

***The Synergy Of Poetic Leadership:
How Leading Poetically Bridges The Gaps***

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Abstract:

I will not follow where the path may lead,
but I will go where there is no path, and I will leave a trail.
From Wind-Wafted Wild Flowers, Muriel Strode

We live in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), where the disparate needs of individuals, communities and society are at times in conflict. There is a growing recognition that traditional styles of leadership are no longer adequate for such a world. Interdisciplinary practices can give us a new perspective on our challenges; new ways to build synergy. This paper will consider how a poetic leadership can help us reach common ground, and find meaning in our place in our community or society.

Poetry deals in the currencies of passion and truth; its language is open and non-directive. Poetry connects emotionally whilst allowing us the freedom to make our own interpretations. It provides a space for reflection. These are vital skills for engaging with others in a noisy and complex world. The music of poetry can wake up our senses. It can develop our lateral thinking capabilities, and may help us to manage better in ambiguity and uncertainty. Poetry sits with not knowing. Leadership with these qualities can build resilience in a VUCA world.

Keywords: leadership; poetry; leadership development; metaphor; transpersonal; creativity

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LEADERSHIP AS POETRY

Leaders write organizational poetry
George Goens [1]

Leaders and their followers are increasingly searching for meaning in the workplace. Many seek models of leadership that are more articulate and quiet; that link to the self and humanity; that bring meaning and creativity; that are comfortable with ambiguity. Yet we continue to work in environments that prioritise self-sufficiency and fast results; that reward directive styles of leadership. Many would argue that there is a widening gulf between what people want from their leaders, and what traditional modes of leadership succession and management development deliver.

There is a plethora of authoritative advice about leadership. Rather than adding to this canon, I am offering a way of seeing leadership in the idea of the poetic leader. Poetic leadership is about a way of thinking and communicating that is beautiful, intelligent, complex, subtle, figurative, and questioning.

My premise is that:

- poetry has much in common with leadership and has something to offer on several levels
- poetry and poetic language can be powerful tools for leaders
- reading and understanding poetry can develop useful thinking skills for leaders
- using poetic devices and approaches (such as tone, rhythm, and narrative) can improve our leadership
- metaphor is useful not only in leadership but about leadership
- seeing leadership as a poetic activity can shift our relationship with our identity as leaders

Metaphors establish a mindset that affects the way we see the world. Using poetry as a metaphor for leadership provides us with a shorthand - an intuitive understanding. It may not only offer a framework for thinking about leadership, but also tell us something about the here-and-now of communicating as a leader.

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem, I mean that there can be no part that is redundant. Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is a machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy.
William Carlos Williams

Why should we give attention to poetry? In a world where creativity and innovation are key differentiators; where people are increasingly looking for meaning in their work; and where clarity and truth can be hard to find, I believe that poetry has something to offer.

In *The Music-Makers*, Arthur O'Shaughnessy named poets as the original movers and shakers of the world. Poetry deals in the currencies of passion and truth; currencies that are vital in successful leadership.

The word poetry derives from the Greek "ποίησις", poiesis, a "making"). So a poem is a made thing; an artefact. Denotatively, poetry is literary work in metrical form or verse, with a purpose of exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative thoughts. The word poetic is also given connotative meanings, such as the characteristics of rhythm, beauty, spirit and feeling, and of being elevated or sublime.

One of poetry's features is its ability to balance or fuse elements that are in tension, for example: sound and symbol; rhyme and rhythm; head and heart. Like great leadership, poetry connects with us emotionally, and our response to it can be powerful, unconscious and physical. Housman famously described this physical response, suggesting that the seat of our sensation in response to poetry is the pit of the stomach.

Poetry does not exist in isolation but passes between the poet and the reader or listener. It evokes what Coleridge called 'a willing response', or what we might think of as a followership. We read poetry with an expectation of creative expression because we associate the two. There is a linguistic contract between poet and reader, just as there is an organisational contract between leaders and the led.

William Carlos Williams argued that a poem should be a field of action. Poetry, as a made thing, makes the bridge between doing and knowing. Poetry is increasingly brought into the boardrooms, training spaces and marketing strategies of a wide range of organisations. We use poetry in leadership development at my own company Different Development. And as well as focusing on poems themselves, thinking more broadly about the poetic qualities of leadership can add another dimension.

THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP

Lord, what an organ is human speech when employed by a master
Mark Twain

Language is power[ful]. We recognise great leaders in part from the language they use. Leaders concentrate on the meaning of events and decisions; they are sensitive to language. The language of leadership is colourful, peppered with symbolism and metaphor, laced with examples, and imprinted with a clear message or call for action.

There is particular strength in the language of poetry, and this was part of Plato's rationale for saying poets would be banished from his Republic. Poetry pushes language to its utmost. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that whereas 'ordinary language resembles a coin that we pass round among ourselves in place of something else, poetic language is like gold itself'. [2]

Leaders and teams who are able to draw on richer vocabulary and deeper descriptions of things, will broaden the language of their organisations and overcome the verbal monotony so common in the corporate world. A richer organisational vocabulary can increase the bandwidth of our connections, both interpersonally and intellectually.

SETTING THE TONE

Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic...All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice some how entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.

Robert Frost

More than in any other medium, poetry uses sound to convey meaning. Through the simple yet demanding act of combining consonants and vowels in certain ways, a poet can communicate emotions that are distinct from the words' denotations and connotations.

Sonic devices such as repetition, assonance, mimesis and rhythm enable the poet to overlay and stress certain sounds, with powerful and sometimes intoxicating effect. These aspects of poetic voice, alongside the images and events in the poem, work to create mood and enhance emotion; to make music from words.

A poem's tone is its overall mood or pervading atmosphere; the attitude towards the subject that its style implies; its emotional colouring. A poet uses tone to influence the readers' expectations and response.

When American poet laureate Robert Frost spoke and wrote about poetic tone, he meant the kind of eavesdropped vocal sound that comes through a closed door when people are speaking - the kind that gives us a sense of what is going on even though we can't hear the words exactly.

Likewise, people should be able to understand what is going on in an organisation (or a leader's mind) from the overheard tones in an organisations's conversational register. As they will inevitably hear something, it is important that they hear what we would want them to hear. The tone set by ongoing practices, habits and processes; the attitude implied by the things we pay attention to; the symbolism of the leader's daily decisions and choices - these may be more pervasive in setting the tone than formal communications and Board reports. Tone needs to be congruent, supporting the sense of what we are trying to say.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS

Listen: nothing. The sound of silence. The rustle of
air in the silence. The music of air touching itself -
silently.

Luce Irigaray

Form in poetry is the arrangement, manner or method used to organise and convey its content. Poets today are likely to draw on from - and even combine - diverse forms.

Form is a key part of the way said. The poet needs to make choices about shape and form carefully, as it should not only reflect the purpose and style of a poem, but will give the reader clues about meaning and tone. When a poem's tone and shape fits with its theme, it lends credence to its particular circumstance. Such a poem has an overall sense of congruence, showing rather than telling us its message.

Formality and Fluidity

Although structure and form are the enablers of rhythm, we should not get too hung up on them - the rhythm must have space; must live. One of the most common failings in organisational change programmes is too great a focus on structure and process, and not enough on the human factors of change.

Adaptability and flexibility are key. In typical organisations there is ongoing turnover of staff, frequent restructuring of teams and business units, and time limited task-and-finish or matrix-based activities. The structure that is fit for purpose one day will be antiquated the next. If we are to maintain motivation and engagement, processes must not become monotonous. A degree of variety in pattern - of deviation from form - will help to keep people's interest.

Structure

Poets use structural elements such as lines, stanzas and punctuation to help the reader follow their meaning. In management-speak, lines and stanzas can help to 'chunk the elephant'; to divide a complex process, problem or project into bite-sized pieces.

In poetry, minute marks of punctuation can have a big impact on our senses and understanding. These small things matter. So too do the punctuating gestures that we make as leaders: eye contact; a nod; a touch; saying "yes", and "thank you"; starting an email with a greeting. In such simple ways we signal our intentions and the tone of our connection.

Endings are crucial too. As well as its closing thought or sentiment, the final mark of a poem, and the space that follows, will usually signify clearly that it has come to an end. This sense of closure and completion is important. Neither a poem, a speech or a corridor interaction should just fizzle out.

Say That Again!

