Leadership: Wisdom in Action

by **Elizabeth Smythe** and **Andrew Norton**

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reveal how the thinking of leadership is always in 'play' enacting the wisdom of practice. The 'know how' of leadership theory (techne) tends to assume that a plan, or a set of skills, can accomplish whatever one sets out to achieve. However, the nature of human and contextual encounter instead draws one into a dynamic relationship where all is in-play. To lead is to recognise the impact and primacy of play and to respond accordingly. For this research study, experienced leaders were interviewed and data was analysed drawing on the philosophical notions of Heidegger and Gadamer, using a phenomenological methodology. The findings indicate that 'know how' is not sufficient. Strong leadership requires wisdom that is enacted in the moment. In addition, 'who' the leader is matters, for in the dynamic of play leaders can only draw on their own integrity. Being attuned to the play also matters, for discerning mood, possibilities and threats prompt the leader's next move. Leadership that enables individuals to play with wisdom, foresight and sound judgement can only be learnt through experience. The implications are that emerging leaders need to be exposed to the play of leadership and to be mentored by experienced leaders who can share their wisdom.

The wisdom of leadership

To lead is to always be in play, enacting the wisdom of leadership. This was a key theme of a research study that explored the thinking-experience of leadership (Smythe & Norton, 2007). Drawing on the philosophical writings of Heidegger [1889-1976] and Gadamer [1900-2004] the notions of 'play' are drawn into discussion with the research data to unpack, as much as possible, the nature of leading in a thinking, knowing, and responding manner.

Play is at the heart of every human encounter. Individuals respond to the other in an emerging, dynamic, open-to-the-moment manner and are caught up in whatever happens next. Gadamer (1982) writes of the primacy of play. Once an individual is in the game, or leading the team, a dynamic unfolding takes place.

'Know how', as captured by the term t*echne,* goes back to the ancient Greeks and refers to the type of knowing that guides what we do (Inwood 2000). This type of knowing is different from *episteme*, the kind of reasoning of science (Feenberg 2005; Polkinghorne 2004). It carries with it assumptions of knowledge that are universal, relatively acontextual and with rational explanation concerning why a skill needs to be conducted in a particular way. In their quest for competence, every novice searches for 'know how'. Although *techne* is brought to the play in itself, it is insufficient for it can never predict the situation of 'now'. *Techne* needs to be understood alongside *logos*, which for Heidegger meant "the gathering of the relationships that make things intelligible" (Feenberg 2005, p. 31). In this regard, *Logos* brings the circumspection that underpins action. However, such knowing is not sufficient. It is wisdom

(*phronesis*) that is called for in the play of experience.

Phronesis refers to practical wisdom, "one that varies with situations, is receptive to particulars, and has a quality of improvisation" (Polkinghorne 2004, p. 115). *Phronesis* can also be described as "the practice wisdom people use in particular situations when they do not and cannot know what to do" (Stamp, Burridge, & Thomas, 2007, p. 479). It is only in 'practice' that *phronesis* reveals itself: "All genuine *phronesis* is absorbed into action … we can never freeze our assets, nor is there ever a period of respite in which we might prepare ourselves for action … we are always already in the situation of having to act" (Dunne, 1993, p. 268). It is too late for the captain of the boat, or the leader of the business, to retreat to consult the 'know how' books when the unpredicted storm arrives. Leadership calls for them to act in the moment. Leadership calls on not just what they know, but on a mood of courage, perseverance, discernment and thoughtfulness as well as wisdom (Traüffer, Bekker, Bocârnea, & Winston, 2010). To decide 'in the moment' is to draw on who one is in every facet of one's being.

Unpacking the notion of leadership

Questions can be asked regarding what it is like to live leadership. The Boston Consultancy Group (2006, p. 24) paint a picture of the Executive leaders of 2020 and suggest that these leaders will need to:

> balance a wider range of interest … deliver the goods … nurture the long-term health … [have] advanced communication and team building skills … 'know their stuff' … but they will also have to deal with greater levels of uncertainty… while at the same time strive to achieve a balance between their working and family life.

