Executive summary

The shortcomings of existing metaphors of leadership based on the leader-as-hero are becoming increasingly clear. A clear-cut alternative, leader-as-servant (from the works of Robert Greenleaf), also suffers from problems of misinterpretation and lack of apparent relevance. This paper presents work on a new option – leader-as-host – building on my initial [2009] paper*.

A host is someone who receives or entertains guests. Host sometimes have to act heroically; stepping forward, planning, inviting, introducing, providing. They also act in service – stepping back, encouraging, giving space, joining in. The host can be seen encompassing aspects of both and the movement between them. Hosting has ancient roots and is found across all cultures. We all know good hosting (and good guesting) at an instinctive gut level, and I propose that this carries over into leading groups of all types and sizes – at organisational level (corporate, public, community), at team/group level and even at a personal level – how are you hosting your own life?

This paper examines six particular aspects that make up hosting and relates them to leadership practice. I propose that hosts (and leaders):

- Create great spaces (physical and psychological) – and are active in them
- Use the ‘soft power’ of invitation (rather than the ‘hard power’ of coercion)
- Have ‘Response-ability’ (Balancing defining the event AND responding to what happens)
- Use Co-participation (Balancing providing for everyone AND joining in alongside everyone else)
- Ensure judicious Gate-opening (Balancing defending boundaries AND making new connections)
- Spend time front stage, on the balcony (taking an overview) and back stage (developing their capabilities)
*This is a working paper to develop ideas around the metaphor of Leader as Host. It is based on my 2009 published paper Leader as Host, Host as Leader: Towards a new yet ancient metaphor (International Journal for Leadership in Public Services Vol 5 No 1 pp 19-24, 2009).

In the three years since that paper appeared, it has been downloaded hundreds of times from www.hostleadership.com and various people have come forward to offer valuable thoughts, ideas and additions. My own thinking has also progressed in the meantime. This paper is both a summary of the latest work and a request for further thoughts, examples, experiences and stories to be included in my forthcoming book on this topic. Everything in the book will be credited and acknowledged.

Please share this paper actively with your colleagues and contacts.

Join the new Host Leadership community website at www.hostleadership.com for discussions, updates and further news.
Introduction

The metaphor of leader as host offers a view on leadership that is at once rooted in millennia of practice and at the same time is something new and timely.

Such metaphors are very important in my view—they offer a rich and broad set of ideas about leadership in a way which allows interpretation into many different real-life situations. Rather than a prescription, such metaphors offer us a way to engage with often difficult situations and quickly alter our thinking to come from another place. In the intervening time others have come towards similar thoughts from different backgrounds, and I hope I have reflected these views here. Building on the existing ideas of heroic and servant leadership, I hope you will find inspiration of a very practical kind in the metaphor and practice of the host.

Leader as hero

The idea of a leader as a heroic figure is deeply engrained in our society. Powerful men (usually), fast acting, all-knowing, saving the situation, turning things around, avoiding disaster. This is a caricature, but images like the Lone Ranger, Lee Iacocca [Chrysler] and Joan of Arc spring to mind. There are related archetypes in the leadership literature—the king and the warrior are two based on the work of Jung, the shepherd has ancient Biblical roots. In each case the leader can be relied upon in times of trouble to pull things through.

Harvard Business School leadership writer Sharon Daloz Parks sums up the situation very nicely:

“It has become almost a cliché among leadership theorists to disavow a heroic command-and-control model of leadership. But the heroic image of leadership that prevails in the conventional mind is more than a model. It is a deep and abiding myth.” (Parks 2005, p 201)

The survival of this myth in the public imagination is perhaps the most telling thing. It seems that we need some kind of person to resort to in difficult times. Yet with the postmodern world of ever-greater connectedness, multiple perspectives and ‘swamp issues’—issues which are messy, interconnected, not amenable to quickfire technical analysis—the commanding-and-controlling hero has never looked more out of place.