Poets often repeat themselves. Repetition of same or similar words, sounds, symbols, even lines, helps to create a sense of congruence and flow; a thread that we can follow through the labyrinth of a poem. As leaders, repetition can help us to create connection and resonance. It enables us to repeat or recast a point to ensure it has been heard and understood; to stress something important. We can use repetition to reflect and endorse what we hear from others too.

We know that our messages have been heard and understood when we start to hear them come, unbidden and rephrased, from others around the organisation.

Pausing for Breath

French poet Stéphane Mallarmé argued that "It is the job of poetry to clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things". Poetry has many means of imposing pauses, often encouraging or requiring us to read slowly, to breathe, to stop and think, and listen. Much of its power lies in the relationship - the contrast - between the words and the white space of the page.

Just as a poem's life lies in the breath between the words, so is space - to rest, pause and think - a key tool in the leader's toolkit. We need respite from intensity; contrast between doing and not doing. Calm, white space is the realm of the imagination.

Effective leadership is both measured and spacious; it provides for down time and reflection. Even in a busy environment, when pressures to make decisions are great, we may need to buy a little time - to create a breathing space within which further information gathering and investigation can take place, in order, ultimately, to arrive at a better decision. We all need space and time to think our best thoughts.

LEADING WITH RHYTHM

Our biological rhythms are the symphony of the cosmos, music embedded deep within us to which we dance, even when we can't name the tune.

Deepak Chopra

We are immersed in a natural symphony of rhythms, and organisations, made up of people and the work they do, are no exception. Rhythmic movement is a natural consequence of the body doing physical work, and maximises muscular efficiency. Perhaps this increased efficiency is why physical work across the globe is often accompanied by singing or chanting, from the spiritual songs sung by ditch diggers in the Caribbean to the Hebridean waulking songs sung by women as they soften home woven cloth. Although more immediately apparent in physical work, rhythm is an important factor in productivity of any kind.

Rhythm is key in music and dance, and present in all language based arts, but it is in poetry that the driving beat of language meets meaning. Poetry mimics the waves of breath (or inspiration) that accompany speech. Indeed, poetic rhythms are sometimes ascribed to units of breath. In his essay *Projective Verse*, poet and critic Charles Olson suggests: "And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes." [3]

William Carlos Williams described the movement of a poem as "intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character." [4] Prosody is the energy of that poem, the thumping cadence of the poem's engine that creates pace and momentum.

Effective leaders are aware of the rhythms at play within their organisation, and know how to read them, ride them, and shift them when necessary. They can interact with organisational rhythms to increase productivity and allegiance.

Rhythm can act as a powerful change agent. As Professors Bob and Janet Denhardt suggest in *The Dance of Leadership* : "The beats provide the obvious structure and constitute moments of stability, but, between each accent, there is an open space, an opportunity, begging to be filled." [5] Rhythm exemplifies the tension between stability and change that is the essence of life and of leadership. In the space that follows a moment of stability, one of a million things might happen. It is the leader's role to help the group navigate this space. A poetic leader will follow the breathing rhythm of ebb-and-flow; give-and-take; lead-and-follow.

TELLING THE TRUTH

All truths wait in all things
Walt Whitman

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the poet writes “what will and must be spoken”. Poets are often watchdogs of the truth in the face of corruption and exploitation. In taking this role, many poets have carved a courageous and at times dangerous role for themselves. In today’s organisations, the quest for veracity has never been more vital, nor potentially so tricky.

Martin Heidegger regarded language as the ultimate reality, and poetry as the most authentic language. Poetry makes important truths accessible and tangible, in contrast with the vague promises made by remote regimes, and disempowering leaders. Kathleen Jamie suggests: "...if poetry is a method of approaching truths, and each of us with a human soul and 'a tongue in oor heids' can make an approach toward a truth, poetry is inherently democratic.”

A poetic leader will put truth in the hands of their people, overcoming the nagging sense that people often have; that somebody else is secretly running the show. The truth also has an impact on the bottom line. Professor Tony Simons found that organisations where managers have 'behavioral integrity' are substantially more profitable than those where they don't. [6]

Leadership is authenticity, not style. Authentic leaders are originals. Many leadership development texts list the leadership characteristics we are supposed to adopt, and extols the virtues of particular leaders we are recommended to emulate. This is the antithesis of authenticity. It is about developing a persona or an image of a leader. The prospective leader who attempts to adopt prescribed leadership traits is destined to fail.

