



Leading through Liminal Space

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene.

A few days ago, I heard from a client who had dropped out of contact with me while going through dramatic changes in his personal and professional lives (this story is shared with his permission). After opening his text with a description of several new, painful issues that had arisen, he wrote, "I just decided to check out. I got in my truck and drove to the desert and just

spent time alone with my thoughts...I don't know what it is, but the desert was the perfect spot." We mused together about the desert as a setting of many a seeker coming to terms with inner and outer struggles.

For him, that desert was a physical analog to the liminal space that had arisen in his heart and mind.

Lately, I feel that I am witnessing, and participating in, many people's journeys into a metaphorical desert.

I see leadership teams contending with fundamental transformations of the way they lead and do business. I sit with coaching clients who grapple with fulfilling the needs of those they lead in ways that call into question their core ways of being in the world. I drink coffee with friends who have left a familiar phase of life and are searching, with a mixture of pain and hope, for the new path forward. I read newspaper headlines that seem to describe a country and a global community in which long-standing structures, systems, and even values we took for granted as "givens" are crumbling at breathtaking speed.

Liminality abounds.

Betwixt and Between.

Liminality has long been a favorite concept of mine. I named my consulting business in honor of it. But I often find myself defining it for others as they try to make sense of the company name on my business card.

What is liminality? The Latin root, "limen," is a noun that means threshold, border, or

beginning. "[Liminal](#)," the adjective form, has been defined as:

1. Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process
2. Occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold

The original term, coined in cultural anthropology circles, describes the time in a cultural or tribal ritual where an actual transformation was occurring (e.g. from child to adult). It has also been used in traditional storytelling and mythology to depict a particular phase in a hero or heroine's journey. More recently, the concept has been adopted and broadened by depth psychologists, spiritualists, and others to represent potent spaces of transformation when an individual, group, or culture is no longer in a previous state but is not yet in the new state, when old ways of being no longer work but the new ways have not yet emerged.

I first encountered the term when working with a Jungian psychologist who consistently encouraged me to recognize the liminal space I was in at the time, to make the most of its gifts, in a belief that each of us is given a precious few truly liminal experiences in a lifetime. I continue

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to draw inspiration from her wise counsel in my own work.

Liminality isn't just Change.

I've been doing change management consulting for most of my career. Yet working with people and human systems in liminal space is different. There are commonalities, of course. Something that used to work, whether it be a leadership behavior or a business strategy, doesn't work anymore; thus, change needs to occur.

Yet in a liminal time, the nature of the change is far deeper and more difficult to define for a period of time than in the type of conditions we typically call "change." Many of my clients are contending with a dizzying array of coinciding transformations in the form of radically new technologies, sweeping changes in market dynamics, and/or a need to completely re-think their organizational designs. Old solutions not only no longer work, the underlying logic and analytical approaches that used to guide decision-making are being re-worked, too. In short, there's very little firm-feeling ground upon which to stand amidst the seas of change.

Enter liminality.

Liminality implies an inherently powerful and almost "pregnant" space. It carries an intensity to it that signals an elemental shift is afoot – and that both destruction and construction are simultaneously occurring at a dizzying pace. It's a time of disorientation...and re-orientation. Of being

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unmade...and re-made. Some refer to it as a time of "no longer and not yet." Still others refer to it as "crazy time."

A crucial differentiator of liminality from a time of change is that liminality is about how we grow and are transformed by the time spent in liminal space. It is not simply about tolerating or even surviving an uncertain time until the new state is defined. And the skills involved aren't about managing it to get through it more quickly. Rather, liminality speaks strongly of the interiority of the experience. We must actively participate, even surrender, to the experiences of a liminal time and how we are to be shaped into our future professional and/or personal selves (or perhaps even more accurately, how layers of our false selves are stripped away to reveal what remains).

In religious writings, liminality is used to characterize God's movement in our lives, a sacred passage between old and new. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and

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author, writes that [liminality](#) is “sacred space...all transformation takes place here...there alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence...get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible.”

Leading through Liminality. The term has been gaining momentum in organizational effectiveness circles, too. In a [2014 article in The Harvard Business Review](#) on the leadership required during liminal times, Dan Pontefract comments that “Organizations must also periodically go through such wrenching times of transition, and it is during such liminal times that leaders have their greatest impact.” Further, he asserts that an organization going through a liminal time requires leadership who themselves experience liminality.

I couldn't agree more.

