[MUSIC PLAYING]

LARRY SUSSKIND: Tonight, I want to try to pose the basic assumption behind the idea of facilitative leadership in the public sector and share a few terms, a few concepts. I want to give you a problem to think about at dinner, then ask you at your table to pursue the questions, and then save about 10 minutes at the end to see if something different was happening at the different tables. But the key idea tonight is raise this question and offer some terms, some concepts.

The goal is to begin a conversation. If I had these ideas all worked out for myself, I would have written a book, but I definitely don't have all these ideas worked out. So my goal is to share some thoughts, provoke some conversation, ask you to continue the conversation in small groups, and then, all together. And I'm hoping that I can get you to write a couple pages at the end of the fourth week, or sooner, should you be motivated. And that I can take all of those and work them into the kind of summary or synthesis.

I will draft something and then encourage anybody that contributed to continued to work, to take that draft, develop it further, and have it be a departmental publication, which we don't have. But I don't see why we can't do that, because I think the question will continue to be of interest and concern. This all started last spring at the end of the semester. My course on negotiation and dispute resolution in the public sector said, I've looked around for leadership courses. They have them at the Kennedy School. They have them at the business school at Harvard. They have them at Sloan.

But they all seem to assume you're somebody working in a private organization. It's not the same thing as leadership in the public context. Really, the assumption is, you're in an organization and it's a private organization.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

How do you manage as a leader? There's nothing said differently about being in a leadership role in the public sector. And I think it's very different. That's what I'm trying to work out. In what ways is it different? Should all the basic assumptions be questioned about leadership, slash management of groups, organizations, networks in the public sector? I've spent 50 years working in dispute resolution in the public sector, in 30 countries. I want to think comparatively about this. So please, do not constrain yourself unnecessarily to imagine only something in a US context when we're talking in table conversation.

If you're thinking very much in your culture, your context, your country, just say so. Don't not do it, but let everybody else know that you're starting from a different point in the conversation. And I don't know about how far generalizations can go about the public sector when we switch from country and culture to country and culture. We'll see what you think about that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Imagine a city government has appointed a task force to give the city advice regarding the decision the city has to make, regarding the use of a particular piece of public land that was abandoned, not used. And now, there are multiple proposals for how it should be used within that neighborhood, within the city, within the Metropolitan area. And the cities ask a task force of people. The usual, the blue ribbon committee was announced, and a lot of folks yelled about that. And so more people got added. That was the solution to representation that that mayor chose. OK, fine. We'll just add more people, especially the ones who've made noise. You be on the committee.

Begging the question of the representativeness and thus the credibility of this group, and whatever it recommends. But since the city wasn't giving away final decision making authority, it was just asking for advice from a task force, didn't worry too much about representativeness. It didn't worry too much about credibility in the eyes of the groups that weren't at the table. And so this task force has been meeting. It didn't have much of a mandate. Just, we'd like your advice about this undeveloped parcel that's been sitting here for a long time. What do you think city should do with it?

And my question to you is, how would you know who's the real leader of that task force? They've met multiple times. They have whatever mandate they had from the mayor's office. How would we know who's the real leader of this 25-person group? You could clearly tell that a couple of people had way more knowledge and experience with regard to the city, city politics, city planning, city development, real estate development. And they were showing it off in the conversation. Did that make them the leader?

Or maybe we're listening, and one person, soft voice, not pushing hard at all on the substantive question, but says, well, I've been on a bunch of task forces like this before in the city, and my sense is we ought to do this, this, and this, and use our time this way, and get the involvement of other people like so, and so, and so, and so, with the fact that person had the most experience in this kind of a role. Would that qualify them to be the leader? Would that make them the leader?

There's one person who clearly is the workhorse on this committee, they're saying, I'll take the notes, I'll work the flip chart, and they're making very clear that they're taking care of all the housekeeping chores and activities, almost like a secretary, keeping track of the ideas, and offering their own views along the way. Is the person willing to do the most work the leader? Who's the leader? Or are there just these leadership functions, and different people can all choose on their own to play different functions, as long as the rest of the group accepts it?

If we're in a corporate context, I promise you everyone would know who the leader of the group is, because whoever said there would be a meeting, whoever said there would be a group appointed the person who was the head of the group. Doesn't happen that way most of the time. I'm talking about when the larger network of the public is tapped, and you're trying to organize in cities, trying to organize them. Don't we need a theory of practice as urban planners, with regard to how this leadership question should be handled in the public arena? It's just whatever happens?

