of us gathered at Simon Fraser University for a working session on leadership. Leadership is about change and implicitly about results. After a group activity, a [male] participant challenged us by saying that no one had mentioned results, and that for clients, leadership work was all about results. A few of us reminded him of results we had shared, but these did not satisfy his un-explored criteria for what constitutes a result. Some participants explored different views of results for this journal

issue; Anne Litwin and I wondered whether gendered perspectives were at play. If masculine and feminine perceptions of results differ, that would have implications for effective leadership.

1.2 Beginnings

We as authors—Anne and Alice—were already interested in how gender plays out in workplace interactions, communication, learning and effectiveness. We knew that women are generally underrepresented in formal leadership positions:

- In 2013, 14.6% of the top jobs in U.S. Fortune 500 companies were occupied by women (Covert, 2015).

- In 2012, 25% of senior management roles were held by women in Canadian companies, down from 28% in 2011 (CNW, 2015).

We were familiar with evidence showing that women bring valuable perspectives to workplaces. For example:

- Organizations with women on boards made better business decisions during the recent financial crisis (Litwin, 2014).

- Teams composed of a majority of women outperform teams with a majority of men (Litwin, 2015).

With regard to this contradiction, Klenke writes: "the very skills and traits women were once told have no place in the boardroom, are the very same which now presumably give them a leadership advantage" (2011, p.16).

We had never used a "results lens" to frame our thinking about gender and leadership. To write this paper, we collaborated from the west and east coasts of North America and across the U.S./Canada border. One e-mail exchange follows:

Alice: Hello Anne. I thought you would enjoy a conversation I had with my friend Eileen tonight (she and her husband have worked in international development and are transforming their acreage into an organic farm). A dozen of us were in the small ferry terminal after attending a music concert.

> Eileen: Are you working on another book?
> Alice: Not now. But I'm working with a colleague on a paper about whether men and women see results differently.
> Eileen: Isn't it kind of obvious?
> Alice: I know what you mean.
> Eileen: Like Fred wants to get all these things done (pounding fist into palm of hand). Get through the list. Nothing about process…Duh
> Alice: I can't say Duh. It's an academic journal.
> Eileen: You need a longer word.
> Alice: What's a four-syllable word for Duh?
> Several people in the terminal: laughter.

[I found it interesting that Eileen and Fred—who complement each other well and achieve a lot—understand results differently. And being able to play with such differences seemed promising.]

Anne replied: Hi, Alice. I never told you that I live this snippet of conversation. It does seem obvious—yet nothing's changed about how results are perceived.

1.3 Explorations

We agreed that "gendered perceptions of results" was a compelling research topic. Yet, it currently lives between the lines of publications and beneath the surfaces of conversations. Our work would be exploratory and perhaps controversial because:

1. Our society thinks of gender as binary, and equates masculine with men and feminine with women. Gender describes a set of socially

constructed expectations for women and men, taught as part of the socialization process (Wood, 2006). Although we see blurring of these lines and roles, they have been drawn strongly and judgmentally. For example, men are rarely praised for using leadership approaches that reflect a feminine style, judged by many as weaker and less effective. Although we use "women" and "men" in this paper, our focus is on feminine and masculine rather than biological differences.

2. Most thinking about leadership competencies and results is gender neutral. For example, authenticity is promoted, but there are issues with women being authentic. Authenticity is relational and followers may not relate to feminine approaches, and if women emulate male colleagues by: "enacting leadership in a conventional, no-nonsense, authoritative manner, they…may feel personally inauthentic" (Eagly, 2005 p.471).

3. Results can be framed in many ways: for example by measuring inputs, outputs or outcomes. Table 1 shows examples of how results might be understood.

shorter ‹ **Timespan** › longer		
entity Individual behaviors result in attention	Attention to performance results in a promotion	A series of promotions results in becoming a senior or public figure
^ Scope ^ Work on trust results in growth and connection	Stimulation of resultant networks results in new learning (intellectual capital)	Team performance results in improved tangible outputs
system Boundaries have resulted in efficient but fragmented silos	Boundaries are blurred and spanned; resulting in novel collaborations	Emergent innovations result in better places: workplaces, communities, planet…

Table 1: Possible ways of framing results

4. There are ethical and power implications around who determines the nature of results. And there are process implications around whether we can predict and plan for results, or whether they are emergent.

