



# John Sherwood's Dance

A Map For Understanding  
Unconscious Transactions  
Between Groups and  
Newly-Appointed Leaders

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*If an organization and its structures are to be instruments for the humanization and liberation of its members, the power operative in a system cannot be coercive power, which is based on fear of sanctions. Nor can it even be simply reward power, which is based on the anticipation of some return for one's involvement. Ultimately it must involve the kind of power which comes from people freely choosing to engage themselves in efforts to achieve a goal which they themselves have freely adopted. This power of free persons is called commitment.*

John Sherwood

## Introduction

This short paper attempts to describe what happens between a leader and the members of a group when the leader is newly appointed. It is based on the work of John Sherwood<sup>1</sup> from Cincinnati, Ohio. I have presented it to executives in workshop settings for over a decade and continue to get strong feedback that it resonates at some deep level with their lived experience of the dynamics described herein.

As you read this paper, you will probably find it helpful to recall one or two groups with established histories of which you were a member and where a new leader was appointed, or alternatively a situation where you were appointed to a designated leadership position of a pre-existing group with its own history.

1. Some of this model is contained in John Sherwood's book, *Leadership: The Responsible Exercise of Power*, MDI, Cincinnati, OH, 1975. John was a good friend to me and a mentor over many years. The map described in this paper is one of the many things he gave me as a way of thinking about organizations and group behavior.

## Two Rivers

Before exploring the dance, a few preliminaries. It is possible to view that which occurs in groups and among people as occurring in either of two rivers. One river is above ground; but flowing below beneath the surface is an underground stream.

If all to which a person pays attention in group functioning is manifest behavior (what people say and do, or fail to say and do) then we could say they are fishing in the aboveground river. But if one is also keen to examine and react to the corporate unconscious or the psychodynamics in group functioning then we might say that they are fishing in the underground stream.

The two rivers co-exist. The underground stream is largely invisible and many people go about their day-to-day activities oblivious of its existence. Yet it too can be a source of nourishment and it too can carry vast amounts of water.

In a similar way the unconscious dynamics of groups are as real as the surface and manifest behavior, just simply invisible to most who work with them. And like the underground stream, the





**The underground stream is largely invisible and many people go about their day-to-day activities oblivious of its existence.**

unconscious forces at work in group behavior contain a very large body of information, which a newly appointed leader ignores at her<sup>2</sup> peril.

In the terms of this paper the aboveground stream contains that which is conscious, tangible, rational, visible, tangible and verbal. The underground stream, on the other hand, consists of those things that are unconscious, tacit, non-rational, less visible, intangible and imaginal.

John Sherwood suggested there are a set of unconscious but nevertheless real transactions occurring between a newly-designated leader and an existing group which directly impact on the effectiveness of the leader and of the group. But these transactions, like the water in the underground stream, are largely unconscious and invisible. He sought to explain the nature of these implicit unconscious and non-rational transactions and in his explanations in the form of the model in these pages which I have termed "John Sherwood's Dance".

2. The feminine gender is also meant to include the masculine.

## Declaration and Acceptance

The starting point is the time when a new leader comes into a group. Often, it seems, one of the first things she has to confront (apart from the task of finding out how the place actually works and what it's supposed to do) is an array of stories.

Members of the group start telling stories about the "way we've done things around here". These stories usually relate incidents and methods to the leader or they might relate critical events in the history of the group.

At one level, the content of the stories is probably marginally useful to a new leader but at another level it is profoundly important that the leader pay attention to the themes in the stories, for the group members are doing two things. By telling stories they are making a statement about their own corporate and collective identity to the leader. They are declaring themselves.

They are saying "This is who we are, this is our shared history, this is our identity, this is our

culture and our culture is expressed in our stories and these are our stories."

A leader at this point in time has some choices. She can deal with these stories at a content level, take the information, say thank you very much and go on about her business. But, if the leader behaves either non-verbally or symbolically in a way which discounts these stories, then she is well and truly "behind the eight-ball". For by so discounting the stories she discounts the identity of the people.

