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Want to be a Leader? I'd Rather be an Alchemist

Elizabeth Mischler

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Prior to this, Elizabeth was Producer of Artist Development at South East Dance, providing a dedicated focus to developing dance artists and the dance sector. She has worked with a host of companies and independent artists, helping them to consider what they need creatively and organisationally to best underpin their artistic work. Elizabeth was a professional dancer, rehearsal director and teacher for 15 years, working with companies throughout the UK and Europe, including Ballet Theatre Munich, Mark Bruce Company, Clod Ensemble, National Dance Company Wales, Matthew Bourne's New Adventures and others. She went on to work as Producer for Mark Bruce Company and as Assistant to the Director/Company Manager for DV8 Physical Theatre. She is a Trustee on the board of DV8 Physical Theatre and previously was Chair and Trustee for Mark Bruce Company.

Want to be a leader? I'd rather be an alchemist.

Leadership development is big business. A quick Google of those two words shows over 600,000,000 results. Apparently most people want to become better leaders. So did I when I began my Clore Fellowship... but not anymore. Now, I want to become a better alchemist.

We all have ideas as to what leadership is and in the dictionary many related words can be found. Among them are guidance, direction, authority, control, management, being first or among the first.

What about alchemy? Alchemy as an ancient "art" was concerned with changing base metals (i.e. lead) into gold. Alchemists attempted the impossible, experimenting with a process of mixing different elements together and pursuing transformation. The Oxford Dictionary defines alchemy as: A seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination.

Let's compare. As a traditional leader, one can successfully carve out a path and guide a way through, making things happen with others following. As an alchemist, one can transform and combine ideas and people to create something distinct. It will be seemingly magical, through its flow and synthesis.

At the heart of leadership are people, with their individual talents, abilities and ideas. The alchemy lies in the craft, skill and imagination with which these are intertwined. The alchemist is no longer attempting the impossible. The alchemist is a true leader.

So what does one need to become an alchemist? What is the formula? Let's look at a few key elements that every alchemist should have to hand...

Combining

We all 'combine' for ourselves every day. Think of the roles that each of us inhabits at work and personally: parent, child, colleague, expert, friend, client, etc. These roles are constantly intersecting and interacting to affect and catalyse each other, our feelings and our actions. The alchemist is aware of all of this and pays attention to what is at play internally. She or he will weave this together to a positive result, consciously gaining strength, insight or agency.

It is also necessary to navigate this on a wider scale – positively combining people, skills and characters to make a 'team', workplace or organisation. Bringing together unusual suspects and different personalities takes time and attention, but is worth it. The same is true for ideas – pooling thoughts together from many sources can trigger or unlock other ways of thinking. 'Better,' new or more compelling ideas can come from integrating disparate views and approaches.

'Combining' is layered and dynamic and, at any given time, there is both independence and connectedness. For this to work in a team, a clear framework or structure is needed.

Shape

Leaders rarely challenge the hierarchical pyramid. Yes, a structure is needed that is cohesive and clear, but a structure can also breed freedom and the sharing of power. It can be a different shape: circular, active and connected. At any given time, someone different may be at the forefront leading the way or in the back supporting, and every single role is essential to making the whole work. Within this, ideas, tasks and people remain in motion.

There are some great examples out there. Organisations referred to as “teal” are “moving forward along an evolutionary spectrum, toward self-management, wholeness, and a deeper sense of purpose” (Frederic Laloux). One such teal structure is Holacracy®, an open source framework of self-management that offers space to each individual in a company to pursue ideas and energise their roles, within an interconnected circular structure. Based on transparency, progress and shared authority, Holacracy® gives people responsibility and empowerment to make their own decisions, and try out new solutions or ideas, even if those are not perfect. The solution or idea can be improved upon if needed, but at least a first step is taken, with testing and learning to inform the next step. In this way, work, relationships and a company’s purpose continually evolve.