Future leadership is thus a picture of complexity, demanding particular skills and knowledge combined with a sense of the ability to juggle, to discern, to hold tensions together, cope with uncertainty and at the same time hold the self together. Collinson talks of leadership dynamics that are "dependent on fluid, multi-directional social interactions and networks of influence" (2005, p. 1422). The metaphor of 'fluid' captures the sense of something that once set free can rapidly go any-which-way. He states "Leaders cannot predict or assume followers' motivations, obedience or loyalty" (p. 1435) and goes on to describe relationships that are "blurred, multiple, ambiguous and contradictory" (p. 1436). There is a sense of a leader being 'in the fray' where knowing and not knowing co-exist. Day (2000, p. 123) suggests that effective leadership is about developing the self which "requires an intelligent head and an intelligent heart". We agree that the head and heart are always connected in the experience of thinking (Smythe & Norton, 2007) and further explore the dimension to leadership that goes beyond 'know how'. Simpson and French (2006, p. 249) state that "leadership is evoked precisely in moments or situations where we do not know - either what we are doing, or where we are going, or how to get to where we want to be". To be a leader is to be thrown into ambiguity (Endres, Chowdhury & Milner, 2009) and situations that demand "swift and nimble action" (Ropo & Sauer, 2008, p. 565). Lawler (2005, p. 227) concludes that leadership is "inherently a chaotic, arrational, emotional phenomenon". Pye (2005, p. 47) describes leadership as "sensemaking in action". The combination of know how (*techne*), *episteme* (science) and *logos* (brings circumspection) is still not enough to equip a leader. Leadership calls for *techne* and *phronesis*, the practical wisdom that can make a decision in a face of all that is not yet known, in the midst of a situation that is changing before one's eyes, and in the understanding that 'I may have already done something wrong'.

Research methodology

The paper draws on Heideggerian phenomenological research in which 14 Australasian leaders were invited to talk about 'thinking' in relation to being a leader (Smythe & Norton, 2007). Traüffer et al. (2010) recommend this methodological approach in their work on discernment. Ethical approval was gained through the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee. Permission was also granted to name the people involved as the nature of the data was likely to make anonymity difficult. Writing has thus been consultative ensuring on-going consent.

The philosophical underpinnings draw on Heidegger's notion that "Human life is not something visible from the outside, but must be seen in the very act, performance, or execution of its own reality, which always exceeds any of the properties that we can list about it" (Harman, 2007, p. 25). Therefore, the only way to come to understand what it means to be human is to listen to people describe their 'lived' experiences. Further, "life is always this particular life and no other or, as Heidegger puts it, life is 'thisly'" (Harman, 2007, p. 28). No single leader's experience is ever the 'truth' about leadership, for it is always enmeshed in a unique context. Harman (2007) describes the task of such research as being "a way of staying true to what must be thought" (p. 155). A recent publication of a lecture course given by Heiddeger in 1944 includes this quote:

> Philosophy is around humans day and night like the sky and the earth, almost even closer

than they are, like the brightness that rests between them, which humans almost always overlook since they are only busy with what appears to them within the brightness. Sometimes, whenever it darkens, humans become especially attentive to the brightness around them. But even then, humans do not pay closer attention to it, because they are accustomed to the fact that the brightness returns. (Heidegger, 1944/2011, p.11)

Heidegger continually suggests that as humans we are still not thinking (1966, 1968, 2001). The quest of philosophically based research, such as Heideggerian phenomenology, is to draw one into thinking, to mediate on what has already been thought, what is still to be thought, and what is as yet nowhere near our thoughts. However, the context of our thinking is already right 'here' in our midst. It is the very closeness of it, the familiarity and the expectedness that stops us from thinking. The quest of phenomenology is to get as close to the experience itself as we can, and to listen with attentiveness; in short, to think (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008). Heidegger uses the notion of '*Dasein*' (1995), which means being-there and being-open to some things (and at the same time closed to all others), to hold the idea that we are never outside of a world. We are always surrounded by the light or the dark, always already knowing, and always only beginning to grasp the thinking that withdraws into unknowingness, forgetfulness or confusion. It is therefore the same in the being of leaders. Paradoxically, their thinking-about is not something that in itself is 'thought'. How leaders think, how they act in a moment of decision, how they simply 'know' are all modes of being so taken-for-granted that they disappear into the darkness. Phenomenological research can never dispel the darkness, it can only begin to shed light, to raise questions and to call forth remembering. Insights will always be unique to each reader, as the words of the authors are invested back into their own 'thisly' situations. Participants, researchers and readers are always this group of people, in this place, on this day when 'this' happened. Each has their own interpretive moment of understanding.