The most credible leaders and people I want by my side through a liminal time are those who have opened to the forces of liminality in themselves, who have the stories of personal transformation to tell, and who have extracted wisdom by mining the richness of it. In some ways, this type of

leadership is resonant with Jim Collins' [Level Five Leaders](#), who have often been through personal crucible experiences of their own and allowed themselves to be irrevocably changed in ways that affect how they lead.

So, if you are entering, or are in the midst of, a liminal space, what are you to do? How can you best lead yourself and others through it?

Opening to Liminality. The guidance available to us is almost maddeningly abstract – no change management recipes to be found here. However, based on all I have read and experienced, I've outlined several suggestions below. A tool to help you through a self-guided reflection process can be found [here](#).

Set Your Intention: I use a working definition of “leadership” that is “to bring the best forward in ourselves and others in the pursuit of meaningful goals.” So, whether we are trying to lead ourselves through a liminal time in our personal lives or lead a team through a liminal time in our business lives, the goal is the same: to bring the best forward in those who are involved and to do so in pursuit of a meaningful outcome.

The first suggestion is to get clear on your intention for this period of liminal time, however long it might last. Who do you want to be as you carry yourself through it? What qualities of presence (e.g. thoughtfulness, vulnerability, comfort with ambiguity) and/or character (e.g. candor, connection to others, integrity) do you commit to manifesting? These qualities might be those you already possess or those you wish to cultivate in yourself during this time.

Either way, this intention should serve as a guidepost for you – sort of like that landmark that you guide your boat by as you bring it back into harbor. Reflect often, perhaps with the help of journaling or a vision board, on how you wish to carry yourself through each day or a specific event. And then re-center as needed.

Monitor from Whence you are Acting:

A point of vigilance regarding acting in alignment with your intention is to frequently assess whether you are acting from forces that lie “below the line” or “above the line”.

When you are below the line, you are acting from fear, defensiveness, or a sense of scarcity, resulting in a range of behaviors that either produce, or are a reaction against, a victim mindset. When you are

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motivated by above-the-line factors, in contrast, you seek to create whatever measure of good you can by assuming responsibility for your behaviors and the consequences you get.

Another way of looking at this metaphor is that dipping below the line engenders ego-driven behavior while operating above the line comes from your deeper self.

It can be appealing to hang out in a below-the-line position while going through a liminal time, given the untetheredness, sense of being out of control, and even fear that accompanies it. And perhaps part of the resultant growth comes from hanging out there for a while until you are uncomfortable enough to try something different. But liminality, by definition, connotes that significant shifts are afoot, so we have an opportunity to learn how to put our creative energies in service of those shifts and to co-create the path forward.

Importantly, this guideline does *not* suggest you should not feel fear. Rather, you must be honest when you do and use that self-awareness to ensure that you don't unwittingly create from that fear. Instead, we can shift into great questions to assist us in getting above that line, like: “what is needing to die/be born here?” and “what do I sense about the momentum of these shifts and how can I get in better alignment with them?”

Embrace Paradox and Uncertainty:

Liminal times are, by their very nature, replete with paradox. You are neither here

nor there; the truth of what has thrust you or your organization into a liminal time is neither black nor white.

The guidance here is paradoxical in itself: you must both let go and hold on at the same time. As your sense of security and what you thought you knew to be true is tested, you can either resist by holding on to what needs to be shed even tighter or ease your grip.

Inevitably, your grip will have to ease – the liminal forces will make sure of it. So, here, too, we have a choice to work in the direction the energy is flowing, to paddle our boats with the current, or against it. Yet at the same time, we must remember that we do hold some power and authority over our lives and leadership - we do have that paddle in our hands. We are able to assert our creative energies where we can, so that, ultimately, we are both leading and being led.

The immense popularity of agile methodologies for product development and subsequent generalization to a broader organizational operating model represents exactly this kind of thinking. Leaders are realizing the best solving is provisional at best. Instead of seeking certainty, we must get people moving through uncertainty, experimenting with smaller innovations, and challenge the mindset that innovation is an “all or nothing” proposition.