Mayor says, it's fine with me. The whole group can just collect their suggestions and send them to me. That's fine.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

As practitioners, I think we need a theory of practice. Could be our own. It could be the MIT theory of leadership, facilitative leadership. Could be your table's theory. But I don't see how, as planners, we just wander forward. And we're going to be in so many situations in which ad hoc clusters of people are supposed to be doing the public's work. We're usually supposed to be involved in such things. And I think the key to that is to see yourself as a facilitative leader, providing a service, a service. It's a service model of leadership, which I think is necessary in the public sector. But you can convince me that that's wrong.

You have plenty of alternative models, and that's why we're going to be having conversations about this. They need to be empathetic to the interests of the other people around the table. If you can't gin up empathy for the others and their quandaries with regard to this, you'll never be a leader of that group. You have to be a capable, active listener. If you can't hear how far off you are about what's going on by listening to people, talking to each other or to you, you won't succeed.

You have to be able to read the group, to recognize underlying dynamics that let you know more about the interests of the participants. This is not people raising their hand and saying something. Reading the group over many occasions, coalition building. You can't keep treating it like a set of individuals who are only there for themselves. You have to help them begin to form coalitions. You cannot function in a service role if you cannot put aside your ego. You need to be able to take a long view. The group needs you to do that. They're focused on the short term.

I would argue the facilitator leader has to constantly be thinking about the long term. You have to be able to write the group's victory speech. You have to be able to draft that as the facilitative leader, because it has to take account of how it looks from all of their standpoints. You have to promote organizational learning along the way. What didn't we do well? What did we do well? Was that just this one time? Or is there something there we can change about how we're working so we do better next time?

But if someone is not focused on organizational learning, it will not just fall out naturally. Now, when I look at that list of, let's call them, skills, not micro skills, but capabilities, capacities, leads me to the conclusion-- may lead you to a different conclusion-- that facilitative leaders are made and not born. I believe that the charismatic leader who provides vision, who provides inspiration, you might try really hard to become that. My sense is that charismatic leaders are born. It's not that they don't do anything to improve themselves. I just don't think you can build yourself up piece by piece to become charismatic.

I really do think that you're either lucky or not lucky to be endowed with that ability as an inspirational leader. Charismatic leaders, I think, are more likely to be born than made. Paternalistic leaders, we can train them. I think Sloan and HBS do a great job. I can't deny they've made a whole lot of people like that. I would like to think that if we tried, DUSP could make a whole lot of facilitative leaders, people who are collaborative service providers in the public sector.

On this question of "Are facilitative leaders are made, not born?" I think facilitative leaders can be made. And there are people who, when it comes down to it, say yeah, a facilitative leader, can provide direction without taking control. They know that everyone has to be involved in all the decisions. Leadership in the public sector requires different kinds of skills, orientation, and a different theory from leadership in private organizational contexts.

I'm counting on the conversation over these four weeks to maybe make a case, the beginning of a case to take to the Department and say, what exactly are you hoping I'm going to turn out to be? Don't tell me, planner. That just doesn't do it. It has to be more than that. So we break for dinner, and then I will ask you to consider some of the questions from within what I presented. I'm hoping to get from each of you, by the end of week four, some reflection on this proposition that I'm offering.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So public-private, any difference? Important difference? Always? Sometimes? Maybe? Second question, facilitative leaders are made, not born. Does that sound right to you? And anybody become a facilitative leader? I mean leader. I don't just mean a facilitative person. So made, not born. Public versus private. And can you really construe leadership as service? Can you say I'm a leader, I'm providing service, that's what I'm doing? Service in the public interest, that's the dominant consideration in thinking about leadership in the public sector. Can you imagine yourself in a service role, someone who's recognized for the service they provide in the public arena?

So I offer those three points. See where the discussion goes. Take 20 minutes. Meet somebody you don't know. Talk to someone you do know and you never get to talk to.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

AUDIENCE: One of my managers was like, you need to have the confidence to assert, and make a decision and move forward with it, rather than trying to make everything a collective decision. When you're like, they're leading a group. And I do think there's kind of a gender dynamic involved in that where-- and I felt like I was younger in the office. I felt like, oh, I should be deferring to all of the other people in this group in order to make decisions. I do think women may be socialized to be more facilitative, rather than paternal or top down.

AUDIENCE: I don't want to say caretaking role, but it does begin to feel like you're nurturing consensus, sort of tending to everyone's needs, as opposed to achieving the best solution.

AUDIENCE: It kind of feels like herding cats sometimes, and there is a lot of emotional labor involved, understanding social dynamics, and power and political dynamics, sometimes even-- I don't know-- babysitting. You know? You know? It doesn't feel like a sexy leader role. It's definitely not.

AUDIENCE: I think if you're delivering a product, as opposed to a service, you don't have to have much empathy. You just need drive and ambition. But if you're leaning into process, which I think is the nature of facilitation, you need to be patient with folks to provide the service.