Poets make conscious choices about the voice in which they write and have a characteristic style, even though their tone may change from one work to another. Although we too will adapt our words and tone to fit the audience or situation, our unique leadership voice must remain recognisable. If a leader is to create trust and confidence, they must sound true; they must act and speak consistently.

SHOWING AND TELLING

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood
and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the
endless immensity of the sea
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“Show, don't tell” is common advice to fiction writers to write in a way that allows the reader to experience the piece through a character's action, words, thoughts and feelings rather than through the narrator's exposition. Rather than being heavy-handed, or overwhelming the reader with adjectives, they should allow the story to emerge from the text; leaving her to draw her own conclusions about what is going on from what she observes and understands.

Effective writers use detail to breathe life into their writing. Rather than naming emotions (she was afraid; he was angry) they use carefully chosen words alongside appropriate descriptions - stiff, sweaty, a snapped reply, a stammer - to paint a more vivid picture. As Anton Chekhov urged, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

FINDING MEANING; MAKING SENSE

While science may lead you to truth, only imagination can lead you to meaning.

C.S. Lewis

One of the most important tasks of today’s leaders, especially in times of uncertainty and change, is to help people make sense of things. A good leader is able to help others find meaning, by providing context and by helping people find a sense of what they do and where they fit. Leaders frame the issues in a way that the people in an organisation can respond to positively.

We need to transmit meaning, but we work with people who have divergent views and perspectives; who are motivated by unlike things, and may hold dear, values that are alien to us. We need to find somewhere for different values and beliefs to meet, and a language that helps to build and share meaning.

The language of poetry can guide us. Poets help us to define what it is to be human. They speak, implicitly or explicitly, of soul and spirit. They help us to find our place in the world, and in respect to other people in it. Poetry explores the unknown, raises questions and seeks meaning.

Poetry also spans the divide between the intellectual and the emotional; the known and the felt. Holding its content lightly, poetry is able to communicate both an idea and the feeling associated with that idea - the two entwined - with clarity and precision. In most organisational challenges, the interface between the rational and the emotional is the place where the leadership quest succeeds or fails.

George Santayana suggests that poetry’s function is “to seize hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas; to build new structures.. fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul.” [7]

THINKING AND LEARNING

I have no axe to grind; only my thoughts to burnish.

George Santayana

How Poetry Helps Us Think

One of the most important qualities that champions of poetry for the workplace identify is its power to develop new thinking skills; skills that emphasise wisdom and learning over knowledge; creative over fixed ideas. According to Clare Morgan,

“Reading poetry generates conceptual spaces that may be different from the spaces usually available to (business) strategists”. [8]

Poetry uses relatively unpredictable language and surprising imagery; it arrests the ear and the mind with novelty, patterns, powerful metre and fresh ideas; it requires us to remain alert and pay attention. By doing all this, poetry reduces what is known as ‘automatic perception’ and helps us to question our assumptions. To read poetry requires us to claim that imaginative space, to live with uncertainty, rather than rush to conclude and summarise.

Traditional management approaches tend to follow inductive or deductive logic. Whilst this enables us to extrapolate from known facts and past experience, it is of limited value in anticipating the unknown consequences of something that has yet to be. We can’t create something that we can’t imagine. Poetry’s abductive thinking style may help us to develop the necessary skills.

Ambiguity

While facts are important, they are not enough. Lominger International’s research suggests that the most important competency in short supply today is dealing with ambiguity. [9] People who are tolerant of ambiguities cope relatively well where information is vague, incomplete or inconsistent, and where the solution and means of getting there are not immediately clear.

Curious exploration, and a willingness to sit with unresolved questions, mirror the creative structure of poetry rather than the concrete answers of prose. Keats called this tolerance ‘negative capability’: “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. [10] Poetry is a country of no right answers; a land of light and shade, of paths that may lead somewhere or nowhere; a territory of lookout points and places to rest.

CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.

Albert Einstein

IBM’s 2010 Global CEO Study identifies creativity as “the single most important leadership competency for enterprises seeking a path through this complexity.” [11]

Creative leaders are thought to innovate more. They have new ideas. They create new products. They come up with new ways to get things done. Artists have tools that enable them to move from intention to creation and expression, and we can develop similar approaches in leadership. Poetry has a grammar of possibility, and reading poetry can help to develop (amongst other things) creative thinking skills and tolerance of ambiguity. These are vital skills in today’s complex world.