There are several shortcomings with the heroic leader myth, including:

1. The hero leader is seen as all-knowing and the followers all-dependent; the people cannot rescue themselves but rely on the appearance of the hero.
2. The illusion of control—by being all-knowing and strong and brave, the leader can avert disaster by their own efforts alone. The interdependent and complex world is not so amenable to this outlook.
3. The homogeneous imagery of the followers—kings have subjects, shepherds have flocks of sheep. This seems to suggest homogeneity among the masses. All the followers are the same and therefore can be thought of as one [rather than individuals].
4. The willingness of the hero [warrior, king, even shepherd] to die in the act of saving the flock—it is their duty to risk being destroyed or to destroy [actually or metaphorically].
Leader as Servant

There is clearly more to leadership that heroism. But what? One key countering idea is that of Servant-Leadership, proposed by Robert K Greenleaf in 1970 and taken up by many management thinkers (see for example Spears, 1995).

Inspired by the Herman Hesse novella *The Journey To The East*, Greenleaf arrived at the conclusion that great leaders must first serve others – and this fact is what shows their true greatness. The story concerns a group making a spiritual journey. They are accompanied by Leo, a servant who looks after the group, eases the way and cares for them. The journey goes well until Leo disappears, whereupon the party begins to fall apart – they cannot cope without him and the journey has to be abandoned. Many years later, the narrator finally stumbles across Leo and is taken to the religious order which originally sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo is in fact the head of order – its guiding spirit.

This idea is a brilliant counterblast to the hero-leader metaphor prevailing at the time. It has become influential in many fields and has been a catalyst for later thinking about spiritual practice and its connection and function in leadership (see for example Senge et al, 2005). It brings to the fore the leader’s need to respond to their followers and sustain the community, to steward it and hold it in trust for future generations. We might view it as on the same power spectrum as the hero, but at the other end.

However, the metaphor of leader as servant is also not without its shortcomings.

1. **The richness of the metaphor is not obvious.** In the 21st century most of us are long separated from the everyday idea of servants – we tend to think instinctively of something like a waiter. In history and literature the master/servant relationship is a rich and multi-dimensional one – think of Jeeves and Wooster, Leporello and Don Giovanni, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote and so on. However, this is not obvious to those who see the opposite of servant as Master and are therefore confused about accountability and authority. [These are of course carefully considered in the writings on servant leadership]. For a good example of a narrow misunderstanding of servant leadership, see McCrimmon [http://www.leadersdirect.com/servant.html]

2. The image of servant is not a compelling one to those (for example women and ethnic minorities) who are traditionally cast in such a role; they would prefer a new image to move towards. Supporters of servant leadership make the point that detailed study can show new ways to view the role, but this is perhaps unlikely if the initial image does not appeal.

3. **The leader as servant has similar hierarchical issues to the hero, but from the other end.** Many people view the servant as at the whim/mercy of the master. There are apparent difficulties with responsibility – if the master wants to go a certain way, how accountable is the servant? This tension is of course part of a full treatment in servant leadership and provides much richness, if the student can be persuaded to persevere. It is also interesting to note that in the Hesse story mentioned above, the group does not realise
that their servant has been playing a leadership role until it is too late – which of course works well in terms of a parable but not so well in terms of a leadership practice.

Other leadership metaphors have been suggested and explored in recent years – including theatre director, musician, improviser (DePree, 1992) and artist (Parks 2005). These all have valuable elements. However, the search for an alternative compelling leadership metaphor continues. To be compelling, a metaphor might be instantly recognisable in a useful way in the same way as the hero (and so draw in the learner) whilst being a rich source of wisdom in complex, ever-changing and difficult times (like the servant).

Leader as Host, Host as Leader

In this paper I propose a new, yet ancient, metaphor – the leader as host. During the past five years or so, this idea has started to appear in various form – apart from my own initial paper (McKergow, 2009), Margaret Wheatley and her colleagues at the Berkana Institute have been working along similar lines (Wheatley and Frieze 2011). There is also the excellent Art of Hosting movement (www.artofhosting.org) which focuses on building participation in leadership by hosting conversations that matter.