AUDIENCE: I feel like this can be very easily underappreciated, this kind of service.

AUDIENCE: I feel like maybe leadership does contain a meaning of achieving on a consensus. We still need to lead people to somewhere. Public sector is trying to achieve or best serve public interest by incorporating different voices from multi stakeholders. but for private corporate, they have a clear vision or a clear goal that I want to create this product.

AUDIENCE: There is no involvement of the community in what we are doing.

AUDIENCE: The governance is different than probably the skills that you may need in terms of leadership. They may have commonalities, but I do believe that there are certain differences. My perception is that the private sector is more vertical, and it's more based on appointments and authorities. And in the public sector, in my experience, you may need a lot more influence.

AUDIENCE: In the public sector, what's more dangerous is that you're kind of putting on this facade of, this is the public. But then the mechanisms there don't allow people to equally come to the table.

AUDIENCE: The trust of the public and private sectors are different. The nature of leadership should be different.

AUDIENCE: How do you think managing people differs in the public sector?

AUDIENCE: Many South European countries, you have to play a low profile.

AUDIENCE: As a leader.

AUDIENCE: No, as an individual that wants to aspire as a leader. I have a hard time here.

AUDIENCE: In the US.

AUDIENCE: In the US particularly. Yeah, I've been working 20 years with an Anglo-Saxon organization that's with the UN. And I think that this doesn't work in other cultures, in many cultures.

AUDIENCE: I think it's very difficult to transpose these styles of leadership wholesale. But by developing these skills, you can eventually be bestowed the power by the community, because they see that you are ready to show up.

AUDIENCE: And you are aligned to their values. And that's very important. In Japan, for example, they have a hard time partnering and negotiating with Americans. They are self-confident and outspoken, and they are bold.

AUDIENCE: Yes.

AUDIENCE: And this boldness which, here is considering a skill and something positive, you are confident with yourself, which don't take me wrong, it's not bad, in certain cultures could be considered arrogant. And it's important to play a more low profile role.

AUDIENCE: So how does that vary when you're in that particular world?

AUDIENCE: That is one of the places is empathy. You are reading the room and you understand that, for example, in the Nordic countries, people don't want you to shine.

AUDIENCE: Ah, that's interesting.

AUDIENCE: People don't want to shine. The power of the many Nordic countries is the community itself, while here in the United States, I can see that this distinction-- and you can see that in movies and narratives-- a leader is someone that shines. That concept of leadership doesn't apply everywhere. For us Norwegians, working in Japan is perfect. But Americans, they always have a clash. Certain communities are more silent. Some things, you don't have to discuss.

And I'm not saying that they are better or worse. There are certain communities that they have other values than the financial things.

AUDIENCE: This goes for public fans. I think a lot of times, you're rewarded for just doing your current job well, which allows you to start out as like a technical skill. And then you can get promoted to a manager role of people who do that technical stuff. But you're not taught how to be a manager and how to support people, how to develop their skill set. You're just really good at that level of what you do.

AUDIENCE: Things like empathy and being a good listener are things that might get-- I don't know-- kind of not embody those qualities as much.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, I'd honestly love to talk about the efficiency piece in the public sector, because cost efficiency is usually one of the biggest conversations. Then efficiency isn't articulated as prize-worthy.

LARRY SUSSKIND: Anything come up that anybody felt strongly about, or any of those three issues?

AUDIENCE: The concept of leadership as a service. And we kind of had-- maybe this is a philosophical question about whether there's such thing as selfless leadership. Or is everyone always in the back of their minds, doing something for their own benefit? Even if you are facilitating, trying to be a facilitator, where do you get a little ego rush when you make something happen, are we all at DUSP because we truly want to change the world, or because we think that we're important enough to do that?

LARRY SUSSKIND: Thank you.

AUDIENCE: Thanks for the existential crisis.

AUDIENCE: Those who have some charismatic characteristics will naturally be a better leader.

AUDIENCE: So we opened up by discussing the question of whether facilitative leaders are made or born. And we talked a little bit about the role of gender, and race, and sexuality in this question. Just kind of speaking from my experience, being a woman in the public sector, I found myself deferring to a more facilitative form of leadership, when maybe being a little bit more assertive or taking on more of a decision making role would have been better. So I think that yeah, thinking about the social dynamics around whether someone is innately facilitative is important.

AUDIENCE: A lot of the time in public settings, there's apprehension to take that more decision making position, just because that's maybe not the role that we've historically occupied. And so we defer to, potentially, more caretaking, more nurturing, I guess, function in decision making. So we tend to build in consensus, rather than delegate responsibility or asserting expertise in a realm. Because if you don't look like the decision maker, oftentimes your credibility could be reckoned, challenged, pushed back against.

