



We Are A Web of Conclusions

Chapter 1 from Rayona Sharpnack's upcoming book 8 Timeless Principles of Women's Leadership

Each of us is made up of a web of conclusions. All of what you and I call "reality" is a set of tentative conclusions!

What does it mean to be a web of conclusions? Simply stated it means that you, me and every other person operate from an inherited collection of conclusions. Obviously, some conclusions are easier to accept than others. In the 18th century, the sun revolved around the earth. That was not a tentative conclusion--that was a FACT. It was observable by every person from any place in the world. How much more factual or "truthful" could you get? Scientists and mathematicians went to great lengths to draw and compute the necessary models to substantiate that the sun revolves around the earth. As history later revealed, Galileo and Copernicus had a different conclusion that became our next factual reality. *Shouldn't this leave us wondering what "factual reality today" will be seen as a tentative conclusion 100 years from now?*

On a more personal note, have you ever operated from a factual reality that you aren't competent at something. e.g. "I'm just not good with finances." or "I could never work in a fast-paced business that changes it's strategy every year." Have you ever operated from a belief system that is derived from circumstances? e.g. "I'll never get a promotion into senior

management as long as the current CEO is in office." Or "There is no way to take costs out of the supply chain as long as we keep all of our current manufacturing plants open." We say those things as if we are just reporting on the truth.

One example of this is a colleague named Oceana Lott who discovered the extent to which her prevailing web of conclusions had limited her career. When Oceana came to our Women Leading Change program in Spring of 1999, she told the group she had just transferred to a department in her Fortune 500 high-tech company that, she concluded, had a "glass ceiling." She felt frustrated and confined. During the program, we started talking about the conclusions we have created around "the glass ceiling." Oceana realized that it could indeed be just a tentative conclusion.

"I had to ask myself, to what extent is this [the glass ceiling] true solely because I think it is? Are there times when I don't take risks or when I approach someone suspiciously? How does this belief [in a glass ceiling] lead to behavior that proves the conclusion?"

That is not to say that the statistics are not valid. But the question of whether or not you're experiencing the glass ceiling as an individual is up in the air. If you believe that you are, and you string together lots of events in support of the conclusion, then that's the story you get to carry around with you--living every day believing that you're limited in what you can accomplish.

Oceana went on to pursue successful work outside of corporate America not because there was a glass ceiling but because she discovered that she had been operating from the false conclusion that she couldn't have a sustainable lifestyle if she didn't do work associated with her college degree.

Now, stop reading for a moment. What conclusions have you drawn about YOU?

What are the conclusions from which I am living my life?

What conclusions have I made about my destiny?

What conclusions am I operating from regarding my team?

What conclusions am I imposing on others?

What conclusions do I believe to be true about customers?

What conclusions do I have about myself or my skills?

What conclusions do I have about my manager's skills?

Let's consider that conclusions are neither good nor bad....conclusions are neither right nor wrong.....conclusions are merely that: CONCLUSIONS! They are made up of words, beliefs, history, experiences, stories, feelings, education, and statistics. They are not made from carbon or silicon or any of the elements that make up solid objects. Doesn't it seem obvious then that something made up of words is different than something that is made up of metal? It's logical that if I wanted to change an object that is made up of carbon or silicon I would apply heat, force, or chemicals. What do I apply if I want to change conclusions, which are made up of words? [This is what my daughter calls the "DUH" factor. The answer is so obvious, anybody can see it] You would apply **words** if you wanted to change a conclusion!

Imagine that together, you and I, engage in a certain curiosity and fascination around what it takes to be a great leader, given that each of us and the people that we lead operate from both common and uncommon conclusions. Common conclusions are those that are handed down from generation to generation and virtually everywhere you go people believe them to be true and factual. In corporations and large organizations, these tend to form the basis of culture. Uncommon conclusions are those that we uniquely construct based on our own experiences, thoughts and feelings. As we engage in this book, we'll practice suspending the certainty of

what we already know to be "true" for the possibility of discovering whole new dimensions of freedom and power. Consider the provocations in this book with an openness and commitment to discover things that can change your life forever.