Some years ago, after a change of political leadership in one of our governments, a new infrastructure department was formed through the amalgamation of a former engineering department and a much smaller policy department. The engineering department had a long history of technical achievement and excellence. For the sake of this example, the reader might imagine it built roads, or set up telecommunications systems, or delivered high quality construction projects. The policy department, on the other hand, primarily undertook policy analysis and other administrative and service functions – for example, it might have collected speeding fines from errant drivers, licence fees from radio broadcasters, or supervised the licensing and quality assurance of construction companies.<sup>3</sup> The leadership of the new organization came mostly from the previous policy department; indeed the name of the new organization was exactly the same as the name of this former group. Many of the people who were in designated leadership positions in the new organization came from the former policy department and suddenly found themselves managing a much larger creature with a very high technical engineering component to its corporate task. Yet over 80 per cent of the employees came from the former engineering department.

3. The options and examples are given here to protect the identity of the "innocent" and the "guilty".

In a rush of managerial and economically rationalist euphoria that seemed, at the time, to sweep through all the newly-elected government's operations, the basic purpose and direction of the new department was espoused to be one of facilitating the economic infrastructure necessary for the state to prosper in the field of the new department's operations.

Suddenly, instead of building roads or setting up telecommunications systems or erecting wonderful testaments to engineering excellence, the people were told they had to become strategic, entrepreneurial, economically-oriented advisors aiding infrastructure development.

The reader will no doubt recognize the familiarity of this type of transition, and in a logical world (aboveground stream) it all makes sense in the late twentieth century. The aboveground stream considerations suggest little wrong with this scenario. However, what happened in the underground stream was quite different.

In the early days after the merger, the engineering-oriented people took every opportunity to tell the new senior executives of the department about how good they were and what wonderful feats of engineering they had accomplished. In so doing, they were declaring themselves.

The response of the new senior executives at the time was not what the engineering-oriented managers expected nor wanted. They simply ignored the engineers. As the engineers continued to tell the stories the executives became more irritable and annoyed, until finally they started telling stories themselves about the engineers, stories which cast the engineers in the color of being "past it", irrelevant and not up with the times.

Somewhere about this time a very, very significant malaise set in among about two-

thirds of the organization for, by their behavior, the new gods on Mount Olympus, were saying to the mortal engineers, "You don't count." They had failed to accept the declaration of the past of this organization as exemplified in the stories. They had discounted the stories and the rich tapestry of information contained therein. Consequently the engineers felt discounted.

Wise leaders listen attentively to such stories when they are appointed to new groups and accept the patterns contained in them. In this way they validate as worthwhile the effort and achievements of the group and, more importantly, validate its collective identity.

### Demonstration and Perception

The leader now needs to demonstrate in some way she has accepted the group's past as a valid experience and has also accepted their identity by demonstrating behavior which is consistent with the stories told to her of the group's past. If she fails to do this then her apparent acceptance in the previous step of the dance will be seen as invalid or incongruent in some way.

There needs to be a period in which the leader behaves as if she will continue in the ways of the past, for, if the leader does things which are fundamentally different to the told stories the group will experience this as an unconscious and powerful message of rejection, no matter what the leader's verbal statements are. It is a case of "do as I do, not as I say", for in the early stages of a relationship with a new leader the group will pay far more attention to her actual and symbolic behavior than any verbal utterances.

Now, it may be that the leader will support some previously established policy. It may be that she will continue some very small practice. In objective terms, what she chooses to support is less important than that she actually demonstrates support for the past. It can be

at a very simple level or at a quite complex and conceptual level. What matters is that this support is seen to happen and that it is symbolically valent (attractive) to the people. That is, the leader chooses a practice which makes sense to the people and is symbolic to them of their collective identity.

For example, one of my clients is a large technically-oriented company with its own cafeteria where all the clerical support and other employees gather to have lunch each day. From time immemorial, or so it seems, this particular cafeteria had really represented a map of the organization's culture.

There was a certain group of technicians who, it seems, had always sat at a given table. The finance people sat at another table and stated to me on a number of occasions they would never dream of sitting at the technicians' table. A third group of people, mostly clerical assistants and mostly female, sat at yet another table and they stated they would not for one moment entertain sitting at either of the previous two tables. Finally, some of the manual labor people who work in this organization used a separate and fourth table.

The territories were very clearly marked out.

A new CEO was appointed to this highly technical organization. He had made a career in financial management and after some years in other firms he had returned to this company where he began his career as a financial controller. In those previous days in this company he had sat at the finance table with his colleagues.

It was hoped by all that he would be able to lead the company out of its financial woes.

