Leadership Imagination Retreat
June 23, 2017
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Participants:

Maureen Donker: Mayor of Midland, MI

Marie Forgeard: Lead Scientific Consultant, Imagination Institute; Post-doctoral fellow at McLean Hospital

Margaret "Peg" Klein: United States Navy Officer

Elizabeth Hyde: Research Specialist, Imagination Institute

Scott Barry Kaufman: Scientific Director, Imagination Institute; Author and Blogger

Derek Lidow: Global CEO, entrepreneur, professor, and mentor

Meredith Myers: Senior Fellow at the Center for Leadership and Change Management at The Wharton School

Robert Scales: Retired United States Army major general & former commandant of the U.S. Army War College

Martin Seligman: Director, Positive Psychology Center at Penn & Executive Director, Imagination Institute, Award-Winning Author and Founder of Positive Psychology

Arthur Schwartz: Professor of Leadership Studies & Executive Director of the Oskin Leadership Institute at Widener University

Payal Sharma: Visiting Assistant Professor of Management at The Wharton School

Report prepared by:

Arthur Schwartz

Each participant of the Leadership Imagination Retreat was sent a list of questions in advance of the one-day retreat. Several of these questions served as discussion prompts during the retreat. For example: What does imagination look like within the context of leadership? What role does intuition play in your leadership practice? What organizational or institutional constraints serve as barriers to being more creative? How important is collaboration to your most imaginative or creative ideas? Can imagination be taught to emerging leaders?

Imagination as anticipatory genius

Robert "Bob" Scales served over thirty years in the Army, retiring as a Major General. In 1995, he created the *Army After Next Program*, the Army's first attempt to build a strategic game and operational concept for future land warfare. Scales posited that there are four types of creative leaders within the military. First is the *operational genius*, the leader who creates new ways to conduct war. The second type is the *political genius*, the leader who knows how to navigate political waters. The third type is the *bureaucratic genius*, the leader who knows how to make large organizations work more efficiently. The last type is the *anticipatory genius*, the leader who imagines a new paradigm or a different view of how to deal with human conflict. This kind of leader is able to envision the future in ways that other leaders can't. Scales argued that the *anticipatory genius* is less appreciated within the military context.

The differences between creativity, innovation and design

Derek Lidow currently teachers entrepreneurship, leadership and design thinking at Princeton University. He has been a CEO of a large global public semiconductor company and founder of a startup. In 2014, Wiley published his book *Startup Leadership*, an ethnographically inspired study of leadership skills. Lidow explained the differences between creativity, innovation and design. *Creativity*, he suggested, is the ability to think differently and develop a new idea. *Innovation* is the ability to have a group of people adapt your idea. *Design* is innovation under constraints (time, resources, etc.).

Meredith Myers, an award-winning faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, suggested that innovation is a reaction to the constraints of a system and imagination is the ability to transcend those constraints. Together, Lidow and Myers agreed that business is far more than simply using one's imagination to design a new product or service. The most effective leaders are adept at adapting to new challenges.

Leadership and vision

Myers highlighted that the scholarship on leadership clearly differentiates between the transactional and transformational leader. One major difference is that the transformational leader is able to develop and inspire a shared vision. The participants spent considerable time exploring how leadership is ultimately about change and that a leader needs to *articulate a vision* for that change. Imagination is an indispensable tool that helps the leader articulate his or her vision. Payal Sharma, a Visiting Professor of Management at the Wharton School, added that followers recognize quickly whether they work for a manager who "puts out fires" or a

leader who thinks strategically and has the ability to communicate a compelling vision for the unit, company or team.

Leadership and intuition

Martin Seligman, Director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center and Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, opened a line of inquiry that focused our attention on the role and function of intuition in leadership. Derek Lidow argued that most leaders are adept at inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. However, leaders are not trained to be *abductive thinkers*. He discussed the benefits for leaders who can: (1) develop the power of observation; and (2) via a hunch or intuition develop a plausible hypothesis based on those facts. Seligman added that abductive thinking is "leaping to the right conclusion." The participants began to discuss why so many leaders are not abductive thinkers. Several participants suggested that it's because our educational, military and corporate cultures reward only inductive and deductive thinking. These institutions simply do not give people "permission" to think beyond constraints. We don't train our students or emerging leaders to identify or arrive at solutions to the myriad of hidden constraints that inflict all organizations.