Method

We sought to interview leaders who have a reputation of being 'impressive'. Our intention is to bring to light the experience of leading. Participants were selected from business, education, sport, church and community work. The interviews tried to capture the ontology of leadership, the experience-as-lived, with particular emphasis on the 'thinking' of leadership. It is always difficult to extract one particular experience of thinking from a life where thinking never stops, thus the data tends to offer generalised descriptions, already carrying the participants' own layers of interpretive analysis. Questions tended to follow a person's story of 'becoming and being a leader'. Once the interviews were transcribed they were crafted to reveal the stories within, to enable meaning to be more sharply revealed (Caelli, 2001). Analysis was achieved through writing and re-writing (Van Manen, 1990) and seeking to work with the interplay of disclosure and that which always still remains concealed (Gadamer, 2006). The process was one of a call to think, to read, to question and to grasp at insights that both hint and withdraw (Smythe et al., 2008). It is a quest that can never be won; instead the thinking lives on in new questions. The theme of 'play' arose within the hermeneutic circle of parts and whole. 'Play' is thus within all of the data, showing both as a thing-in-itself and returning again to the swirling, dynamic whole.

Backgrounding

The following metaphor is offered to draw the reader into thinking about the philosophical notions of this paper:

> Writing of 'The deceptious appearances that are frequently observed at sea, such as the reflection of the sun, ripplings occasioned by the meeting of two opposite currents, whales asleep upon the surface of the water, shoals of fish, fog-banks, and the extraordinary effect of mirage [which] have given birth to many … non-existing islands and shoals,' King commented that if all of these were laid down in charts, 'the navigator would be in a constant fever of anxiety and alarm for the safety of his vessel'. But along the coast this was normal; where known and unknown resembled each other, and might so easily collapse into the blindness of the same, no wonder dark and light, anxiety and boredom, land and sea seemed distinguished by only the narrowest of lines. Where the sun shone most brightly 'in the direction of our course', there the greatest danger was in 'running thus 'dark with excess of bright' upon any rocks or shoals that might be in our way'. (Carter, 1999, p. 147)

The metaphor of sailing a stretch of sea reveals how known and unknown always co-exist, just as Heidegger's light and dark co-exist. Leaders wisely take and consult 'sea charts' and bring the requisite skills (*techne*), yet that in itself is not enough. It is practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that has them alert to the possibilities of the 'play'. Where known and unknown resemble each other, leaders can never say they 'know' in advance. While they may have a plan, they are the first to cast the plan aside when the

'whales' appear. Their attention is towards the 'play' of what comes. They engage in a process where "instead of always knowing things [they] …intuit understandingly …to understand intuitively" (Crowe 2006, p. 210).

The showing

No average, ordinary day

The leaders in our study talked of their experience of being 'in the play'. Dr John Hinchcliff, just weeks before his retirement as Vice Chancellor of the Auckland University of Technology, spoke of the 'play' he responded to day after day:

> I don't think there is an average ordinary day. The constant movement, constantly being interrupted, short sharp fragmentary things to deal with mean frustration. There is a constant stream of demands. Some people do not want to move until they have got a perfect analysis. Well, I would say there is no perfect analysis because we are human and fallible, and the situation is changing. So we have to involve ourselves in a particular process and think through it from within, together with colleagues. Then we make our decision, act on it, and then re-assess and re-think and re-check and act again. This may not cohere with the paradigm of western philosophy, which has to be organised and controlled. Life is not like that. It is changing and turbulent, and you cannot sit in an ivory tower on the sidelines waiting to get a perfect system. Life is thinking and acting and changing.

John has learnt that everyday life is changing and turbulent. There is seldom time to stop and think. Time is packaged in short, sharp, un-ending demands and interruptions. To take every issue away for quiet, thoughtful analysis is simply not an option. However, John also argues that this option should not exist. Life needs to be lived out in the 'play' of thinking, acting, changing, re-thinking, and acting again. Thought and practice are not separate entities. Rather they go hand-in-hand, side-by-side into every encounter.

He continues:

> There is no substitute for thorough thinking. The more you can do before you get involved in an action the better you will be prepared. But we cannot expect our thinking will last all the distance. We must test it and then act it out. Many of your most exciting challenges are from someone saying, 'Why don't you do this?' or 'Why don't you do that?' Then you must think quickly. So you have a go while

engaged in thinking more and more deeply about the situation.

John is not saying that one should not bother to think and plan and prepare; he is not discarding the *techne*. Instead, he is arguing that *techne* is necessary, but in itself it is not sufficient. Prepared thinking will not last the distance, nor is its strength proven until it has been tested by exposure to others. That is when the excitement and challenge of the play 'takes' over and suggestions come flying. The leader needs to be fit and agile enough in his thinking to play-along in an attuned and skilful manner.