It is worth recognising that implementing a differently shaped structure can bring bumps along the way. The alchemist does not shy away from this and values these tensions in themselves, because they can bring great insight and new opportunity.

Questions, good questions

The alchemist is curious, wanting to discover more, understand new things and find better ways of working. Answers and ideas stop coming when questions stop being asked. The art of asking ‘good’ questions is fundamental because the right questions often prompt the right solution.

A ‘hero’ leader is one that sweeps in with the ‘best’ solution – but is it? The alchemist acts as a host rather than hero, asking questions and holding the space for an individual or collective to find and grow their own creativity, process and answers. “What is most critical?” “What would be ideal?” “What else?” “What would success look like?” These questions open the possibility for anyone to find an answer and take the lead. Frequently, they bring about a new option that the ‘hero’ would not have come up with on their own. Global design company IDEO calls this “leading alongside”.

At the same time, an alchemist will push to look beyond perceived boundaries, sometimes confirming the old and potentially discovering something entirely new. The status quo is not always the best mode of operation. “If there were no boundaries, what might we do?” “How might a different sector do this?” “That’s the 5 year picture, what will this look like in 25 years’ time?” These questions can change thoughts, industries or even the world. Following threads that may be seemingly left field or impossible may uncover unexpected and powerful learning that will catalyse a way forwards.

Zoom Out, Zoom In

A skilful process of enquiry, observation, ideation, questioning, expansion, focus and testing is at the core of how an alchemist works. It goes something like this. See the world as a beginner, with fresh eyes => ask questions => reconsider => redefine. Now repeat => be curious => blow it open => bring it back together => clarify => make sense. Design thinkers call this the double diamond: convergent and divergent thinking. It continues: question, hone in and refocus, without being directed by pre-assumptions. Relish the surprises. Throw away the barriers and be creative. Next, do this with others – invite other players into the game and see new possibilities present.

Within this, 'combining' has a role to play. The alchemist is not afraid to mix people of different talents and expertise. The Studio (a collection of designers, artists, makers, strategists and thinkers) at NASA's Jet Propulsion laboratory refers to its work as helping scientists and engineers to "think through their thinking". By organising information and asking questions differently, this collection of diverse minds contribute to the making sense of, generating and synthesis of ideas. Certain results may only be possible by the combining of these people, these ideas and these questions.

Listen

The alchemist is an acute observer and a keen listener.

In 2012, Google began a research initiative entitled Project Aristotle, studying why some of Google's teams did well and others did not. Through interviews, they found that team members felt team culture was the most important measure of team effectiveness. Their research found that in 'good' teams, everyone had a chance to talk within the team (roughly the same amount of time spread over a certain period). This in turn meant that team members also listen to each other.

Listening doesn't just happen by itself. A healthy mode of communication needs to be cultivated, or as Project Aristotle terms it, "psychological safety" needs to be established. Useful ground rules include:

- Don't be afraid of other points of view – it doesn't have to change yours, but may help you see something else.
- Enter a debate without presumption or assumption that you know what someone else thinks.
- Discussion does not have to be about changing minds – it can be about synthesis of information and different points of view to strengthen, influence or inform.
- Work from a belief of positive intent and cooperation. View people as discussants, not adversaries.
- Don't be afraid to share your ideas or say what you think.

- Listen to the logic of where someone's thinking comes from – not only the beliefs themselves, but the context or story and how those beliefs have been reached.
- Encourage constructive disagreement – disagreement with rigour and respect.

Make Mistakes

Even within the most successful and well-run teams or projects, mistakes get made. This can be good! It is also both inevitable and necessary. Alchemists learn, adapt, improvise and try again. After all, this is alchemy: transforming, combining, creating – it is not just about one finite direction. Failure is where some of the best discoveries lie, and the key is to learn and transform them.