5. Any research about results would draw on the assumptions above. The research question: "Will incorporation of Six Sigma methods in the second quarter of 2016 affect profit by the fourth quarter?" implies a focus on outputs, a time-contained organizational scale, and linear cause and effect relationships. This could be considered a masculine orientation to results. Research designs and interpretations of findings are gendered.

For this exploratory paper, we reflected on published materials in relation to our experiences with gender, leadership and results.

1.4 Structure of This Paper

We begin by exploring gender and leadership in relation to workplace values and results by interweaving literature with our experiential learning. In doing so, we draw on theories including Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and the Theory of Boundary Critique. We chose RCT because it provides a lens for understanding how gendered workplace values can define results differently. The systems lens of boundary critique can illuminate dynamics between gendered perspectives. We share representative experiences from our work, and conclude with commentary on results and suggestions for future studies.

2 Masculine and Feminine Workplace Values

Feminist communications scholars note that "organizational discourse tends to value rationality, the public sphere and the mind, all of which have been socially constructed as masculine, and tend to marginalize that which is associated with femininity, namely; emotionality, the private sphere and the

body." (Tretheway, 2006, p. 126) Other scholars (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1975, 1977; Mumby, 2006) have described ways that organizations are gendered: there are patterns of advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and coercion, action and emotion, meaning and identity that are based on a distinction between masculine and feminine work values. We considered it worthy of further exploration to determine if this pattern may extend to gendered perceptions of results.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) gives us a useful lens for exploring workplace values. It draws on psychodynamic and feminist theory and emphasizes the primacy of human connection and relationships (Jordan, 2010). Fletcher (1999) explains that a basic tenet of RCT is that growth and development require a context of connection, or growth-fostering relationships.

Fletcher and other RCT scholars suggest that feminine values of work (which men can also have, but which women more often report) define results differently than the masculine, or core values. For example, a task focus is masculine; a community or team focus is more feminine. Independence is a more masculine value; inter-dependence is more feminine.

Alice: When I worked as a gender specialist for a secondary school curriculum revision project, I worked with a team of women interested in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) curricula. Some were university professors; others worked in applied fields such a biomedical engineering. During our first face-to-face session, one woman said: "For girls, context is everything." This resonated with every team member. The curricula seemed stripped of context, so this was a regular topic of conversation. In our reviews, we described the importance of context for women, and coded related edits back to that theme. Context involved links between the theme and its relevance, environment, subject intersections, and application. These edits surprised decision-makers (in comparison to equal numbers of male and female pronouns) and were not always accepted, even as legitimate gender-related recommendations.

3 Masculine and Feminine Workplace Practices

If feminine practices are less visible than masculine ones, feminine views of results may be hidden.

3.1 Diary Studies

One of Sally Helgesen's studies was similar to Mintzberg's famous study of what leaders actually do. Mintzberg's CEOs were male; Helgesen's were female. Mintzberg's men saw themselves at the top of pyramids, gathering refined information to make key decisions. Helgesen's women saw themselves in the centers of their organizations. Their models were more like boundary-spanning webs than pyramids. Her participants blurred lines between their professional and personal lives, whereas Mintzberg's segregated aspects of their lives. These differences resulted in different practices. For example, women paid attention to many things at once. Helgesen (2011) used the metaphor of radar-like focus, which she contrasted with the masculine laser-like focus. Women may be more opportunistic and less planful than men. They may be more inclusive in planning efforts. So a woman might see development of a diverse working group as a result, and men might not. Women may see work-life integration as a result, and schedule their days accordingly. And they may be less visible than people who use the top-of-pyramid metaphor. Anne's work with Graciela illustrates this well.