Heidegger says "A much-quoted saying is attributed to Heraclitus: *panta rhei*, everything is in flux. Accordingly, there is no being. Everything 'is' becoming" (1987, p. 97). Leading is revealed in people who are seldom stuck in a 'there' but rather are always on the way to becoming. When questions are thrown they are already thinking ahead to predict the protagonists' responses. They delight in the now of play, while realising that to understand they must know what has just happened, and at the same time be at least one step ahead in their thinking. In the play, the past does not follow on after but already goes ahead (Heidegger, 1995). Past costly mistakes teach an individual which moves to avoid. A longstanding trusted relationship invites one to be frank. A look from a colleague is caught, interpreted, and sets the play in a different direction. All is in flux. All is open to possibility. Past, present and future collapse together to be as one in the play of thinking. Heidegger (1944/2011, p. 2) says "If humans think that which is – and they think this constantly in some way – then humans also think and have always already thought what has been and what will come". The *phronesis* of leadership tolerates all that is understood, all that is not yet known, all that is confusing and perplexing, and yet still acts (Simpson & French, 2006). It takes courage to call the action amidst such a complex play of light and dark, of known and unknown.

Moving tradition forwards

Sir Paul Reeves, New Zealand's first Maori Governor General, recounts one of his early encounters within the play of leadership:

> When I got to my first position as Bishop my predecessor had been there for 24 years, and done a solid job, but there was a need for new ideas, and innovation. Generally the people were saying 'for God's sake give us some shape and definition, give us an under-girding of theology to go with that, so that we are grounded and based within our tradition. Our tradition surely is not something to stand still,

it is something that moves forward, so put us in our tradition and lead us'. So we led. That broke down into support of the clergy. We were out of full-timers, so we looked for some others in another sort of formation. And it meant dealing with the Maori portion of the diocese, which is substantial, and had to be understood, and which for years had been paternalised, I think. The leadership in the diocese had been slightly scared of Maoris, and I had come in to do something about that. There was a financial situation. But there was also the need for me to verbalise what the message was. I got into some scrapes along the way. I was taken to the High Court. I terminated employment with somebody, and the question was whether I had followed the rules. The whole matter of natural justice was tested. For instance, I was thought to be delving into politics and using my position inappropriately. But we survived. And so if you are leading well, people forgive you. You don't always express leadership as they understand it, and on that particular matter what we really tested or stretched a bit was the bond of union between us. We had to look at it, understand it again, and we had to realise better what it meant to be in some sort of communion with each other.

The play of leadership is never about any single thing. It occurs in a context of tradition, culture, employment contracts, personalities and mood. Within the play of leadership possibilities open and close and tensions emerge. Sir Paul says "I was taken to the High Court". Situations thus arise that the leader has no control over. These situations happen and must be played out. Amidst the flux, the drive of the leader is to both 'hold' and 'move forward'. The church is steeped in tradition and has values that are timeless, yet at the same time runs the risk of becoming entrenched in behaviours that are time-worn and in need of change.

Sir Paul reveals *phronesis* in his humility in understanding that leadership is all about people, and even though he may be leader he is not a person 'over' others. Instead, he sees himself as one who goes-along-with and one who also needs to be forgiven. Play always involves the other players. To lead is to both stretch the bonds of union and to hold the communion of openness and trust. Harter and Ziolkowski (2006) describe leadership as being within a community of followers where each is vulnerable to the other, where each relies upon others, where each is gifted uniquely, and where the work is only ever accomplished by working together. Lawler (2005) talks of the unpredictable nature of all relationships. This mix defies order or control;

instead, it can only be lived amidst all that makes us human.

Heidegger suggests:

> True comradeship only arises under the pressure of a great common danger or from the ever-growing commitment to a clearly perceived common task; it has nothing to do with the effusive abandonment of psychological inhibitions by individuals who have agreed to sleep, eat and sing under one roof. (cited in Young, 2001, p. 56)

There is something about being together within the play that draws the people to the leader and the leader to the people. This drawing-to may bring tension and bonds may at times be stretched not knowing if they will be strong enough to withstand the rigour of debate. However, it is in the midst of such play that true comradeship, or as Sir Paul calls it "communion" grows strong.