He had been in his new position approximately one week when he thought it appropriate to go and eat in the cafeteria with his employees. The first day he sat with the technicians and on the second day he sat with the clerical support staff, but he invited some of the technicians to

join him at this other table. On the third day of his second week he sat with the laborers, and again invited technicians and clerical staff to join him.

He actually ignored the finance people because he thought they knew him from old times and that they "would be OK", as he put it to me some weeks later. But he failed to realize that, by sitting at the other three tables, he had violated a profound cultural norm in two ways: first, he had mixed up the territories and, second, he did not participate in the tribal

things can have profound significance in the underground stream. Specifically, it is an illustration of a leader failing to demonstrate his acceptance of the underlying group culture.

If, on the other hand, he had spent a couple of weeks sitting with the finance people at their table, had not disturbed the seating arrangements so abruptly, it is likely that the employees would have accepted the changes with little distress. He could have "carried them with him", so to speak. But our leader didn't realize this, for he was not paying attention to

**The territories were very clearly marked out.**



Woodcut from the *Roxburghe Ballads*, 17th century.

ritual of that tribe to which he was "supposed to belong" – in their eyes.

He committed a third, and very grievous, mortal error a week later: he rearranged the entire seating pattern of the cafeteria into small tables, removed the square oblong rectangular tables and replaced them with small circular tables that no more than five people could sit at comfortably. To say that "all hell broke loose" is somewhat of an understatement.

This example illustrates that something in the aboveground stream and apparently trivial in the long-term organizational scheme of

underground elements – in his world all that needed attention was contained in the logical, the rational, the tangible and the visible: the aboveground stream.

Now, the issue might be about seating arrangements; it could equally be about some pre-established policy, it could be about a management system, it could be about a major company program of activity. The substance doesn't really matter; what matters is whether the leader demonstrates compliance with critically symbolically and important elements in the group's culture.

## Acknowledgment and Acceptance

If the leader demonstrates (on some symbolically valent and visible issue) her compliance with past practice and ritual then they will perceive very clearly her validation of them as a group.

The group will then, unconsciously, begin a process of acknowledging the leader as acceptable and valid. Psychodynamically they are saying, "We can see that you respect us and our history and because of that we think you are OK."

At this stage the group often confers status on the new leader for the first time. There are a number of possible signals that this is occurring or about to occur.

There may be, for instance, a sudden drop-off in the frequency of stories about the past: they have accepted and acknowledged the new person as a leader and no longer feel the need to restate again and again, through story, their collective identity. It is often not so much that they start telling stories about the new ways, nor that they start telling stories about the new leader; rather it is that they often seem to stop telling stories about the past. The group, psychodynamically, has become settled again.

You will also find members of the group deferring more to the leader. This may take the form of standing aside in the doorway, or bowing their shoulders or head ever so slightly whenever the leader appears in their midst. Perhaps, even, less direct eye contact with the leader. Alternatively, instead of ceasing a topic of conversation when the leader arrives they may continue it and ask the leader for her opinions about the matter at hand. They may, for instance, start to give the chair at the head of the table to the leader or ask her if she wants to sit in such a chair. All these small signs of deference start to increase



in frequency and if the leader is paying attention to the underground stream, she will realize she has been acknowledged as the group's leader.

If the leader fails to accept the deference now paid to her, she can set the process back a step or two. For example, if she doesn't accept the chair at the head of the table, if she says "No, no, you go first through the door", or, if she fails to deal with the decisions she is asked to address by the subordinates, she will tend regress the pattern, for the people will tend to interpret such responses unconsciously as the leader rejecting them as a group.

It is not that such responses are inappropriate, but rather a question of timing. They may well be appropriate later in the relationship that the leader establishes with the group.

If, however, the leader does accept this deference and the associated patterns of behavior for a period of time, she will have become *empowered by the group to lead them*, at least within some constraints. By so doing she will also be symbolically accepting the status conferred on her by the group.

## Evocation and Acceptance

Once empowered by the group in this manner, a leader's range of viable options increases substantially. For example, she might call for some new response, some new system, some new organizational practice, some different way of dealing with clients.

Returning to the cafeteria example, if our CEO had waited and danced the first three steps with the group, she would then have been

in a much better psychological position to have said "Well, why don't we think about rearranging the tables in the cafeteria?"

Equally, and in more general terms, the leader could have said "Why don't we think about changing the policy around this program to X or Y from A or B?" Alternatively, it might be a management system that she wants to change, or a way of conducting meetings.