My work takes the metaphor of the host as leader and examines it in close detail. Rather than making sweeping statements about service and community, I will be looking at a whole range of key elements about what it means to be a good host, and applying that lens to the tasks and challenges of leading. What has amazed me, and continues to do so, is quite how many parallels and useful options can be assembled from this connection.

As we will see, the host is an enduring role across many civilisations and cultures – yet its use as a leadership myth seems to be relatively unexplored. I propose that it is significantly different to the servant.

We can look at hero and servant as opposing ends of a spectrum of hierarchical leadership:

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Hero   Host   Servant
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It seems to me that Host lies above this spectrum – it is a flexible and context-dependent role which sometimes necessitates hero behaviour, sometimes servant, and many inbetween possibilities. This new metaphor could be viewed as a Hegelian synthesis – it not only includes both of the others, but offers a new perspective with many creative possibilities.

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Hero      Host      Servant
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We are all familiar with the act of hosting. Who has not given a dinner party, invited people for drinks, celebrated their birthday? We all know this role. And who has not attended a party as
a guest, or stayed in someone’s house for a weekend? So we all also know the counterpart to host: guest. These are both roles we know, and both come with norms and expectations. Host and guest are mutually co-defining; like yin and yang, you can’t have one without the other, and when one changes then the other must change also. Indeed, the word hospitality comes from the Greek *hospes*, which means both host and guest. This duality also occurs in French [*hôte*] and Italian [*ospite*].

**What do hosts do?**

We might start to think of the roles of host and guest first in connection with a very concrete everyday example like a party.

1. In advance: the host decides to hold a party, what kind of party, where and when and makes plans. They then decide which guests to invite, and invite them. They procure food, drink and any entertainments to be laid on. They choose and prepare the space carefully. The host is here making active choices and plans, and in some ways is acting rather heroically by deciding what they want and laying the ground to make it happen.

2. On the night: now the host’s role changes dramatically. They welcome the guests, give them refreshments, make introductions, see that everything is proceeding and, basically, ensure that their guests have a suitably good time. Note that this does NOT mean hogging the limelight or leading every conversation. It does mean taking care that everyone is attended to, making people aware of transitions (like moving from drinks to dinner), seeing that no-one is left out and so on. They must respond to their guests – no event like that can be choreographed entirely. In this way they are acting more like servants. However, they also join in fully (unlike servants).

Of course, the nature and degree of emergence is somehow connected to the host’s plans – but only somehow. One never knows what might happen – be it a dropped jar of beetroot on a fine white shirt, the failure of the soufflé or even the arrival of unwelcome gate-crashers. The guests will tend to look first to the host, who may be required to quickly move in these cases from something like a serving position to a more heroic lead – or not – in protecting the boundaries of the party. It all depends on the kind of event which has transpired (which may or may not be as the host intended).

3. Afterwards – the host says goodbye to their guests and in all probability is left to do the cleaning up. Once again, they combine elements of heroism with elements of serving. This act of being ‘the last’ as well as ‘the first’ is characteristic of host leaders – for example the captain of a sinking ship must see that everyone else is safe before they themselves leave.

This is a concrete and everyday example – but I hope it has already provoked your thinking on leadership and how you practise it. As we go on to explore the rich history (hostory?) of the role we will find that it not only appears through every society, but that it forms a very deep and often spiritual connection between people. Extraordinarily there is no book, in print or not, which looks at the way the host tradition developed and how it works in different contexts. This is something I am looking to remedy with the current project.

*The host is both the first and the last – Arabic proverb*
Advantages of the host metaphor

1. **It’s an everyday image** – one we all instinctively understand and relate to from both sides – as host and as guest. Everyone has been in both these roles at some point – yet it is rich, versatile and capable of very deep spiritual interpretation in a way coherent with the mundane understanding.

2. **Host and Guest are co-defining** – it doesn’t make sense to think of a host without some kind of guest, whereas one could be a hero without anyone to rescue, or a servant waiting for someone to serve.