When everything blew up

Grahame Maher, then CEO of Vodafone New Zealand, recounts this moment of leadership:

> There was the time of the streakers at the Bledisloe Cup game when I was almost expelled from New Zealand. We were doing a whole lot of stuff between Australia and New Zealand. We were doing jokes with customers. We did a whole lot of stuff for staff, trying to inspire the Australian/Kiwi business thing. During that, someone rang up and said, 'Look, I've got this great idea, I can get Vodafone on screen at the Bledisloe. If I do, I might get into trouble. I might get naked in the crowd, but is it okay?' I just said, 'Yes sure, if you want to do anything you can it's great.' I was sitting with a whole bunch of my mates from New Zealand watching this game when these guys got onto the field, streaking. I never actually expected they would get onto the field or anything ('sheepish' laughter). That was on Saturday. On the Sunday everything blew up. I spoke to lawyers and all of the things that you do normally, and to the Rugby Union. They were all saying, 'Just blame them. Blame your PR company. Blame someone.' I didn't sleep at all well on the Sunday night. So on Monday morning I rang my lawyers and said 'Look I'm going to tell the media what happened, and that's what I'm going to do' So I rang the media and said, 'I need to tell you what happened.' I said, 'It is my fault. I took the call and said 'Yes'. I am sorry.' The media hounded me for weeks. I also told the business

it was my own fault, and that I had made a big mistake! I apologised and said, 'I am sorry.' That was just an act of believing in what I needed to do and what I value. I walked off a plane and there was a guy with a TV camera there, and I thought, 'God this is hard sometimes'. I took a lot of calls. It was a real test to me around belief in the things that I value, like the fair dinkum thing of telling it like it is. I got a lot of support from all of the staff when I apologised and said I was wrong and took responsibility. And the popular media comment around, 'It is amazing to see a CEO of an organisation actually take responsibility and apologise.' And I think the customers as well. It took some personal toll for a few weeks, but I dealt with that. I didn't think I would ever be allowed back in New Zealand. They missed that goal. Oh dear.

Making snap decisions on the spur of the moment without fully understanding the intent or the consequences can leave leaders in a very public mess. The play has gone wrong, and at the same time the play of the aftermath comes with a fury. Gadamer (1994) says:

> We do not know where thinking will lead us. Where we believe we know, we only believe that we think … Thinking challenges us, and we have to stand or fall. Standing, however, means to stand fast, to correspond, to answer – and not to play, in a calculating manner, with possibilities. (p. 137)

In times when it feels that everything has gone wrong it would be easy for a leader to fall, or to give the impression of standing without having a firm place for his or her feet. Grahame stood firm on his values of honesty, of taking personal responsibility, of apologising and of facing the flak (Hill & Stephens, 2005). In this way *techne* gives way to embodied values that keep leaders awake in a restless night and fuel the courage to do 'what is right'. Courage needs to always be 'poised' for the moment when the play calls for more than an individual feels able to give:

> It is plain that there is no separate essence called courage, no cup or cell in the brain, no vessel in the heart containing drops or atoms that make or give this virtue; but it is the right or healthy state of every man, when he is free to do that which is constitutional to him to do. It is directness, the instant performing of that which he ought. (Geldard, 2001, p. 145)

Play depends on the constitution of the person. *Phronesis* "depends on nothing less than one's integrity as a person" (Dunne, 1993, p. 359). There is

no time in the play to 'think up' a response. One simply has to be who one is. When values are already firmly established they become the compass that directs, the voice that speaks with authenticity, the passion that convinces. Leadership is enacted in a world wherein we are thrown or delivered over to the world (Heidegger, 1995). At any time, anything can happen. According to Buber (1996, p. 83) the world is "unreliable, for it appears always new to you, and you cannot take it by its word … It comes to fetch you … It does not stand outside you, it touches your ground". Grahame went to watch a rugby game with friends, not to face one of the most challenging leadership calls of his career. The leader never knows when he will need to arise amidst chaos, hurt, anger and confusion to take charge, even when that means personally taking the blame. But he does know the moment when it calls. Collins (2005, p. 31) describes great leadership as "largely a matter of conscious choice". To be great is to make the choice to hold to one's values regardless of the consequences.

Heidegger (cited in Young, 2001, p. 24) suggests that there is a need to go beyond what is in order to determine what ought to be:

> The important thing here about understanding one's world, is understanding the difference between 'victory and disgrace', 'what is brave and what cowardly, what noble and what fugitive, what master and what slave'.

The integrity of the leader is revealed in the discernment of the brave, noble way to act. It is often in the instance, or in the unthinking response, that actions (unthinkingly) reveal the very hallmark of the leader.