Effective leaders work at a moving edge; a place of not knowing, of adventure and creativity, where current knowledge asymptotes to nothing. This place of the unknown is encountered in many fields. The physicist Niels Bohr observed that, 'When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections'. [12] Only by reaching this place of not knowing can we discover something new.

Leaders must be visionaries; as Shelley said (of poets): “the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present”.

HEART TO HEART: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.
Only connect...

E.M. Forster, *Howards End*

Personal Connections

Effective leaders - poetic leaders - honour and nurture connections; in particular people's connection with the things that matter most to them. This is a powerful antidote to the continual erosion of meaning and passion that is common in the superficial churn and aesthetic muteness of many working lives. Poetic leadership helps a leader connect their own outer and inner worlds (integrally), and connects people with each other (transpersonally).

Poetry is the natural habitat of emotional intelligence. Poetry enables us to engage the emotions (what - Yeats called 'footsteps over our hearts') and helps us perceive what we may already know. It works through 'hot' rather than 'cold' cognition, involving the body and all its sensations.

Effective leaders are visible and open. They don't hide behind hierarchy and bureaucracy, but interact with people across the organisation and inspire them to achievement. They are able to put ourselves in others' shoes. The specific relationship between leader and followers is a key part of an organisation's pervading culture.

W H Auden famously said, “Put poetry on a pedestal and it ends up on the shelf“. The role of the celebrity leader can be equally isolating - on top of a pedestal is a lonely place. It is also dangerous; worshipped leaders can become defended, invulnerable and arrogant. In healthy organisations, people are empowered to speak their own views, rather than serving as disenfranchised echoes to narcissistic leaders. Like the Emperor with no clothes, leaders need to be told the truth; they need to understand their failings and admit their mistakes; above all they need to connect with others and offer them realistic role models.

Leadership conversations

In an organisation that empowers people, there is good dialogue. The leader helps others to express themselves; they create the overall shape of conversation like curating the exhibits in a museum or the stanzas of a poem.

A poetic leader pays attention, treads lightly, and notices little things; they are full of care and care-ful; they want to see as well as be seen; they are a voice that listens, that asks questions. To listen well we must be genuinely curious about another's point of view; we must hold our own knowledge and authority in abeyance. As Winston Churchill said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

As a grammar of ambiguity, poetry can strengthen our ability to sit with the questions rather than rush to conclusions. This makes it what Clare Morgan calls a "ground for surrender"; a place of opening up that can act as a basis for reframing seemingly intractable issues. Reframing and revisioning are essential in opening up the possibility of change of mind; and that possibility, in turn, can act as a catalyst in the trust process.

Common Ground

Part of poetry's relevance may be its universality and its enduring nature. It enables us to see ourselves and current circumstances as part of a continuum, a community extending across history. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer describe how art helps us to set aside our sense of individuality and self, and to see life directly through timeless ideas.

Collaborative leaders seek out that which unifies, and direct their energy to that which brings and holds people together, rather than to anatomising their differences; yet they need to do this without imposing a impersonal world view.

Poets, too, search for universally understandable symbols that are nevertheless made personal. As Keith Holyoak [13] argues, "Poetry reflects the tension between what is personal and what is collective, individuality and the shared human core..."

According to Elizabethan courtier Sir Philip Sidney, in *An Apology for Poetry*, poetry surpasses history in that it tells us how life ought to be and surpasses philosophy in that it gives us the particular example.

Poetry works by connecting the general with the personal or individual. By writing very specifically, often at an emotional level, of one experience, a good poet can connect to the reader's own specific experience. I call this finding the highest common denominator. In this way, poetry - and poetic leadership - bridges the universal & the personal, so creating synergy between individual, community & society.

IN SUMMARY

- Poetry deals in the currencies of passion & truth; its language is open & non-directive.
- Poetry connects emotionally whilst allowing us the freedom to make our own interpretations.
- Poetry provides a space for reflection.
- These are vital engagement skills for leaders in noisy & complex environments.
- The music of poetry can wake up our senses and develop our lateral thinking capabilities.
- Poetry sits with not knowing and helps us live with ambiguity.
- Poetic Leadership can help build resilience in a VUCA world.
- Poetry connects individual, community and society.

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