

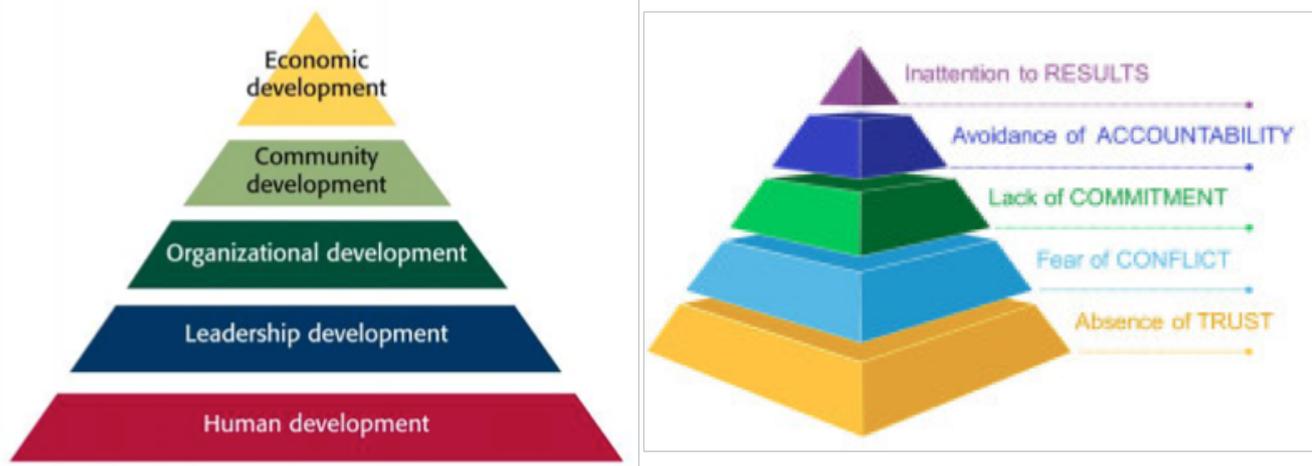
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Once a dying American city, Tupelo illustrates a story of community revival and teamwork like no other. Located in Lee County, Mississippi, the city once prospered in agricultural produces. However, things had gone downhill since the 1900s. During this rough time, McLean, the city's most unlikely hero, proposed a plan that is sufficient for Tupelo's future generations to model after – the Tupelo model. And it was McLean's extraordinary leadership viewpoint that has allowed Tupelo to become more than just the city that cradled Elvis Presley.

In his book *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Putnam did a great job relaying the tale of the legendary McLean and his seemingly ordinary ideals. The book itself was put together in the format of a guidebook to successful leadership - consisting of 12 stories involving social-capital successes.

Throughout the course of LEAD100, our team explores several leadership theories including *5 Dysfunctions of a Team* and *the VAE Model*. I have opted to perform an in-depth study of the Tupelo model, as the model takes on a prominent structure that very much resembles that of the VAE Model, while highlighting a few key points as discussed in *5 Dysfunctions of a Team*.

The first observation I made in the Tupelo model is its resemblance with the 5 Dysfunctions model. This is illustrated in the following diagram.



The Tupelo model on the left places a heavy base in human development, followed by leadership, organizational, community, and finally economic development (the ultimate goal). The 5 dysfunctions model shares the same order of movement – absence of trust being the most common dysfunctions, followed by fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and finally inattention to results. I particularly enjoy how the importance of creating trust in a leader is elaborated in the chapter: ‘He has no charisma,’ Grisham says, ‘but everyone trusts him.’ He adds, ‘I can teach everything except trust. I tell people, if you don’t trust ‘em, don’t send ‘em.’

The VAE model, on the other hand, also goes hand-in-hand with both the Tupelo and 5 Dysfunctions model. Here’s a more illustrative viewpoint of how the VAE model can be broken down into; we can say that the vision component is when a farmer plans out what to plant for the season - for example, the farmer intends to plant cucumbers in the summer. Whether the cucumbers will sell by the end of the summer is not part of his vision; the main emphasis is on planning to plant the cucumbers, and actually spreading the seeds. Alignment takes place when the farmer maintains the

crops - watering, fertilizing, and keeping them safe from bad weather conditions. Execution can be seen as the simplest part - the actual harvesting of the cucumbers. It is common for many to overlook the vision and alignment part, and go straight into demanding results. This is why the VAE model is an important guideline to follow when executing a team project.

Though not emphasized in the writing style, the chapter annotates in many occasions the importance of sharing a common vision within the team. This can be seen in “his great skill, according to Grisham, was in bringing people together and introducing them to ideas that he borrowed elsewhere. He was mainly a catalyst; he unlocked other people’s power.” Through this excerpt, we can see that one of the most important characteristics possessed by McLean, the leader in this context, was his ability to create or help others realize a common vision. This same idea is once again highlighted in “he talks to them about the importance of achieving a critical mass of people committed to the same vision of community development.”