Play without the road map

Grant Dalton, who has led New Zealand's bid for the America's Cup, describes the play of leadership in this way:

> I think one of the great things about this sort of environment that I live in, yachting campaigns, is that you haven't got five hundred and fifty thousand other companies that are doing the same thing. There is no road map. The great guys are often defined as the ones who broke the mould and went in another direction. We have computers and software that didn't exist four years ago because somebody one day went in the other direction. So the great thing about the yachting campaign of Team New Zealand now is there is no blue print. The blue print has gone, look what happened. So it is kind of cool to be able to just go right outside the square. I enjoy that. It is not so much

originality, it is putting your own spin on the way you want to do it. There may be directors, but they are mates. They can tell me if they think I am bloody cuckoo, but that is quite fun. 'Let's do such and such.' 'Yes, that is a good idea, let's do it.'

It is impossible to follow known ways when these ways do not exist. Grant describes having no road map and no trustworthy blueprint. The way to win the America's Cup is to develop something that is outside the square, radically different. This seems to be akin to what Heidegger (1993) calls 'the clearing'. He talks of going for a walk on a forest path. Others have walked the way before, stamping down the track. It needs no thinking, only following. On the track itself the trees are so close it is hard to see them as trees. Concentration wanders to other things. Suddenly one comes to a clearing, a wide-open space. In the clearing it is possible to stand back and see afresh the nature of trees. There is room for them to show themselves in their full dimensions. However, the challenge of the clearing is that the way forward is not always obvious. The pre-walked path may be signposted across the other side, but suddenly the full 360 degrees present as opportunities. New ways can be forged. Grant and his team have reached a place of clearing. They have chosen not to take the pre-existing way. New technology offers solutions that have yet to be imagined. The clearing is a thinking space, where the nature of boats is brought to question as if the piece of paper were blank. The 'bloody cuckoo idea' may be the radical advance. In this form of leadership the *techne* of all that is already known about building boats and the *phronesis* born of experience play together when 'space', free from pre-established constraint, is welcomed.

Harman (2007, p. 118) talks of Heidegger's "endless interplay in his thinking between absence and presence, veiling and unveiling, sheltering and clearing". The leader who stays 'safely' in the realm of the veiled and the sheltered, who stays on the known paths, is unlikely to lead others to new ideas, to new territory or towards a new vision. *Phronesis* takes the leap:

> The leap alone takes us into the neighbourhood where thinking resides …. In contrast to the steady progress, where we move unawares from one thing to the next and everything remains alike, the leap takes us abruptly to where everything is different, so different that it strikes us as strange. Abrupt means the sudden sheer descent or rise that marks the chasm's edge. Though we may not founder in such a leap, what the leap takes us to will confound us. (Heidegger, 1968, p.12)

It takes courage to leap and it takes wisdom to reside in the new found territory of thinking where everything is different. One can only 'play' in a context where there are no known ways, no pre-formed rules and no policy guides.

Holding the vision amidst the play

The question arises then that if all is play how does an individual journey to his or her desired destination. Sam Chapman draws on imagery from his Maori heritage:

> In terms of the waka[1] to find the way ahead you would be looking at the stars. That is what vision is. Vision to me is like the stars, you never reach them, but that vision guides us to where we want to go, and it is holding in place that vision. We are the keepers of the vision. I don't have to leave my seat. Just keep it there, and keep on rowing.

In the play of being at one with the sea, tide and storms, Sam suggests that it is not by broad daylight that one defines the way but rather by the timeless stars that only reveal themselves in the darkness. Amidst the toil of play there needs to be a sure, safe reference point to guide, even though night after night the clouds may hide this reference point. A leader has never travelled the same way before, yet he or she comes prepared with an understanding of the cues that will guide. *Phronesis* holds the trust that the stars will shine and hold timeless truth. The leader leads as he rows on, showing his trust that the 'way' is known. "Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step: only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find his right road" (Hammarskjold, 1975, p. 32). Whatever the nature of the play, the leader who embodies *phronesis* will have his eye fixed on the vision that guides.

Heidegger (1987) reminds us of the knowing that goes with us into the unknown. Just as Sam uses the metaphor of knowing the meaning of the stars as his guide, so a leader drawing on *phronesis* will have a line of sight:

> …a definite line of sight. The nature of the thing, the clock for example, remains closed to us unless we know something in advance about such things as time, reckoning with time, the measurement of time. The line of sight must be laid down in advance. We call it the 'perspective', the track of fore-sight. (p. 117)

A track of foresight leads the way to the judgement

---

[1] Maori canoe

that is made. However, Heidegger (1987) continues with a warning:

> To move back and forth, to slip and slide along this track has become second nature with us, so much so that we neither have knowledge of it nor even consider or understand the inquiry into it. We have become immersed (not to say lost) in this perspective, this line of sight which sustains and guides our understanding of being. (p. 117)

In his metaphor, Sam says that he just keeps rowing. That is the challenge for leaders. They must keep the *waka* moving on towards the destination, yet at the same time they must be aware that the line of sight may lead them astray. *Phronesis* calls for ongoing thinking and ongoing questioning – it calls for a leader who feels confident and yet is not afraid to have doubts.