Providing the proposed changes are not too "far-out", too deviant, the leader can evoke these changes in the group. The group will accept this evocation, this request, this call to do something different providing it is *not too different* in their eyes from how they see themselves, ie, from their unconscious corporate identity.

## Discovery and Acknowledgment

Now, if the leader is a judicious one, she will have chosen some change which has a reasonable chance of success. For then the group members can discover they can do things differently *with* the leader. The group "learns" there is a way of working together that is different in some fundamental way to past practice.

If the leader injudiciously chooses a major transformation at this point and if this change

process will take just that amount of time longer. For until the leader has evoked from them a response to do something different which they discover "works" she is unable to take the next step.

If the leader has chosen wisely, it is likely an observer would notice an increased frequency of statements of praise for the leader's ability. Especially common are statements praising her judgement and intellectual capacity for this step of the dance.



fails in some way, she will have created doubt in the minds of the group members about her capacity to lead them and to evoke new responses. In so doing she does not regress the dance, but it does mean that the whole

The wise leader should acknowledge the group in some way – should praise them. At this point the leader needs to be very, very full in her praise. In so doing, she is acknowledging their capacity to change.

## Innovation and Satisfaction

Once the group has discovered it can do different things with the new leader and once they have been acknowledged for this, the leader is then free to innovate. The leader is now able to take the group further and further away from the past practice or ritual or belief or procedure or policy or program. And the group will now go with her.

It is as if you have two links in a chain and one chain has to pull the other chain but until the two links are connected properly one can't pull the other. The mechanism by which those two links become entwined is, for want of a better term, what we are calling John Sherwood's Dance.

## Consequences

This dance in the underground stream of a group's unconscious between its members and a newly-appointed leader has a number of consequences which seem worth illustrating.

To summarize, the dance is one composed of six steps:-

1. Declaration and Acceptance
2. Demonstration and Perception
3. Acknowledgment and Acceptance
4. Evocation and Acceptance
5. Discovery and Acknowledgment
6. Innovation and Satisfaction

The process of empowering leaders begins in the group – it is not something which automatically happens by virtue of their appointment. A leader's power is constituted by the call of the group. A leader's effectiveness stems (initially) from empowerment by the group on the group's terms; that is, the group shares its power with the new leader and ultimately hands a substantial chunk of it over to her.

Now groups come to possess a shared meaning base (a culture, if you like) by attributing meaning to collective efforts and incidents of the past. This shared meaning is the source of their power as a group, and the process of empowering the leader becomes a process of incorporating the leader into this shared meaning base.

Once a leader accepts the commission of a group, if she then refuses to honor the group's norms she will diminish greatly both her effectiveness and the group's power. For, as in a dance, if Partner A chooses not to follow the lead of Partner B, they both cannot complete the dance. Moreover, it is then even less likely that the two will be able to dance together later for B is likely to resist letting A take the lead at a later stage. However, if A initially follows the lead set by B, then the chance of A being allowed to lead later are greatly enhanced. So it is with newly appointed leaders and their groups.

Moreover, formal conferral of authority is not conferral of status. Status arises both from the group's own expression of its identity and from its acceptance of the leader's congruence with this identity. Failure by a leader to accept the status offered is experienced as rejection by the group.

Every group possesses norms and expectations for a new leader before and after she arrives on the scene. These should have the opportunity to become explicit and negotiated after the first three steps of the dance have evolved. Moreover, it is unlikely they can be resolved successfully before the *Acknowledgment and Acceptance* step has been danced for there is likely to be insufficient connection between the group and the new leader.

A group needs to have "space" in which to create, monitor and shape its identity vis-à-vis its leader. In one resource industry company with which I am familiar I was told

of a newly-arrived plant manager who called unannounced every afternoon after 4.30 pm at the office door of his seven direct reports and asked that they each provide him with a verbal report on their activities and achievements of the day. After repeated complaints from these managers to the company general manager that they found his behavior unnerving he was asked to explain.

The plant manager reported he believed the best way to find out how the plant actually ran was to ask people how they spend their time. As to why he engaged in this practice specifically with his direct reports, he stated it was also a way of getting to know how each of his direct reports operated.

What he didn't know was that among this group of managers there was a strong history of shared peer responsibility with high levels of shared collective autonomy delegated to them by their previous plant manager. His daily "incursions" were seen as a strong violation of their shared psychological space. Moreover, his behavior was interpreted as both aggressive and demanding with a strong focus on individual responsibility – again something which was alien to the group's identity.