3. **Hosting is an activity, rather than a defining characteristic of a person** – so one hosts sometimes, and sometimes one is a guest. These two positions can change very quickly indeed, as for example the biblical story of the woman with the alabaster jar anointing Jesus shows. (A woman approaches Jesus and anoints his feet with expensive oil. Those present scold her, saying that the money could have been used to serve the poor. Jesus interrupts them, saying that the woman has honoured him – they will always have the poor, but will not always have him. This can be seen as the leader (Jesus) becoming the guest for a moment, and so revealing an important truth about this relationship.) This ‘interactional view’ is a key underpinning of my own work in Solutions Focus (see for example Jackson & McKergow 2007, McKergow & Clarke 2007) and offers an alternative view to the psychological ‘person-as-bag-of-traits paradigm.

4. **Hosting gives a definite feel of some responsibility for the success of the event** – though there are outside forces at play too. The host has some authority – but they give it to themselves and earn/maintain it by doing the role well. Planning and improvising, control/certainty and freedom/emergence/uncertainty all play a part in an easily understood way.

5. **The role of host can involve behaving as total hero or absolute servant** – depending on the context – or as many inbetween possibilities too.

Key elements of Host Leadership

This section of the paper looks at six elements of hosting in leadership terms. Host leaders:

- Create spaces – and are active in them
- Use the ‘soft power’ of invitation
- Have Response-ability (Balancing defining the event AND responding to what happens)
- Use Co-participation (Balancing providing for everyone AND joining in alongside everyone else)
- Ensure Gate-opening (Balancing defending boundaries AND making new connections)
- Spend time front stage, on the balcony and back stage

1. **Creating space – and being active in it**

A key part of the role of host is to create a suitable space for the events to emerge and unfold. There seems to be a dichotomy here. Much of the new literature on leadership speaks of the creation of space as a key role, and the importance of allowing and nuturing
emergence within the space. However, the host plays a vital role upfront in deciding on the space and how it is to be decorated, laid out and used. This is another example of the flexibility of the host role, one minute making brave and influential decisions and the next clearing up a spilled drink.

The idea of space as has been advanced by the idea of ‘ba’. This Japanese term, originally proposed by philosopher Kitaro Nishida (see for example Nishida 1990, Nonaka and Nonno 1998), means ‘a shared space for emerging relationships’ or in more general terms a context where meaning may emerge.

We might therefore see the host role as inextricably linked not only with guests, but also with space. One cannot host without doing it somewhere (even if the space is online – and look at the success of those organisations like Facebook and Myspace which have offered a useful and flexible space to their guests). Setting up and managing the space (or choosing not to manage it) is a key role of a host, in my view.

Leadership guru Warren Bennis recounts an old story about Gladstone and Disraeli, the famous pair of 19th century British Prime Ministers:

*If you had dinner with William Gladstone, you were left thinking “That Gladstone is the wittiest, the most intelligent, the most charming person around.” But when you had dinner with Benjamin Disraeli, you were left thinking, “I’m the wittiest, the most intelligent, the most charming person around!” Gladstone shone but Disraeli created an environment where others could shine. The latter is the more powerful form of leadership, an adventure in which the leader is privileged to find treasure within others and put it to good use.* [Bennis in the introduction to Parks 2005 p xi-xii].

Disraeli was clearly the better host.

*How do you create the space for people to deliver their best?*

*How does your physical space contribute to your task? How could you improve it?*

*How do you create the right psychological space for your people and their work?*

### 2. Uses the ‘soft power’ of invitation

**Soft power (invitation, welcoming) is different to hard power (coercion and threat).**

Soft power can, however, be surprisingly persuasive and compelling. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye has written on soft power [Nye, 2008] and how it can be anything but ‘soft’ – think of how compelling it is to receive a personal invitation to be part of something.

A good invitation will often combine a welcoming gesture (an extended hand with the message ‘I’d like you to be part of this’) with information, expectations and context. This is vitally clear to ensure that the invitee knows what they’re accepting. We can imagine the awkwardness of a situation where one shows up at a party in fancy dress, only to discover that everyone else is in dinner jackets.