Discussion

Leadership is always in play. Heidegger (cited in Inwood, 2000, p. 167) tells us that play has four main features:

> 1. Play is not a mechanical sequence of events, but rather a free, i.e. rule-governed, happening

It is therefore possible for play to be both free and rule-governed. Every business, institution or social ritual has rules of play (*techne*) yet within these rules comes the freedom, indeed the requirement, to play. *Phronesis* brings the appropriate decisions for the moment.

> 2. What matters in play is not what one actually does, but one's state, one's peculiar finding-oneself-therein, that is, one's mood.

The mood sets the tone of the play. A wise, calm, discerning leader may settle angst, just as a riotous, confronting, angry community may 'throw' a leader. *Phronesis* engenders a sense of communion, of working to achieve a mood of committed oneness.

> 3. The rules form in the course of play. They bind us with a special sort of freedom. Our play develops into a game, which may or may not become detached as a system of rules.

Being-with-one-another brings understanding of how the other is, how they like things done, who does what best and what one can or cannot 'get away with'. Thus community comes to understand how to 'be' together, and develops its own *phronesis*.

> 4. A rule of a game is not a fixed norm that we adopt; it varies in the course of the play: 'Playing always creates for itself the space within which it can form and that also means transform itself'. Being-in-the-world is playing a game.

Within a community the play creates the game and the game re-shapes the play. In this way, decisions fly and wrong decisions reveal themselves, sparking fresh decisions. Intuitive hunches collectively bring a change of game plan. It is all about the quest. In this way thinking and playing are one; such is the call for *phronesis*, for wisdom. Such is the nature of embodied, authentic leadership, which calls for on the spot "balancing and resolution of paradoxes and tensions" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, p. 72).

The play of leading is often taken-for-granted, and the *phronesis* is hidden amidst action. The experienced leaders within this research project were very clear that leadership is always a 'becoming'. Gadamer (1976) talks of the relationship between two men sawing a log together:

> …two men who use a saw together allow the free play of the saw to take place, it would seem, by reciprocally adjusting to each other so that one man's impulse to movement takes effect just when that of the other man ends. It appears, therefore, that the primary factor is a kind of agreement between the two, a deliberate attitude of the one as well as the other … neither partner alone constitutes the real determining factor; rather, it is the unified form of movement as a whole that unifies the fluid activity of both. (p. 54)

Wise leaders recognise the dynamic force of 'free play', attune to the rhythm, and develop embodied responsiveness. Leaders who embrace *phronesis* are always sensitive to the free play in the relationship with other, be that person or environment, for play lies at the very heart of all ventures.

Conclusion

Leadership that exudes wisdom amidst uncertainty, opportunity and threat stays attuned to 'what is' The nature of 'who' the leader is as a person lies at the heart of wisdom. When the 'who' is rooted in values respected by the community, is humble in a world that demands answers, and is courageous in the face of darkness, then the leader is possessed of wisdom. Such a leader is attuned always to the play, the mood of the moment, and keeps their eyes scanning the far horizon. Leadership wisdom cannot be taught in a classroom. It can only be imbibed amidst the exhilaration and danger of play.

Referencing Format

Smythe, E., & Norton, A. (2011). Leadership: Wisdom in Action. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 11*(1), 11 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2011.11.1.6.1105

About the Authors

Elizabeth Smythe has a background in nursing and midwifery, and is closely involved with Heideggerian phenomenology, as both a researcher and a supervisor in the School of Health Care Practice, Auckland University of Technology. Liz was one of the delegates of the international community of health professional researchers who annually meet in Indianapolis at the Institute for Heideggerian Hermeneutical Methodologies to participate in a forum (under the leadership of Professor Pamela Ironside) for the exploration of hermeneutic phenomenology in the context of research and scholarship in health care and the human sciences.

E-mail address: liz.smythe@aut.ac.nz

Andrew has a passion for reading about, thinking and enacting leadership. He has conducted extensive research on a number of prominent New Zealand and Australian leaders and won the 'unlimited' scholarship for the executive Strategic Leadership Programme in Millbrook in 2003. Andrew is an Executive Coach for leadership in both profit and not-for-profit organisations, and leads one of the largest Presbyterian Churches in New Zealand, St Columba @ Botany, in Auckland.