Imagination and failure

The participants had a spirited discussion on the relationship between failure and imagination. Myers described her work at the Wharton School that focuses on taking executives through a program designed to have them understand the skills required to create and lead a high performing team. Myers commented that the executives often fail during an experiential learning activity. Seligman then made the comment: *failure is overrated*. He argued that learning to imagine a creative solution is qualitatively different than simply learning to eliminate (through trial and error) what solutions won't work. Insight is not gradual. It's step-like. Seligman referred to the story of the young Isaac Newton and his "aha" apple moment. Seligman argued that great ideas are frequently created in a "flash."

Lidow responded that entrepreneurship requires failure. The original vision is never enough (as it often is in scientific discoveries). Lidow posited that entrepreneurship is the ability of the founder/leader to lead through a series of crises. The founder of a start-up is in a continual state of "crisis leadership" where he or she is continually starting over, responding to assumptions that have proven false. For the entrepreneur, imagination is not creating the new product or service, but continually exploring options, wondering how the small company can keep employees motivated in the face of failure.

Creating a culture of imagination

Throughout the retreat Sharma kept reminding us that leaders who empower their followers create environments and cultures where imagination can flourish. Marie Forgeard, a psychologist at McLean Hospital who studies creative thinking and behavior, added that the best leaders engender a culture of imaginative thinking by fostering meaning and purpose. Leaders can empower their teams to experiment, to develop feedback loops. Leaders can provide time for their followers to think forward. Indeed, time is one of the most significant constraints to

imaginative thinking. The participants began to use the term "tribe" to denote how critical culture is to imaginative thinking. We don't just think imaginatively in isolation. There is a social context to imaginative thinking. Some cultures ("tribes") are positive and constructive. And some cultures, suggested Peg Klein, do not engender imaginative thinking. Klein recently completed her 35-year career in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a Rear Admiral. She is a Navy flier who explained that the "aviation tribe" is one that does not, in general, support imaginative behaviors.

The role of a muse in imaginative thinking

Scales related a story about the time he was sitting with one of his colleagues discussing how to re-envision military action in the Gulf and suddenly his colleague blurted "let's go up!" Those three words created a change for future military affairs in the Gulf. Scales commented that his colleague consistently played the role of the "muse" during their deliberations. His colleague's contrarian spirit was an essential ingredient in Bob's imaginative and abductive thinking.

The leader's chalkboard

Mathematicians and physicists often use the chalkboard when "doing" imagination. Each participant was asked to describe their own "chalkboard." What tools help them to be most creative and imaginative? Maureen Donker, Mayor of Midland City in Michigan, shared that she is most creative when she and her colleagues ask a simple question: "Why do we do it that way?" She underscored how essential and productive it is to invite people "outside the tribe" to ask her team critical and constructive questions. These individuals often help Donker see things that otherwise would be a blind spot for her leadership team. Listening is a tool that helps Donker imagine how things could be done differently in her community.

Klein likes to brainstorm with 3 or 4 people. She tries to engage people in the brainstorm who are different from her (e.g., rank, responsibility, temperament, training). Klein loves mind mapping as a way to bring different details to the forefront and to discover how different ideas relate to each other.

Scales explained that writing is his chalkboard. Whenever a thought jumps into his head he has to immediately write it down. Scales doesn't know how many great insights he has been unable to expand upon because he simply didn't have a 5x7 card in his pocket. Scales also underscored that he creates (writes) in the morning only.

Lidow sketches. He needs to visualize the idea. Whenever possible, Lidow tries to create a "snakes and ladder" game as a way to develop iterations and variations on his initial idea.

Forgeard reflected that she has grown to trust her ideas. Every once in a while an idea will "percolate up" and she intuitively decides to "go for it." Although she doesn't know precisely how her idea will be operationalized, she has developed the confidence to "go for it."

Myers emphasized that creative and imaginative ideas emerge out of her commitment to "care and collaborate." She strives to empower people and to find ways to invite them to collaborate in a spirit of trust. She remarked that "when I am caring for my team I am more creative and

imaginative. Caring leads to great ideas." Myers' reflection opened up a line of inquiry that focused on the ways that groups and teams can produce creative and imaginative products.

Imaginative thinking in groups

Everyone agreed that listening is the key to imaginative thinking in groups. Especially the capacity of the leader to listen. Leaders establish the norms of contribution by celebrating and modeling active listening. Out of these practices emerges "trust and freedom." Multiple solutions emerge when everyone in the group feels safe, counted and given permission. Of course, in a team setting far too many leaders talk way too much. Moreover, Scales suggested that the greatest leaders are those who willingly give credit to others. Klein also highlighted the importance of leader-humility and how rare it is for a leader to admit that he or she might not be the smartest person in the room. The participants recognized two essential leader qualities that will catalyze imagination and creativity in a team setting: (1) the ability to ask great questions that ignites open and honest conversation; and, (2) the ability to speak last – not first. The participants also emphasized that in today's environment the benefits of collective decision-making outweighs individual decision making. Every leader has blind spots, which is why the best leaders encourage imaginative thinking in groups.