An invitation also contains the possibility for the invitee to refuse. As Pachamama Alliance co-founder Lynne Twist observed to me, ‘If ‘no’ isn’t an option, then isn’t really an invitation, it’s an order.’ In fact, invitations involve choice for both parties. This is not to say that everything has to be done with choice – though that need not stop the host leader thinking...
about it as such. Engaging people with soft power, invitation and choice will be a key option for host leaders. There is also the ‘first mover advantage’, as seen in poker. If as the host leader you initiate and make the first moves, then other people have to respond to you. This shows with great clarity the power of invitation in leadership.

Accepting an invitation brings consequences for the guest/acceptor too - they now have some ‘skin in the game’. We see the roles of host and guest as co-defining and mutual, though usually it’s the host who starts things off. (In ancient times it was not unusual for the boot to be on the other foot, with a stranger knocking on the door and requesting shelter. This is much less common in modern times, but is an interesting aspect of the host leadership paradigm. How do we treat people who come to us unknown and unbidden? They may be customers or stakeholders. Do we have the confidence and openness to welcome strangers into our midst?

*How do you use the power of invitation?*

*How do you engage people to work with you?*

*What compelling invitations have you received from others? What made them compelling?*

### Three balances for a host leader

#### Elements of host leadership

My initial thinking about hosting leads me to propose three balances for a host. These are aspects of hosting which go together, where the host must find the right point of balance in their role and be able to move from one part of the spectrum to the other. The choice is between ‘stepping forward’ and ‘stepping back’. Both of these options are right – but selecting which to choose in the context is the essence of good hosting.

#### 3. Principle of Response-ability

**Defining the event** AND **Responding to what happens**

The host has a role in setting things up and moving things along – but they must always stay alert for the serendipitous, the unexpected, the fortunate and the unfortunate. This shows the key role of accountability played by the host. Their initial conception and decisions will kick things off. Then, events will inevitably occur which introduce unexpected changes, and a good host will be able to respond constructively. A key element here is being able to move from intentional planning and preparation to viewing what emerges with non-judgement, to ask instead ‘what is trying to emerge here’.

One who does too much ‘defining the event’ might be called a Dictator. Everything must go according to plan or all is lost.

One who does too much ‘responding to what happens’ might be called an Abdicator. Sees a fire starting and asks their guests ‘What do you think we should do?’. (I have seen this type of behaviour quite a lot in some organisations, it’s more common than might be expected.)

*How do you balance the taking of power in defining things with the giving away of that power in responsiveness?*

*How do you prepare for the unpreparable?*
4. Principle of Co-participation

Engage and provide AND Join in along with everyone else

It is no surprise that hosts engage their guests and provide for them. But do they always join in too? It would be very strange to go to a dinner party and have the host eat in the kitchen! Spend some time observing from the balcony, but also get onto the dance floor [in the metaphor of Ronald Heifitz, 1994] The process of engaging can take many forms, from the cheery greeting to a spiritual state of openness and love [for example as given in the Rule of St Benedict, founder of the Benedictine Order and a key early Christian advocate of the importance of hospitality, see for example Hay, 2006].

One who does too much ‘initiate and provide’ might be called a Motherer. You don’t need to be a mother to be a Motherer, it’s open to both sexes!

One who does too much joining in could be called a Coaster. It’s great to join in, and the host will always have a weather eye open for things which need seeing to. A host is never doing nothing, even when they are not doing anything.

In what ways do you join in with your organisation?
How do you handle the alongside-ness of participation with the spotlight of leadership?

5. Principle of Gate-opener

Protect boundaries AND Encourage new connections

When the party is threatened by unwelcome gatecrashers, the host is expected to lead the response. However, they must also encourage new connections, both within and across boundaries. This, like the other balances, is somewhat paradoxical and requires judgement. The host establishes routines, patterns, rituals, key expectations within the group, which both assist it to grow and build, and also define it. They then work to enforce them appropriately [which will often be relatively quietly]. Traditions are a very powerful way in which organisations define themselves, and the host plays a key role here.