Andrew has a passion for photography, poetry and phenomenology, combining in the publication of his book "*Finding Cadence*".

E-mail address: Andrew.norton@stcolumba.org.nz

References

Buber, M. (1996). *I and Thou*. New York: Touchstone.

Caelli, K. (2001). Engaging with phenomenology: Is it more of a challenge than it needs to be? *Qualitative Health Research. 11*, 273-281.

Carter, P. (1999). Dark with excess of bright: Mapping the coastlines of knowledge. In D. Cosgrove (Ed.), *Mappings* (p. 125-147). London: Reaktion Books.

Collins, J. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors*. Boulder, Colorado: Jim Collins.

Collinson, D. (2005). Dialectics of leadership. *Human relations, 58*, 1419-1442.

Crowe, B. (2006). *Heidegger's religious origins*. Bloomingdale, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Day, C. (2000). Effective leadership and reflective practice. *Reflective practice, 1*, 113-127.

Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Endres, M., Chowdhury, S., & Milner, M. (2009). Ambiguity tolerance and accurate assessment of self-efficacy in a

complex decision task. *Journal of Management & Organization. 15,* 31-46.

Feenberg, A. (2005). *Heidegger and Marcuse*. New York: Routledge.

Gadamer, H. G. (1976). *Philosophical hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (1982). *Truth and method*. Crossroad, New York.

Gadamer, H. G. (1994). *Heidegger's ways*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (2006). Classical and philosophical hermeneutics. *Theory, Culture & Society. 23*, 29-56.

Geldard, R. (2001). *The spiritual teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Great Barrington: Lindisfarne.

Hammarskjold, D. (1975). *Markings*. London: Faber & Faber.

Harman, G. (2007). *Heidegger explained, from phenomenon to thing*. Open Court: Chicago.

Harter, N., & Ziolkowski, F. (2006). Leadership and inequality. *Leadership, 2*, 25-293.

Heidegger, M. (1966). *Discourse on Thinking* (J. Anderson & E. H. Freund, Trans.). New York: Harper Row. (Original English publication).

Heidegger, M. (1968). *What is called thinking?* (J. G. Gray, Trans.). New York: Harper Row. (Original English publication).

Heidegger, M. (1935/1987). *An introduction to metaphysics* (R. Manheim, Trans). New Haven: Yale University Press. (Original English publication).

Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic writings* (D. Krell, Ed.). San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Heidegger, M. (1927/1995). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. (2001). *Zollikon Seminars* (F. Mayr & R. Askay, Trans.). Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1944/2011). *Introduction to philosophy-thinking and poetizing* (P. J. Braunstein, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hill, R. & Stephens, D. (2005). The multiplicity of selves and selves management: A leadership challenge for the 21st century. *Leadership, 1*, 127-140.

Hutchens, B. C. (2004). Levinas, A guide for the perplexed. New York: Continuum.

Inwood, M. (2000). *A Heidegger Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. (2010). Enacting the 'true self': Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 21*, 64-74.

Lawler, J. (2005). The essence of leadership? Existentialism and leadership. *Leadership. 1*, 215-231.

Polkinghorne, D. (2004). *Practice and the human sciences*. New York: State University of New York.

Pye, A. (2005). Leadership and organizing: Sensemaking in action. *Leadership. 1*, 31-50.

Ropo, A., & Sauer, E. (2008). Dances of leadership: Bridging theory and practice through an aesthetic approach. *Journal of Management & Organization, 14*, 560-572.

Simpson, P., & French, R. (2006). Negative capability and the capacity to think in the present moment: Some implications for leadership practice. *Leadership, 2*, 245-255.

Smythe, E., & Norton, A. (2007). Thinking as leadership/leadership as thinking. *Leadership. 3*, 65-90.

Smythe, E., Ironside, P., Sims, S., Swenson, M., & Spence, D. (2008). Doing Heideggerian hermeneutic research: A discussion paper. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 45*, 1389-1397.

Stamp, G., Burridge, B., & Thomas, P. (2007). Strategic leadership: An exchange of letters. *Leadership. 3*, 479-496.

The Boston Consulting Group (2006). *The manager of the 21st century 2020 vision*. Boston, Australia: Innovation & Business Skills.

Traüffer, H. C. V., Bekker, C., Bocârnea, M., & Winston, B. E. (2010). Towards an understanding of discernment: A conceptual paper. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal. 31,* 176-184.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Young, J. (2001). Heidegger's Philosophy of Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____