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Shift our Theory of Knowledge: In liminal space, how we know what we know – our ways of making sense of the world – may feel as if they are under attack. Yet one of the biggest gifts of a liminal time lies in its ability to fundamentally shift our personal epistemology. Rational processes such as analyzing cause and effect will likely be outstripped by the magnitude, speed, and types of change occurring, causing us to reach for other ways to understand what is happening. Sensing and intuiting, individually and collectively, will help us perceive new truths as well as the path forward

Otto Scharmer introduced his powerful [“Theory U”](#) as a change management model, yet I see it as most strongly addressing the dynamics of liminality. His writings call upon us to lean into our deeper, intuitive sense of what new future is “presencing” itself in ways that challenge some of our deepest habits as critical thinkers and problems solvers:

“What I see rising is a new form of presence and power that starts to grow

spontaneously from and through small groups and networks of people. It's a different quality of connection, a different way of being present with one another and with what wants to emerge. When groups begin to operate from a real future possibility, they start to tap into a different social field from the one they normally experience. It manifests through a shift in the quality of thinking, conversing, and collective action. When that shift happens, people can connect with a deeper source of creativity and knowing and move beyond the patterns of the past. They step into their real power, the power of their authentic self."ⁱ

Thus, we must be mindful of tapping into all channels of forming insight and knowledge: head, heart, and gut. (For more information on parts of self and how to work with them, visit this [link](#).)

Balance the Aloneness with Being with Others: As a leader, you must not allow the "turning within" that is inherent during liminal space to create distance or even detachment in yourself or among your team members. Rather, you must find meaningful ways to forge connections such that you and others are co-creators of the new state, not simply "co-sufferers" or most damagingly, "co-reactors." Again, find

ways to shift above that line and participate in acts of shared meaning-making.

I recently ran a session with an executive leadership team that is entering year two of a complete overhaul of their organization and ways of conducting business (Note: this example is used with permission of the leader). They are an incredibly committed group of seasoned executives, yet many entered the team session deeply weary in spirit. I asked them to sit in a circle and share journey maps of the months that had passed since the last time we were together. As they took turns narrating the ups and downs of their personal and professional lives, the set of their shoulders eased, and their facial expressions softened. I listened and was

deeply moved, as personal support was both sought and offered. At the end, I shared an approximation of an old Meg Wheatley quote I carry around that goes something like this: "if you want to bring a human system back to life, connect it to itself." Heads nodded in recognition as I did so.

Yet one of the first measures many organizations put in place during times of financial stress is to cut back on travel budgets, which in turn means many teams stop meeting in person. Virtual ways of working together can and must have a

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place in our ways of connecting. But there is no substitute for looking each other in the eyes, and having an experience of sharing our stories, during liminal times.

As we do so, we must be thoughtful together, to help mold and shape each other in ways that are both supportive and transformative of the leaders we are being and the leadership we are providing. Questions such as, “What is emerging and what is our role in it? What is dying and what must be let go of? In all of that, what are we being called upon to contribute and lead?” are crucial.

Be kind to yourself. Liminal forces can be very intense. So, this last guideline is about self-care, both for your own benefit and the benefit of those you lead.

During liminal times, we must care for ourselves, to consciously nurture ourselves through rest, refueling, and fun. One danger to avoid is to allow the “largeness” of what is occurring around us – and even within us – to eclipse our underlying humanity, to over-correct into solemnity and even severity of spirit. We rightfully take refuge in the full expanse of our lives, seeking its grace. Find times to play, to laugh, to rest. If nothing else, we need

strong, well-rested legs and full hearts for the journey ahead.

Additionally, engage in contemplative practices as a means of increasing your awareness of the [narrative](#) that is being built by and around you during this liminal time. Pray, meditate, paint, take long walks with your dog – whatever helps you tune in and drop down into a greater degree of attentiveness to what is unfolding for and in you.

Do I Have to? Can you sleepwalk through a liminal time, avoiding the feelings of chaos and discomfort? I suppose so. I suspect many of us do as we buckle down and redouble the energy we put into the old ways of doing things. Or, rather than face the unknown, we stay in situations that no longer serve us. But to do so would mean forgoing the experience of working alongside the almost magical forces that help to shape us, as individuals and leaders, into the more evolved versions of ourselves.

After time in the desert, our post-liminal selves meet the future with wisdom and a depth of consciousness that cannot be achieved otherwise.

The choice is yours.



Debra Loftus, Ph.D. is a sought-after advisor to many C-suite and senior leaders, as well as a provider of innovative leadership development for some of the world's largest corporations. For over 12 years, her company, Liminal Solutions, has delivered custom solutions on a wide range of topics including executive transition acceleration, team effectiveness, and strategic planning and futuring for organizations.

¹ Excerpt from *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, pg. 4.