3.2 Stories from the Authors' Work

Anne: My client Graciela, an engineer, was distraught. She was led to believe she would receive a promotion and that did not happen. In fact, it had been many years since a promotion and she sought me out as a coach to help her figure out what she was doing wrong. We discovered that her ideas about being a good professional fit perfectly with findings about work values from Fletcher's study. Graciela valued being a good team member and doing whatever was needed. If that meant working weekends on a colleague's project

because he was behind schedule, or troubleshooting for another department, she was glad to do it—*for the good of the whole.* These were "results" she valued. Co-workers thanked her and appreciated how hard she worked, but she never got promoted. When I suggested to her that her "results" were not visible or valued in the organization because she was focused on collaboration rather than on self-promotion, her experience began to make sense to her. She thought about the people who had come in with less experience, trained with her, and been promoted while she stayed behind: people who she had felt were sleazy because they took credit for things others had done. She began to see that what she valued was not what the organization valued. She produced results – teamwork, collaboration, trouble shooting to ensure that deadlines were met – but these were not visible or rewarded.

Alice: My story is from a 14-month study of four mixed-gender groups with parallel goals. One group was particularly effective and satisfied with their work. Based on the descriptions above, members used feminine approaches to leadership. No one thought of themselves as the leader: everyone pointed to others. They created safe spaces for learning and innovation. Connections were nourished; unexpected results emerged. Another group in the study experienced frustration and few results. They employed traditional techniques such as detailed planning and respect for administrative boundaries. Paradoxically, men led adoption of feminine approaches. Perhaps approaches related to different epistemic cultures of the groups. Perhaps men had more freedom to adjust their approaches; women often report being pressured to adopt masculine approaches (Eagly, 2005).

We could learn more about collaborative, egalitarian and interconnected perspectives from women, but they are less visible than those from men. Buckminster Fuller, Gregory Bateson, Joseph Raelin or Peter Senge may come to mind as thought leaders more than Hedy Lamarr or Fabiola Gianotti, Mary Catherine Bateson, Mary Uhl-Bien or Mary Parker Follet. Are men thought leaders, promoted spokespersons, or simply the people who permeate our cultural filters?

4 Sensemaking Through a Systems Lens

How do gendered differences inform our systems view?

4.1 Boundary Critique

Gerald Midgley's (2005) systems theory of boundary critique emphasizes the social construction of boundaries as an ethical act. The value of pluralism (theoretical, methodological…) is imbedded in Midgley's work. His approach to interventions includes an open mind and eclectic toolkit, from which he and participants can choose options as the research evolves. As illustrated in Figure 1, this theory focuses on primary and secondary boundaries. Leaders' construction and maintenance of boundaries have ethical implications. For example, a manager who wants employees to focus solely on results within his unit will marginalize employees who focus on the good of the company. Power and influence are centered within the primary boundary. Elements between the primary and secondary boundaries are marginalized, and can be valued or devalued by the core.

Primary boundary surrounding core values and power

Surrounding area not perceived as relevant

Broader, secondary boundary: Material within this may be considered sacred or profane (valued or devalued)
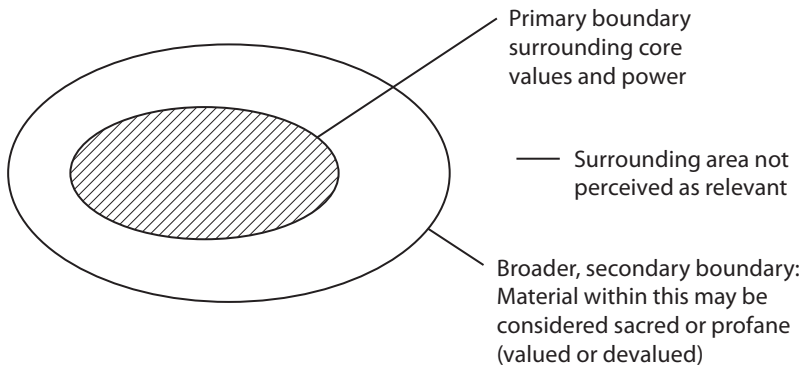
Figure 1: Basic illustration of Midgley's Theory of Boundary Critique Adapted from Midley (2005)