And so the next best thing is often to maybe opt for facilitation instead, especially in a public setting, when sometimes it can be hard to corral really competing interests.

AUDIENCE: OK, we have a very interesting discussion around-- we may have in our minds a concept of leader that perhaps is not shared with other parts of the world. And I think that this is very important where we are defining some of the skills that makes a leader, because we are still, especially in certain communities, certain societies, create a narrative in certain communities, what leadership should be. We discover that leaders are made by the legitimacy that the community give to someone.

LARRY SUSSKIND: What legitimizes the leader and gives them that capacity, that authority to influence all those folks? Usually, we see the arrow going the other way, which is, the legitimacy of the leader is a function of the support of the population in the public arena. So the arrow goes from the constituency to the leader. It's providing legitimacy. And yet we're crediting the leader with providing direction and helping everybody see what they're going to do.

So if we talk about legitimacy and sources of legitimacy, and we talk about authority and the sources of authority, then we can certainly compare public and private. There are very different sources of legitimacy, sources of authority. If we talk about responsibility, comparing leaders in the private sector versus leaders in the public sector, what's their responsibility, clearly, it's different.

So if you begin to pile up these differences and you say, all right, so how is this public sector leader leading to get a different source of authority, a different source of legitimacy, different nature of responsibility, forget about the skills they have or don't have. There's a big difference, I think. Now, we could say, oh, you're just saying that because you're looking at it from a Western perspective, or you're looking at it from a US perspective. And that may be, although, when I look at the sources of legitimacy for leaders in some different countries, I can't find out-- I can't figure out what they are.

People have taken leadership, and legitimacy wasn't the issue. They took the leadership. I'm not saying they worked against an electoral process in a democratic context. I'm saying, but what gave them credibility as a leader wasn't just that they were elected, my goodness. That something else gave them credibility, gave them the right to exercise authority. And I'm wondering what their sense of responsibility was. I know that those three things are different when I talk to and watch leaders in the public arena, versus leadership in a private company.

And we didn't get to discuss what you mean by the public interest. We're presuming the responsibility partly to the public's interest. That's part, at least, of what a leader in the public sector has to do. And then where do they get satisfaction, the questions that you raised first? What do they think success means, and what does it give them? What does it generate for them?

I said earlier that if you take service seriously as a model, that you would include in that the ability to put your ego aside. I don't mean you have no ego. I mean the issue is, when I rank my responsibilities, what's first? And when there's a trade off, what's dominant, and over time, consistently? And my sense is that we've got to talk about being an effective leader who can meet the public interest, but also, there's satisfaction that comes from being effective in that role. And that's for that person.

I don't mean to erase any of that when I talk about service as the primary model. Yes, people still will pursue the things that satisfy them, that they're going to be motivated, not just by being in service, not just by meeting the public interest, but by doing a good job being recognized for that. It's just, what's got priority when trade offs have to be made? What's the primary objective? We'll come back to them. But born versus made, public versus private, when we make these distinctions, do we end up with a model of a leader that we would admire in any country in the world? Maybe not. Maybe there's just radical differences by culture, and context and location.

I'm very prepared to hear that that's a view that's come out of everybody.

AUDIENCE: The levels of governance, power relationships and power dynamics, responsibility, and even impact that the public and private sector may have, they also will be reflected on some skills and characteristics that will be shared by both of them. But there are certain characteristics and skills and nuanced in even a political sense that you will need in the public sector more than in the private sector, in order to move forward initiatives, in order to create consensus, in order to engage with different communities.

So we thought that it could be a little bit more complex in the public sector, and therefore those skills must be enhanced.

AUDIENCE: Something that we discussed is the difference in the public sector versus the private sector of the accountability measures, and how, in a lot of different contexts across the world, the public sector, a big fault is that you might have a good relationship with people that you're interacting with through a public process. But if there is no tangible outcome that people see from their time and efforts, people are going to be frustrated and disempowered by the process. And then they'll be much less likely or even refuse to participate again.

And in the private sector, that is just not really something that people have to navigate because the accountability is already built into the leadership role.

AUDIENCE: And then we talked a little bit about the leaders, facilitative leaders that are made or born. And I think collectively, we did talk about they're mostly made, because a lot of qualities that you did point out, like empathy, or active listening, or putting your ego aside, or organizational learning, I feel like are things you learn by actually interacting with people, by doing this again and again, this process. We need to stop thinking of this one person needs to have all of these qualities, and maybe just think along the lines of how you can continue to do it better.

LARRY SUSSKIND: Thank you. OK. We'll meet again same time next week. Think about your own view of what makes a leader in the public sector successful. So do think about that. Thank you all so much for coming, and we'll see you next week.

[APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]