Consider the possibility that you already know everything you need to know to be a great leader! The purpose of this book is to give each of you access to your own brilliance, creativity and effectiveness in producing extraordinary results through others. This book will provoke you thinking and demonstrate that you are even smarter and more competent than you think you are. As you engage you will discover new ways to talk about and gain access to your own wisdom, intuition and leadership effectiveness. You will see roadblocks that you and others have placed in front of you that can be removed with just one simple action. You will have a newfound ability to transfer your leadership skills to others, igniting in them their own unique leadership capability and allowing their competence to emerge and grow.

Let me confess that while I graduated from college with honors, I take pride in having a simple mind. Now, a simple mind doesn't mean a lazy mind. I just have always been fascinated with taking large, complex, thorny issues and boiling them down into something that a 7th grader could understand. (Must be the impact of teaching junior high for 11 years) Rather than reject the assertion that conclusions, however large or small, can be changed merely through words, let's look at the value proposition of that. After all if there isn't a clear line of sight between what we are asked to do and how it benefits us, then we are less likely to do it.

Take any one of the conclusions that you discovered about yourself from earlier in the chapter and put it through this series of questions:

- * If it were possible to fundamentally change that conclusion, what would become possible in your life as a leader?
- * What new horizons could open up?
- * What results could your team produce that they aren't producing now?
- * What new ways could you and your organization serve customers?
- * What new opportunities for learning and leading could emerge?

Here's how I got value out of shifting conclusions in that very job I just mentioned, teaching junior high. It was my first year out of college. It used to drive me nuts how many questions the kids asked after I gave them an assignment. I made it a personal goal to explain things so clearly that no one would have questions. I honed my sentences. I included every detail I could conceive anyone wanting to know. I spoke slowly and made eye contact. Still the hands shot up. The conclusion that I had drawn was that I really was inept as an educator and kids didn't really listen anyway.

One day, I was in the faculty room drinking coffee and bemoaning my failure to make things clear to my kids when another teacher looked up and said, "Rayona, they don't ask questions to get information. They do it to connect with you." This was a very different conclusion and a revelation to me. It was a whole new context from which to hear kids' questions. The fact that they had questions wasn't a sign that I wasn't explaining things well (my old conclusion), it just meant they wanted to connect with me. I stopped getting irritable and frustrated and began to smile when that lone wagging arm went up. Another ulcer averted!☺

Uncovering and examining conclusions produces freedom and choice. Where freedom – and ultimately leadership – begins is when we stop to examine our conclusions and determine which ones will advance what we are committed to and which ones are barriers to progress.

- **How do conclusions impact my day job?**

If your job is in marketing, this discussion of conclusions may be ringing some bells. After all, successful marketers today don't burden their customers with mind-numbing details about their products and services. Rather, they connect to big concepts. They put the product in a context that provokes the customer to make a conclusion. Commercials for frozen food, laundry detergent or banking rarely explain how their product is different from the competitors (often because the actual content isn't). Rather, they show customers spending time with their children, running on the beach – living a life free of worry. The supposition is that most of us in this society are plagued by stress, and want to rid ourselves of stress in a multitude of ways. The marketers created a 'line of sight' between a simple task such as washing clothes and the conclusion that by using their products or services you will have a more fulfilling life. Now logically it sounds absurd that washing dishes with a particular detergent produces a more fulfilling life, but don't confuse logic with the effect of a well delivered conclusion.

Think about a situation in which you have to tell an employee in a satellite office that that office will close in two months. You may notice a decline in her productivity for a variety of reasons. It would be logical to conclude that she's unmotivated, she's looking for a new job, she feels disconnected. If you tell this same employee that 'we're closing this office, and (you add the conclusion that) I think your skills are a good fit for another division,' you may notice an increase in the quality of her work. The conclusion was transformed from an apparent dead-end to an opportunity.

As leaders, our job is to illuminate all the conscious or unconscious beliefs, myths, assumptions, and preconceptions that form people's conclusions. To lead well, we must begin this process within ourselves. From there, we want to reveal how those conclusions limit our

team's freedom, their career accomplishments, even their satisfaction at work. Later in the book we'll talk more about how to jettison a tentative conclusion and generate a new, more expansive one that will allow us and our team to become more skilled leaders and change agents in our organizations and in our life outside of work.