Teaching imaginative thinking to leaders

Can emerging leaders be taught to think imaginatively? Scales says no. He argued that some leaders have the "right stuff" and some leaders simply do not. Intuitive leadership cannot be taught. He does not believe you can "bottle this stuff" when it comes to intuitive or abductive thinking.

Lidow believes you can teach imaginative thinking to leaders. We can teach creativity because we can teach someone how to solve problems more creatively. Lidow argued that there is a continuum. At one level is a skill that someone has developed but the individual still requires a supervisor to be present. The second level is competence, a level of skill that does not require a supervisor. However, the individual is competent only under conditions of little or no stress. The third level is mastery; at this level the individual is able to perform even in high stress situations. Finally, there is the level of best-in-class, where the individual excels even despite enormous stress. When it comes to imaginative thinking, Lidow's point is that while we certainly cannot train someone to be best-in-class, he is confident that we can teach leaders to think imaginatively at the competent or mastery levels.

Klein once again emphasized the role of culture in fostering imaginative thinking. Some leaders walk into a meeting and let everyone know right away that they have the right answer. Right at that moment the culture of the team has hardened. On the other hand, the leader who walks into a meeting and lets everyone know that he or she has no idea what the right answer is will create a completely different team environment. Especially when the leader says to the team: "Let's go find that right answer!"

Sharma wondered whether we can create reward structures for leaders who demonstrate creative or abductive thinking. Currently, organizations are developing new reward structures

(e.g., promotions) to recognize interpersonal skills. She asked whether it might be possible to "reward the rule breakers?"

Seligman raised the question whether we have seen the last of the "larger than life" leaders. The sort of leader who separates himself or herself from others by the sheer power of intellect or leadership abilities (e.g., Napoleon or Alexander). Where are the "brilliant leaders"? Where are the leaders who are simply "born" with qualities to creatively lead others in battle or to discover a scientific breakthrough? Lidow noted that venture capital firms are desperate to identify and invest in the next "hero entrepreneur." Several participants noted, however, a trend in which collaborative intelligence is replacing individual brilliance.

Institutional factors that impede imagination

The participants agreed that organizational culture is the number one factor that impedes imagination in groups. Each participant remarked how difficult it is for imagination to flourish in a rigid bureaucracy. Donker argued that government is way too focused on outcomes, which she believes leads to a strong aversion to failure. In addition, Donker emphasized that government has far too tightly embraced the notion of "best practices" which she asserted limits creative or novel approaches to a problem or challenge.

Lidow added that every organization and enterprise needs processes that need to be followed. However, he emphasized that the best start-ups integrate into their culture the acceptance that current processes will eventually be replaced by a better process. Lidow also highlighted the importance of "permission" as a key to nurturing imagination in an organization. Employees need to feel they have the permission to experiment. He suggested that Gore Enterprises and 3M are two great examples of large corporations that give employees permission to try something new. Finally, the participants discussed this gnawing reality: too many employees will not strive to be creative or arrive at a novel solution because their contribution will simply result in their boss taking (or receiving) credit for their hard work or imaginative solution.

Thinking creatively about leadership and imagination

Scales returned to the challenge of how organizations and enterprises can more effectively identify leaders from non-leaders, especially leaders who have capacity for abductive thinking. He expressed hope that in the next 20 years organizations will have developed better tools to identify, parse, select, and promote individuals who have what he calls "anticipatory genius."

Myers expressed hope that in the next 20 years scholarship will find better ways to support and inform real world practice and how real world practice will also inform and shape research and scholarship. She was also hopeful that we will find ways to significantly increase diversity in the workplace.

Klein reflected on serving on so many promotion boards during her 35-year career in the Navy. She asserted that the Navy is extremely good at accessing cognitive skills but far less effective in assessing non-cognitive skills that are sometimes the hallmark of the best leaders. She lamented that the maxim "what gets measured gets rewarded" continues to inhibit the promotion of leaders who exhibit "soft" skills or non-technical talents. She is hopeful that within the next 20

years leadership skills will find an equal footing with technical competence when it comes to the military promotions.

Lidow reinforced that leadership skills can be taught. Scholars and teacher-practitioners have created experiential activities where leaders can develop their abductive thinking skills.

Finally, Seligman asserted that leadership can be described as promoting and modeling PERMA (positive emotion, positive engagement, positive relationships, positive meaning and purpose, and positive achievement/accomplishment). He championed the notion that the best leaders consistently promote and model PERMA.