4.2 Feminism and Boundary Critique

In her work with ecofeminism and systems, Stephens notes that Midgley's approaches to pluralism could contribute to feminism. Scholars such as Stephens (2013) and Fletcher (1999, 2004) have noted the invisibility of feminist perspectives. Stephens described frustrations of feminist scholars: "A rich literature has accumulated…ignoring this work is an exclusionary practice itself" (p.4). In applied research, authors often imply that the experiences of women are unimportant and/or parallel to those of men (Stephens, 2013). Some of Fletcher's work is presented in a boundary critique frame in Figure 2.

MARGIN
Community/Team Focus

Connection

Interdependence

CORE
Task Focus
Isolation/Autonomy/Independence
Competition: Competitive Achievement
Hierarchy; Leadership is Directive
Rational Engagement Valued

Success Achieved through Collaboration

Mutuality

Collectivity Flat Structure

Leadership Style is Supportive

Emotional Engagement Valued

Figure 2: Masculine Workplace Values in the Core; Feminine Workplace Values in the Margins. Adapted from Fletcher (2004) and Midgley (2005).

Midgley is interested in dynamics between core and margins. With reference to Figure 2, envision challenges faced by women who try to shift conversations about results away from output measures. Consider Alice's most influential recent twitter post:

"Most organization metrics ignore:
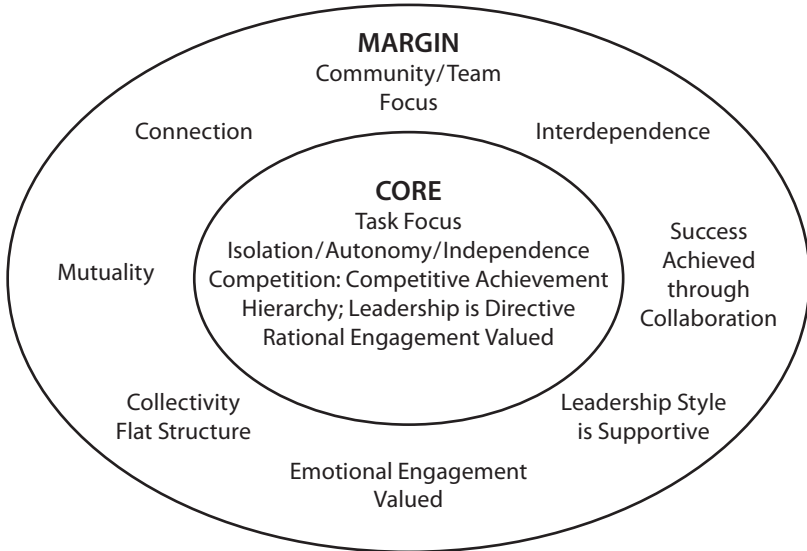Collaboration
Relationship-building
Capacity-building
Knowledge generation and
Kindness.
#Leadership"

Masculine pushback could include rational arguments about the ease and value of measuring task completion, or urgent needs related to the bottom line. British Columbia's New Democratic Party leader Carole James (Oct.30, 2015) described her efforts to build cooperation in legislative sessions. After her brief successes fell apart, she was told she didn't understand that politics is a blood sport. Similarly, a team leader client of Anne's was upset because she accomplished all of the goals set for her team's project and more. She expected a good performance review and possible promotion. However, she was told during her performance appraisal (note the individual and potentially competitive nature of this tool) that despite many indicators of excellence, she needed to "toughen up," spend less time "coddling her team and asking for their input," and be "more decisive" before she would advance. Might this simply have been a different lens on what constitutes results? The client subsequently organized a support group of senior women in her company who put pressure on the company to become more inclusive of gender differences.

5 Summary
Feminine and masculine approaches to leadership and results both have value; feminine perspectives are currently hidden and undervalued. We searched books from our libraries, papers from our files, and recent papers. We found that results—whether business results or other types of outcomes—are rarely explored through a lens of gender.