The host also reacts to new development, changing and evolving the traditions. The host also has to be seen respond to challenges and new impetus - in ways which evolve rather than threaten the existing group. This includes knowing when to let in new people and ideas, and when to keep the gate closed. There are connections to the rise of social media here – what to make public and what to share with friends is now a decision we all have to make.

A powerful example of this kind of thinking is Nelson Mandela in his early time as President of South Africa. Rugby had always been the ‘white man’s game’, and represented the culture of the enemy to many black and anti-apartheid activists. Mandela, in a brilliant coup, appeared at the final wearing the hated Springbok jersey and referred to his pride that ‘our boys’ [almost exclusively white] had triumphed. The story is told movingly in the film Invictus. This act of gate-opening played a significant role in the development of the new South Africa.

One who does too much protecting boundaries might be called a Jailer (or is there a better term?)

One who does too much encouraging new connections might be called a Hustler. Inviting as many people as possible, without thought for those already involved.
“Hospitality is about the crossing of thresholds, the re-imagining of boundaries and the negotiation of space.” Mary David Walgenbach OSB, Sisters of Saint Benedict of Madison Wisconsin

When you have felt the need to strengthen the barricades, or to invite new ideas? What’s the difference?

6. Host Leaders spend time front stage, on the balcony and back stage

As leaders, we spend a fair bit of time ‘front-stage’ – in full view of everyone we’re working with. However, there are at least two other places where host leaders go from time to time.

The first of these is on the balcony. This is a metaphor from Heifitz (1994), which fits the host leader conception well. The view from the balcony is the helicopter view, from above. The host can see what’s going on at a glance, and gets a different perception than they do at ground level. Legendary London restaurateur Anton Mosimann has a small table in the top corner of the balcony of his dining club, an excellent spot to surreptitiously keep an eye on events in the restaurant below.

The other place where host leaders spend time is ‘back-stage’. This metaphor, which I heard from Simon Walker of the Leadership Trust (Walker 2005), sums up the way in which we are called upon at times to act in front of others (front stage) and also reflect, work on our own development, seek counsel from confidants etc (back stage). Some authors write of this as outer and inner work – I prefer the metaphor of front and back stage.

How do you manage to get the balcony view in your work?

What particular activities do you find helpful when you are ‘back-stage’?

Leaders who host

I have been asked to give examples of host leaders in the real world. I think it might be more interesting to look at hosting as an interactional, social and contextual activity rather than a label to be applied to a single individual. I am reluctant to identify the host without also looking at the guests! So, a couple of examples of what I suggest are good hosting.

The Dalai Lama was faced with a difficult situation in March 2008. The exiled spiritual leader of Tibet was faced with riots and disturbance in his homeland, against the Chinese authorities. Asked what he would do in a BBC interview, he was very clear.

“As early as 1987, in this very room, a British journalist asked me ‘If things become out of control, violence, what do you do?’‘. Immediately I told him that, if things became out of control, my only option is to completely resign. Now, it’s the same position.” (Dalai Lama on BBC News, http://tinyurl.com/4vjt7x, 2008)

This is a strong example of host leadership. The host threatens to resign if his people (his guests) continue the violence. He does not accept their behaviour, nor does he accept the role of being their saving hero. He decides what he wants (non violence) and calls on his people to act responsibly. Instead of telling them what to do, he offers them a choice.

We can think of leaders who have acted as hosts in different ways. Media host Arianna Huffington has opened up a space for a wide variety of contributors with her Huffington Post websites. Everest mountaineer Sir Chris Bonington has led many expeditions as a host.
leader, engaging people and supporting them whilst not reaching the final summit goal himself – until he was a guest on a Norwegian expedition. TED curator Chris Anderson has connected academics and thought leaders with countless millions around the world. The late British saxophonist Ronnie Scott, while himself a fine player, has gone down in history for his London jazz club, without which the UK music scene would be a poorer place more than fifty years after it opened.