The dance metaphor also creates an image of movement and energy. So it is with the

relationship between a group and their newly-appointed leader. If the whole process of their mutual engagement is interdependent and dynamic, then the energy and power in the whole system (of group and leader) will grow. If, on the other hand, there is dependence ("I'll tell you what to do") or independence ("You tell me what you want and I will do it"), energy and power of the system will decrease or at best remain stagnant.

Given all these forces at play in the underground stream it would seem to make a lot of sense for groups and leaders to find ways of negotiating together their different "ways of being in the world", of putting this "stuff" out on the table for resolution. In one sense it will not short-circuit the dance processes: they are essentially non-rational phenomena. Nevertheless, such negotiations do offer the chance of making the process visible and more easy.

**The dance metaphor creates an image of movement and energy.**

## Special Cases

For the person promoted to leadership from within the group, the situation is a little more complex.

Imagine, for example, a family where both parents are killed, say, in a car accident. Imagine also that among the surviving children there is a significant age gap and one of the elder children adopts the parent role in the family, for whatever reason. This person is no longer a sibling, but "Carer" or "Guardian". As such they have a position from which they can now exercise new forms of power over those who were previously their siblings. This is a fundamentally different relationship. It is often the case in such situations that the other siblings will work actively but unconsciously to subvert this realignment of power.

So it is in today's organizations. When a peer moves from a "sibling" or peer role into the authority role strong unconscious group forces are unleashed.

For example, it seems that the group and the newly "elected" leader dance a high level of engagement around Steps 1 and 2 – *Declaration and Acceptance* followed by *Demonstration and Perception*. The relationship seems to cycle through both these steps many more times than occurs when the leader is an

"outsider". The group has a much greater hold on the promoted insider and is often less willing to empower this person to take them into new worlds than with someone who arrives free and "clean of past baggage".

Likewise, it seems easier for leaders in a multi-layered organization to dance through these six steps quickly with people further down in the organization than with their immediate subordinates, particularly if they have been promoted as an insider from within a group of peers.

For example, in one client organization the CEO was promoted from within the senior management group. He was able to invoke serious change in the organization with people two or more "rungs" down the organization more easily than with his (now) immediate subordinate managers. They took a much longer time to empower him for themselves – it was as if they were saying to themselves "He's still one of us and we're not going to let him lead us yet." Even deeper, it was as if they were saying "You have betrayed us by getting yourself promoted, and we resent this." So the leader promoted from within needs to pay extra attention to working with the group in Steps 1 and 2, ie, displaying acceptance of the group's culture and then demonstrating congruence with this unconscious identity.



'Le Bal', Jean-Marie Farina, 1861.

It is an especially difficult situation when a group has a succession of leaders who come in and are then posted onwards and sent back to wherever they came from in reasonably short succession. In such cases it is much harder to achieve a resolution, for the group comes (at some very deep level) to see its identity as permanent and its relationship with the leader as temporary. They then seek to outlast the supposedly temporary leader. In such cases the group seems to withhold engaging in the dance with the new leader. The leader has to make an extra large or far more visible symbolic commitment before she will be even enjoined in the dance.

Then there is the type of situation depicted in Ricardo Semler's popular book *Maverick* (1995). He suggests the leader is "thrown up" by the group. In this paradigm you are not so much bringing in a new leader as creating one. In a community model of leadership, people come up from within. The leader is, therefore, already accepted and there is a general agreement that when someone takes on such a role she will actually continue to be "one of us". Hence we will give over something of ourselves to this person for this period of time. She has already demonstrated her membership.

In such cases, the leader and the group have already danced Steps 1 and 2 by virtue of the leader's continued membership of the group and the expectation that the leader will one day be back with them as a member when another member takes on the leadership mantle.



### Reprise

When John Sherwood first presented this dance as a metaphor for some of the relational dynamics in the early 1970s, he stated that he had been using it for nearly 20 years at that time to explain such matters. From the continuing feedback about its current relevance and validity it would seem as though there are some relational dynamics between individuals and groups that are independent of time and simply can't be better explained by the next new model which comes along. If this paper strikes a chord with you and your experience then I would value further comment and feedback on how it can be improved.

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### Photo credits

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'The Wedding Dance', Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c. 1566, Detroit Institute of Arts.



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