5.1 Key Insights

We believe gendered differences deserve more attention. For example, at the Women Leading Change event at Royal Roads University, Carole James and other panelists spoke about making the world a better place, suggesting results involve emergence and big-picture outcomes. A gendered depiction of results focus is presented in Figure 3.
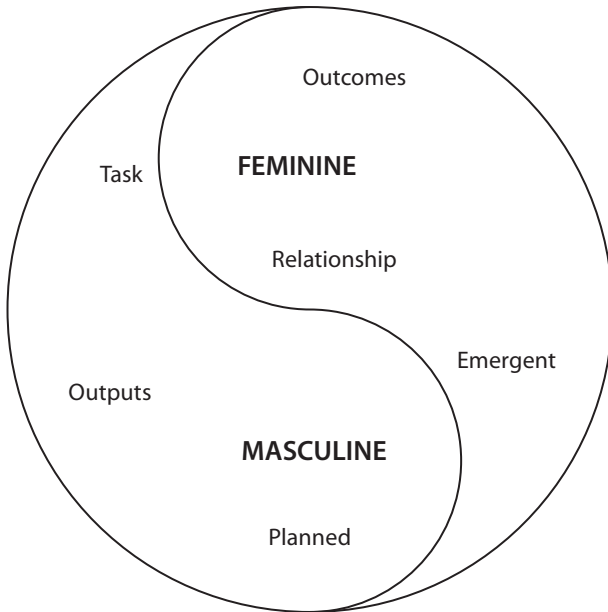

Figure 3: Preliminary Mapping of Gendered Perceptions of Results

Current leadership competencies reflect results defined by masculine work values. Emphasis on tasks and individual results makes the contributions of those using feminine work values and practices invisible. Furthermore, when women try to be more masculine, they further marginalize feminine perspectives.

5.2 Future Research

Our ideas for future research include the following:

1. How can difficult-to-measure results be included in leadership development and the evaluation of competencies?

2. How can standard leadership performance criteria be expanded to better include concepts such as networking, collaboration and emergence?

3. What trends—if any—are building support for feminine leadership approaches (such as redefining performance measures) or eroding support (such as widening of the empathy gap)?

4. How does the effectiveness of feminine or masculine approaches to achieving results map to different contexts (such as ordered or complex)?

We live in an era of increased complexity: challenges range from increasing power of multinationals to climate change. Diversity is important in complex systems, to allow for agility and adaptation. The health of our organizations and our planet relies on a diversity of masculine and feminine values and practices, leading to a healthy ecosystem of results.

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About the authors

Heesoon Bai, Ph.D. is Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University in Canada. She researches and writes in the intersections of ethics, ecological worldviews, contemplative ways, and Asian philosophies. She is also a practicing psychotherapist. You can find Professor Bai's published works at http://summit.sfu.ca/collection/204. Her faculty profile at SFU can be found at http://www.sfu.ca/education/faculty-profiles/hbai.html.

Contact: hbai@sfu.ca

Tom Brown holds an MBA and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Simon Fraser University. He has an academic and practical background in communications, program development and instructional design. His research interests are located at the intersection of university teaching and business ethics with a particular interest in online education. Since 1998 he has held a variety of senior administrative positions in the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University. Currently he teaches business ethics and serves as Academic Director of the Part Time MBA and the online Graduate Diploma in Business Administration.

David Chang is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. His research looks at ecological ethics, contemplative practice and sustainable communities. David has worked as a teacher and teacher educator in both secondary and post-secondary institutions.

Contact: dchangh@sfu.ca

Avraham Cohen, Ph.D., R.C.C., C.C.C. is Professor at City University of Seattle in Vancouver BC, Canada and serves as the Associate-Director for the Master in Counselling program. Since 1987 he has conducted a private psychotherapy practice in Vancouver BC. His recent book publications are *Becoming Fully Human Within Educational Environments: Inner Life,*

Relationship, and Learning, and Speaking of Learning: Recollections, Revelations, and Realizations.