Closer to home, the SOLWorld organisation which shares and builds Solutions Focus practice in organisations (www.solworld.org) works on a hosting principle. There is no Chair, members, officers, committee or bank account. There is, however, a steering group, which anyone can join. Events only happen if someone is prepared to host them, and there is no obligation on anyone to host something against their will. Anyone can offer to host an event under the SOLWorld banner, with the support of the steering group.

The hosts invite participation, risk their own resources and decide what to do with any profit. The results include 11 international conferences, three summer schools, North American and Japanese events, free online listserv and community – with no conventional heroic leader or leadership structure. You can read more about the way SOLWorld operates at http://www.solworld.org/index.cfm?id=141.

I am sure that there are many examples of good hosting in leadership. There are also many examples of poor hosting and how this can negatively affect progress. Just in passing, have you heard about the Chief Executive who had a special lift from the car park to his office suite so that he could avoid having to talk to the workforce? I won’t embarrass this person by naming him here. But think about this in hosting terms – what kind of host would try to do this, and what would his guests think?

A lifelong journey

The journey to being a leader (and a host) is a lifelong trail of learning, experience, experiment, occasional frustration mixed with worthwhile success. One of the advantages of the host perspective is that hosts get feedback very rapidly – the continuing connection of co-participation ensures that the host is never far away from the action and the responses of others.

One over-arching reason for this is that no ‘event’ is ever the same. Things move. Change happens all the time. Even well-rehearsed gatherings happen in new and changing contexts – a newcomer arrives, someone just had some bad news, there are successes to celebrate or difficulties on the horizon. What marks out the excellent host is that they can find ways to respond to these changes while still keeping things moving forwards, acknowledging events without being dominated by them – unless that’s an appropriate response.

A spirit of openness, co-operation, highly-attuned awareness, and curiosity is required – which is to be deployed at the right moments in useful ways, thus requiring a large amount of flexibility. The host leader will usually have an intention for what they are helping to emerge – which must be balanced with non-judgement about what is, in the moment, appearing. This all adds up to a sophisticated and subtle practice – yet one which we can all do at some level, and from where we can all build and improve.
Conclusion...
The host is both the first and the last

This is the proverb which first sparked my interest in this metaphor. The host’s job is to be there to ensure all is prepared, to welcome the first guest, step forward [in the face of danger], lead the movement [towards dinner perhaps], and also step back [to be served last] or to be the last off the sinking ship. It’s interesting to reflect about the recent Costa Concordia cruise ship accident off the coast of Italy, where Captain Schettino was vilified in the press – not for running his ship aground, but for running away afterwards and leaving passengers on board, still at risk.

The metaphor of leader as host combines a powerfully simple idea with which we are all familiar with a rich tradition and many fascinating connections. Please try it out, explore it, use it, and let me and other readers know your experiences. I think there is more to come from this particular idea. Please email me at mark@sfwork.com or call 08453 707145 (in the UK) or +44 207 609 3466 (outside the UK).

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Dr Mark McKergow is co-director of sfwork – The Centre for Solutions Focus at Work. He is an international consultant, speaker and author. He has written and edited three books and dozens of articles. Mark was instrumental in the founding of the SolWorld (Solutions in Organisations Linkup) conference series, is a Board member of the SF consultants body SFCT and edits the academic journal InterAction. He is also a visiting research fellow in philosophy of psychology at the University of Hertfordshire. Mark works regularly in the USA and Asia as well as all over Europe, and is a member of the Transformational Leadership Council. Contact him at mark@sfwork.com.