Dwelling on process, the unknown, and murky moments of ideation and collaboration is where the alchemist excels. Often this is where mistakes or the unexpected appear and, in turn, discovery and ideas not yet even considered. If it weren't for fortunate accidents, we wouldn't have Post-It notes, the Slinky or Penicillin. This is often the space where innovation strikes – in creating space for other ideas to take shape. Think. Do. Fail. Pivot. Try Again.

Presence and Vision

The alchemist strives to understand and harmonise who they are, how they want to be and why. Human beings are complex and their relationships even more so. Alchemists demonstrate what they believe in and value. This translates into how they interact with others, communicate, collaborate and engage with the world. Put simply, they lead by being the best version of themselves.

Within this, imagination and a look towards the future play a part. Rather than only achievable targets, the Alchemist will consider their ultimate ambition, keeping a dream visible and reaching for it. The dream is the target. The alchemy manifests in how one plots backwards to the present day and takes the next steps or sets up the right conditions needed to move towards it.

Alongside this, it is vital that the alchemist remains present, flexible and open to possibility. Things change, opportunities arise, surprises will come up. Whilst keeping an eye on aspiration, there is a need to clearly perceive the moment, integrating all of what is going on into one's understanding and action. The alchemist remains in touch with the here and now, whilst keeping the future in sight and is not afraid to reposition or adjust.

Environment

Do environment, context and workplace culture influence alchemy? Yes, they certainly do.

A 2014 study by economists at the University of Warwick found that happiness led to a 12% boost in productivity, while unhappy workers were 10% less productive. The

research team says, “We find that human happiness has large and positive causal effects on productivity. Positive emotions appear to invigorate human beings” (Fast Company). Flexible working, job shares, assorted methods of getting things done all contribute. An alchemist is open to the fact that someone else may work differently to them. Through acknowledging and enabling people to do their best work in a variety of ways, the workplace can become more alive, diverse and receptive to transformation.

Let’s look to Dutch/German independent training comparison website Springest for a good example. The company noticed some employees were not getting what they needed and weren’t happy, and the work was not as good as it could be. ‘Smooth Operations’ was born, as part of their integral business structure of interlinking circles. The roles in Smooth Operations look after everything from salary negotiation, advancing learning and development of employees, to greening the office, mentoring, Friday drinks, internal events and much more. This is alongside the focus on everyday business and tasks, not an add-on. The result? Employee satisfaction has gone up and the company continues to grow and develop.

Artistry

Alchemy manifests artistry in the combining of all that makes up our world, and subsequent transformation and creation. It takes experience, ingenuity and evolution. Each element affects another, and the rhythm and dynamic of how everything melds as one will rarely be the same. Every alchemist’s formula will be different because it includes their own personal creativity, style and values.

At its best, a sense of ease, artistry and fluidity arise within the process. Imagine a high quality performance that appears seamless, in motion, transporting. There has been sweat, uncertainty, hard work, discipline, rigour, questioning, failure, iteration, creation, refining, combining and challenge along the way, and the end result is magic.

An artist develops over time through practice, risk and growth; so does an alchemist, with attention to and nourishment of their creative skill. The final outcome of any given task is not always the most important or interesting; it may very well be the means of getting there.

Alchemy

The world is changing at lightening speed and there are many forces at play. Being a traditional leader just isn’t good enough anymore. Companies continue to use, and even worse not question, rigid management and problem-solving models. Hierarchical structures discourage ideas, decision-making and ownership. Employee satisfaction and retention have become a concern, even amidst increasing fear of job loss in a hyper-digital age. We need to apply alchemy to leadership and how we connect with each other.

It is time for the alchemist to stand up.

Be an alchemist and dare to change the world. Start with these elements and make your own formula. Look to others and learn from others – it is not just about you. Share your power and others will rise up. Move beyond your bias and expectation that the future will be a continuation of current trends. Conceive of the bigger picture. Stay curious, open-minded and be aware of your process. Do things differently.

Transform, create and combine – you might even find magic along the way.

Clore Leadership cultivates
excellence and innovation
in the leadership of culture.

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