Contact: acohen@cityu.edu

Larry Green is a psychotherapist in private practice and an Associate Professor at City University of Seattle, Canada. His doctoral dissertation (Simon Fraser University) explored the relationship between the prereflective (intuitive) self and the reflective mind. He believes that the prereflective self is more adept than the latter for registering one's immediate situation. The reflective mind often fails to recognize any phenomena that can't be integrated into its pre-existing conceptual categories. Given this orientation, Green's teaching and therapeutic approach emphasizes attending to one's immediate situation and then developing a symbol, image or metaphor that communicates an understanding of the team's situated challenges.

Contact: genero@telus.net

Keith Hunter is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Organization, Leadership and Communication at the University of San Francisco's School of Management. A veteran of the US Navy, he earned his PhD in Organizational Behavior and Management at Carnegie Mellon University in 2011. His primary research interests involve leadership, organizational culture and social network dynamics. Dr. Hunter's teaching spans both the graduate and undergraduate levels, featuring courses in management, leadership, team dynamics and power and influence. A modeling and simulation enthusiast, Dr. Hunter also holds BS and MS degrees in computer science from the University of Central Florida.

Contact: keith.o.hunter@gmail.com or kohunter@usfca.edu

Huw Jones is a business and social research consultant and registered casual academic at the University of Newcastle (UON). Dr. Jones earned his Doctor of Business Administration at UON in 2014; his doctoral thesis examined the relationships between authentic corporate social responsibility

and organizational commitment in Australia. Dr. Jones' primary academic research interests include corporate social responsibility, organizational performance, and management accounting. In practice, Dr. Jones consults in business analytics, market research, and social research.

Contact: huwj001@gmail.com

Anne Litwin, PhD, is an organization development consultant, educator, researcher and executive coach. Anne has been a professional researcher and statistician, the CEO of her family retail business and is past-Chair of the Board of Directors of NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science. She is co-editor of the book *Managing in the Age of Change* and author of the recent book *New Rules for Women: Revolutionizing the Way Women Work Together* (2014), along with numerous journal articles. Anne received her PhD from Fielding Graduate University in Human and Organizational Systems in 2008. She lives in Boston.

Contact: www.annelitwin.com or annelitwin@earthlink.net

Alice MacGillivray is an independent consultant specializing in leadership and knowledge strategy. She began her formal education in the natural sciences and principles from nature continue to inform her work. Alice is also an Associate Faculty member with Royal Roads University and a Fellow with the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University. She has Master's degrees in Leadership and in Human Development and a PhD in Human and Organizational Systems. Alice lives on Gabriola Island on Canada's west coast.

Contact: www.4KM.net or Alice@4KM.net

Christian Stary received his Diploma degree in computer science from the Vienna University of Technology, Austria, in 1984, his Ph.D. degree in usability engineering, and also his Habilitation degree from the Vienna University of Technology, Austria, in 1988 and 1993, respectively. He is currently full Professor of Business Information Systems with the University of Linz.

His current research interests include the area of interactive distributed systems, with a strong focus on method-driven learning and explication technologies for personal capacity building and organizational development.

Leslie Varley, a member of the Killer Whale clan of the Nisga'a Nation, is a social justice advocate. She recently became the Executive Director of British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres. Previously Leslie held the Indigenous health portfolio at Provincial Health Services Authority where she co-lead the development of San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Training, a facilitated, online decolonizing anti-racism training program offered to the health and social justice sectors in three Canadian provinces. Leslie's community work has focused on ending violence against Indigenous women and girls. She holds a Master's in Business Administration from Simon Fraser University.

Contact: larvarley@gmail com

Gary Wagenheim is adjunct management professor at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University and Aalto University Executive Education and former professor of organizational leadership at the School of Technology at Purdue University. His research and teaching interests are reflective practice, leadership, and organizational behavior. He owns and operates Wagenheim Advisory Group that provides corporate training, coaching, and organizational development programs. Dr. Wagenheim received a Ph.D. and a M.A. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University, and a M.B.A. in Organizational Behavior/ Organizational Change and Development from Syracuse University. He lives in Vancouver, Canada.

Contact: wagenhei@sfu.ca

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