Initial reactions to the fist ‘Leader as Host, Host as Leader’ paper (2009):

“The complexity and diversity of leadership theory reflects the world we live in today. But complex and diverse isn’t necessarily good. Many of the challenges we face today are because we have lost the sense of elegant simplicity in the lives we can lead as human beings. In “Leader as Host, Host as Leader” Mark McKergow has done us all a great favour in reminding us that good leaders are human beings first, and leaders second. His revival of ancient wisdom is timely, as is the emerging dialogue around virtue and character in public life. For leaders in the public sector, this concept is the perfect antidote to the mechanistic and stifling rigor mortis of bureaucracy. I cannot recall ever being asked by a host to complete a Health and Safety Risk Assessment before entering their home. The concept of Leader as Host, Host as Leader provides us with a simple relational model of leadership that has evolved and withstood the test of millenia. Good leaders as hosts invite followers. They care for their needs. They are personally humble and self-disciplined, putting the needs of others before their own. But they are also courageous and resilient if things go wrong and they will confront and address the often brutal realities that gate-crash our lives. I commend Mark’s paper unreservedly and thank him for his valuable insight.”

Professor Roger Steare BA FRSA FREC

Visiting Professor of Organizational Ethics, Cass Business School, City University, London
I welcome and am excited by Mark McKergow’s thought-provoking article on host leadership for a variety of reasons.

My experience is that, although many people are relieved to hear about the shortcomings of the heroic leadership models, they often struggle with understanding the notion of leadership as servanthood, particularly if it is the first occasion on which they have encountered the metaphor. It is extremely useful that this article articulates some of the tensions that exist, and offers a new, related metaphor (leader as host) to explore such a critical phenomenon as leadership. I am especially pleased that the author refers to the discomfort that might be particularly acute for women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds, who (with a few exceptions) have conspicuously been excluded from most previous studies of leadership, and some would argue, from full participation in society.

The relationship described between hero, host, and servant offers, as Mark McKergow states, ‘a new perspective with many creative possibilities’, and expands the exquisite commentaries of Margaret Wheatley, which celebrate the essential humanity of leadership in looking for the good in others and having an ‘unshakable faith’ in people, by drawing our attention to leadership as the creation of spaces and opportunities when people come together.

I would hope that our own empirical research on engaging leadership – which, in essence, gave voice to people about their experiences of receiving leadership, identified overriding themes of openness and connectedness, and emphasized the desire for partnership and co-ownership of human aspiration and effort – contributes another aspect of the richness of the new kaleidoscope of leadership thinking.

In summary, Mark McKergow presents a different, exciting perspective for those of us seeking meaning in a world of colossal complexity and unbounded possibilities.

Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe
Chief Executive, Real World Group

This is a very interesting alternative leadership concept and fits in well with developing ideas regarding the need for leadership qualities throughout an organisation. It is a great concept that will stimulate much thought. It would be interesting to apply the metaphor to some recent leadership examples in practice, such as national government initiatives, large corporations such as British Airways, Rolls Royce and Tesco, as well as smaller entities; and also in a military context. Each could be quite revealing, and thought provoking. It would also be interesting to consider the metaphor with respect to the more traditional leadership styles necessary to manage accountability and responsibility. In addition it would also be worth thinking about how you would use the metaphor to stimulate a whole new framework for considering risks and rewards. I wonder also how one might explore the sustainability of leadership using the metaphor, and what happens in times of crisis and disasters and where there is a sudden loss of host. Will the guests be equipped and know what to do next, and how would you seek out a new host? Which begs the question – are hosts born or made?

Frederick Psyk
Director, FSP Solutions and Non-Executive Director on the board of the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust, UK
“As a Faculty member at Ashridge teaching managers and executives from all around the world, I am confronted with many metaphors for leadership. I’ve never been very happy with the Hero metaphor nor the Servant one, although many managers definitely cling to belief in the Hero! Mark’s idea of the Host as a metaphor brings several advantages over other ones. As a teacher and facilitator I want metaphors to help managers explore aspects of their own management and leadership, I want it to be useful as a practical tool both in the classroom and in their organisations. This metaphor gives me many options - for example, the idea of invitation implied in the metaphor. This can lead to conversations around whom the leader invites, who is included and who isn’t, and especially around how the leader invites... As a tool for reflection and exploring the meaning of leadership, I think this is a very worthwhile and useful metaphor.”

Mike Brent
Client and Programme Director. Ashridge Business School

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