Another practical example of this was demonstrated at Oral-B Laboratories, a Gillette subsidiary in Belmont California. Between 1997 and 2000, nearly 40 women participated in our Women Leading Change program. Women Leading Change is a three-day journey of revealing conclusions of individuals, organizations, communities and society at large. Unlike many development programs, positive interest in WLC spread rapidly as co-workers could readily see extraordinary changes in their colleagues and their work groups. The skill of identifying limiting conclusions and generating new conclusions had made a measurable impact in women doing their jobs more effectively.

Among other new business practices, Oral-B was at that time experimenting with rapid new product development processes and dedicated project teams. Oral-B women applying this newly found leadership skill contributed to and led the development of the CrossAction toothbrush.

The CrossAction toothbrush was an outstanding example of breakthrough in product design, development, and manufacturing, clinical methods development, claim support results, consumer evaluation methods, and common effort in cross-functional teaming. The product has been successful in the marketplace and won numerous design and packaging awards. A simple conclusion [that toothbrush bristles had to go straight up and down to remove plaque] had kept every company in the industry producing toothbrushes that had only incremental improvement decade after decade. The CrossAction toothbrush not only revolutionized plaque removal but

gave rise to surfacing additional limiting conclusions regarding dental floss, mouth wash and even how to develop a mentoring program managed by the employees.

Consider another highly visible example. In 1999, when Carly Fiorina became the first woman CEO in the top Fortune 25, she took a hard look at Hewlett-Packard, the company she was now leading. The company had logged a steady, single-digit percent growth rate every year for the past ten years. The question was, What conclusion could be drawn from those results?

“Is this what we want?” Fiorina asked her managers. “Do we want to be a company that chugs along at single-digit growth each year? Our competitors in the computer industry are showing double-digit growth. Are we satisfied with our performance?” Of course the answer was no. No one in high-tech wants to work for a tortoise; when the race to market is as short as it is in that industry, only the hares succeed. What Fiorina recognized and confronted her senior managers with was the unconscious conclusion that the entire company had been operating from: We are a slow, steady, reliable firm and that’s okay. Many branches of the organization had striven to achieve more than that, but the prevailing organizational conclusion had thwarted them. Being slow and reliable had become the corporate culture every bit as much as HP's well-known "management by walking around."

Ms. Fiorina also requested financial statistics broken down by department for each of Hewlett-Packard's seventeen divisions. What she found was that year after year there had been consistent cutbacks throughout the company on funding for R&D and for Sales. This was a surprise—an unpleasant shock, really—to senior management because no one had looked from the entire global enterprise perspective before and seen that these cuts were happening across the board. Each division had had their own budget goals to meet so they trimmed a little here and there, including the budgets for R&D and Sales. As a result of each business unit concluding that

budget cuts in R&D and sales was the right thing to do in their business, no one had seen the enterprise-wide negative effect of these decisions. Needless to say, Fiorina promptly shifted the company's priorities and increased budgets for these two key areas.

Something that happens as a seemingly isolated event (one year's growth rate, one department's cuts) can suddenly be seen as an organizational conclusion if you view it from a different perspective. What conclusions might be limiting your organization?

*** Replacing One Conclusion With Another**

The issue of dealing with conclusions masquerading as reality will challenge any good leader on any day. The problem begins with challenging people to discern if they are dealing with objective reality (carbons and silicon) or subjective reality, the conclusions of 6.2 billion people on Earth. One example of questioning the accuracy of objective reality is to use a microscope and examine an ordinary, everyday, run-of-the- mill plant cell. Better yet, have four people with four microscopes, each viewing the same plant cell on a slide. Viewer No. 1 is looking through a lens that magnifies objects 5 times. Viewer No. 2's microscope has a 10x magnification. Viewer No. 3 has a 25x lens. Viewer No. 4 is looking through an electron microscope (100x magnification). Next, ask them to describe in as much detail as possible what they are seeing. Each person's 'facts' or reality about her plant cell differs depending upon the magnification of her microscope lens. If we then ask each person to make conclusions about the plant cell based on what they observed, we are likely to get four very different conclusions. If these four people are on the same work team and don't realize that each one's lens shows a different set of facts, this highly intelligent, committed group of people could easily dissolve into an argument about who is right. Since we aren't in the plant-cell business, how does this example map on the customers and products that are your business?

