Was there ever a time when (to paraphrase John Donne) leaders could operate as islands, entire of themselves? Frankly, I doubt it. But if there was, that time has gone. Many organizations operate in silos: with each division or department looking upwards and so seldom sideways at issues that cross the verticals. They need leaders who can see across the whole organization and make the sum of the parts greater than the whole. They need leaders who understand the value of networks which extend far beyond the traditional confines – and, more importantly, know how to lead them. The opportunities (and threats) ahead will not come neatly parcelled to fit the department, or division, or sector, or culture, or even country into which we have arranged ourselves. They will cross boundaries and come through walls – and our leaders need to be able to do this too.

And it doesn’t stop at organizations. Society needs leaders who can overcome the silo problem inside their organization – and then move across different spheres of activity outside it and connect them too. Then, perhaps, we can start to shift the “silo problem” in society as well.

This requires leaders who are prepared to challenge the “butt out” culture that tells everyone to “stick to their knitting” and stop interfering where they don’t belong. Leaders who can take responsibility for problems other than their own, both within organizations and in society at large. Leaders who can still lead when their legitimacy is constantly in question.

We need to nurture these leaders. We need to give them the confidence they need to legitimize themselves and challenge the old ways. And we need to make them successful as they create new ones. Why do so many leaders in this situation withdraw to their home territory, bruised, muttering about “them” as they retreat? Because they simply do not know how to lead people who are not “theirs.” They do not know how to adapt when the instincts that led them to success in their own field do not work outside it.
I call this “leading beyond authority.” It’s not about having authority but choosing not to use it; it’s about having no authority at all (and sometimes less than that). It’s about earning legitimacy with ideas that resonate – and an approach to leadership that means people end up willingly granting authority to you.

This is vital. For organizations, for the people who lead them, for the people they lead, and for society as a whole. And it’s different from conventional leadership: not completely different, but different enough to be worth exploring. And, for leaders of all kinds, in all kinds of positions and organizations, I think it is worth learning how to do. Or, at the very least, learning how to do better.

The circle of authority

Most leaders have an inner circle, where they are in authority. Of course, they must motivate their people in it but, ultimately, they can bonus or sack them. The leaders have authority; they are “in control”; they can choose to use their authority to a greater or lesser extent, but everyone knows that this is the bottom line. On the whole, the people they lead are minded to follow, even if they won’t give it their all unless they are motivated and inspired by their leader. I call this the “circle of authority.” Its boundaries are usually coterminous with the leaders’ budget. It is often a department or a division or a section of the organization they operate in. They have usually been appointed or elected to the role. Sometimes it’s huge, sometimes it’s small, but everyone knows what it is – and where it ends. Most of the recognition leaders get is for what they achieve in this space; and most of the leadership development they receive as they progress (under the heading of supervisory training, or management development, or leadership education) aims to make them more effective in this circle.