Just because a conclusion commands unanimous acclaim, it does not necessarily make it factual or impenetrable. (Remember when Copernicus and Galileo wrecked the whole story of the sun orbiting earth.) To be effective leaders, we must constantly be on the lookout for tentative conclusions masquerading as facts. Whether it is performance reviews, marketing plans, or the end of the quarter profit and loss reports, it's all conclusions all the way down.

Conclusions shape everything we see and do. As a matter of fact, we seek confirming evidence for that which we have concluded. Consider something currently happening where you have concluded that something is real, immutable, and factual. You may even have had lots of people supporting you so you "know" it is reality. Look again. At what magnification or scale are you viewing this event, situation, person, or project decision? How might it change if you scaled up or down a few levels of magnification?

Once we are able to view everything in life as a conclusion, we have a leadership advantage. We can relax the grip on conclusions that we have steadfastly held onto. We can invite others to do the same. We can ask questions that reveal that a given conclusion is made of Swiss cheese. We can poke holes in long-held theories and taboos that limit our team's creativity and flexibility. Just think about it...a competitor's ability to undercut your pricing structure doesn't have to result in eroded market share. Ask yourself and your team, what other conclusion could be derived from the same set of facts? Any particular event could be concluded to be either your darkest moment...or your finest hour!

Practicing the art of inventing conclusions is something that you can do anywhere, anytime, independent of circumstances. If you find yourself saying, "You mean just make up a conclusion and act as if it is reality?" Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Remember conclusions are not made of carbon or silicon. They are made up of words. Let us not confuse this with positive

thinking. It's not that there is anything wrong with positive thinking, we just don't want to delude ourselves that if we put hot fudge sauce on top of cat food, it won't necessarily make a delicious dessert.

At the same time, it is important to observe that many conclusions are inherited or just arise by default. There's no telling where these default conclusions originated, but by virtue of the fact that they spontaneously arise in hundreds of organizations spanning dozens of industries in countries from Israel to Singapore, we have to be suspicious that they are not specific to any one organization.

Below are a set of facts and a sampling of default conclusions that could be invented from those same facts:

FACT: Our company has had seven successive quarters of declining revenues

DEFAULT CONCLUSIONS:

- We have to replace the CEO.
- Our people are no longer as committed as they used to be
- We are not communicating the value of our product over our competitor's product.
- It is inevitable that this would happen in a down-turned economy.

Now let's look at some other conclusions that could be generated from the same facts:

INVENTED CONCLUSIONS:

- We are learning what it takes to generate leadership in the worst and best of times.
- It's time for us to get even closer to our customers and see what they need to be successful.
- Our people have always been our most important resource and that is true, now more than ever.
- We must convene "outside the box" brainstorming circles throughout our organization

Now try it out. Invent three or more conclusions that would demonstrate inspiring leadership in the face of seven successive quarters of declining revenues:

- _____
- _____
- _____

The ability of a leader to see and invent conclusions that empower her team determines what kind of future the organization or community will have. If her ability is limited, it will limit the scope of her people's dreams and her company's achievements. It will put a lid on the creativity, energy, enthusiasm --the fire--of her team. If her ability is greater, she can inspire herself and her team to stretch their thinking, to create something new and groundbreaking.

The key to expanding our ability to invent conclusions is *the choice to do so*. When we suddenly see the default conclusions that rush to fill the space between our ears, we can choose to feel like a victim of cultural conditioning or we can brush those thoughts away like cobwebs and step out onto the stage of our life, excited at the possibilities of how far we can go now that we are free to invent a different reality.

Now take a moment to reflect on the chapter you've just read. Jot down what you're starting to notice or becoming curious about. What's stirring within you? Where are you seeing relevance to your current situation?

What is your 'a-ha,' as I call it? What conclusions could you invent to create more opportunity for you and your team, organization or community?