A quote that I particularly enjoy from chapter 5 is “you need to do the right thing, but you can’t lead without people following you.” What stands out to me is the superficial simplicity of this statement, and its difficulty in actual execution. I share the same opinion about leading or following in a team - you cannot work towards something as a team without sharing the same goal or vision.

We can see the theme of common vision from the 1940s evolve over the years in Tupelo. Using the original McLean Tupelo Model as a base, the local Community Development Foundation (CDF) continues to place its emphasis on how community

growth begins with individual growth. In that, we can say that individual growth is one of the missions that help better structure the Tupelo vision. According to research, the Community Development Foundation was the pioneer that organized the very first Industry-Education Day back in 1976. (CDF HISTORY & OVERVIEW // 1970's) While it can be argued that this is part of the Community Development Foundation's alignment work in developing the community, I see this initiative to build better people as an ongoing vision shared by the entire Tupelo. In fact, I think the consistent work put into building a stronger workforce overlap as both Tupelo's current vision and alignment. Statistics show that due to this vision, Tupelo has shifted over the years from an agricultural-heavy city to one that consists of a whopping 26.74% workers working in sales, office and administration support. This transition from blue to white-collar in the majority of its workforce proves to us that its vision of training people before building community is indeed valid.

The Tupelo model also tells the story of how successful development begins with small tangible goals - in other words, "pick the low-hanging fruits first", or the alignment component in the VAE model. Back in the 1940s, McLean achieved that through the formation of the Rural Community Development Councils. As described in the book, "...these groups, which brought together the residents of rural communities - to make them more genuinely communities - through one-on-one conversations with leaders in the rural areas surrounding Tupelo." The result in this is that "the concept of community councils was already understood and supported by many..." By forming these councils, McLean managed to draw a better circle in what and whom his own community consisted of; this is an essential step before diving right into simply developing the community.

Looking back at modern Tupelo, the Community Development Foundation also took similar actions in initiating the Community Leadership Institute in 2005. (Mississippi Business Journal) This two-year program creates a convenient platform for locals to develop in leadership, as well as professionally and personally. Though seemingly insignificant, the program is geared towards more mature leaders in the community that, due to social responsibility, start to ask questions like “how can I learn to help our community continue to grow.” This specific goal is driven directly at the common and ongoing vision of constant community development, guaranteeing a successful outcome. This approach in alignment is also mentioned in *Better Together*, in “We’re not smart enough to know what the future is. We have to put more and more into education and skill training; then [workers] can adapt and prepare for whatever opportunities [may] come.”

The Great Recession in United States 2009 marks a dreadful time for the US economy. Unsurprisingly, it also takes a toll on the Tupelo industry, leaving the Tupelo leaders asking the question, “What are we going to do?” As mentioned earlier, alignment includes keeping an initiative going despite undesired conditions. The alignment work done by the modern Tupelo leaders in response to the economic crisis includes the initiation of the T.U.P.E.L.O Plan by the newly formed task force. “There were six major themes...orderly and efficient land use patterns, economic vitality, neighborhood protection, revitalization and housing, quality design and development, efficient and accessible transportation, and regional coordination.” To put things into better perspective, each theme can be seen as a “low-hanging fruit” - successful alignment implies achieving success in each of the six areas. Since the T.U.P.E.L.O

Plan was founded due to the contingent crisis, Coniglio, the head of the task force, expresses that “he doesn’t want to see the task force grow; he wants it to be such a part of city government that it eventually dissolves and city workers are accountable on its own.” Not only does this answer to the avoidance of accountability component of 5 Dysfunctions of A Team, it also reflects well towards their vision of the pyramid of development. (Orsborn, 2015)

Another example of McLean’s alignment work in the 1940s can be observed in “...they talked about a new sense of community and cooperation in an area once known for corrupt, divisive politics and a habit of not following through with plans.” Not mentioning the fact that McLean’s efforts helped to improve the Tupelo team’s dysfunction in avoidance of accountability and lack of commitment, this improvement in the city’s overall culture also creates a social responsibility for Tupelo locals to improve with their city. This is highlighted in “the crusty sixty-year-old retired man, a longtime cynic and naysayer, who saw changes in the town and decided, ‘I have to change.’” In other words, McLean’s alignment work was so powerful that it started promoting change, allowing his plan to proceed to the execution phase. (FUTURE FOCUS // COMMUNITY INVESTMENT)

The fact that the Tupelo model made it onto Putnam’s *Better Together* is the best evidence that their execution was a successful one - Tupelo was raised back from the dead, and prospered. The 1940s Tupelo locals profited from the prize bull, but the story did not end there. The Tupelo vision was constantly evolved and expanded, and the Community Development Foundation continues to plan and execute more and more plans, allowing them to pick more and more low-hanging fruits. An example of

the current Tupelo leaders' execution work is their Future Focus 2001-2005 Plan. A summary of the plan's return on investment includes an average per capita income that sits 22% above state average, and substantially increased efforts and positive outcomes in workforce development, training and career preparedness. Putting the 1940s Tupelo Model and the modern Community Development efforts side by side, we see a consistent flow towards a constantly growing vision, both resulting in great successes. By the VAE definition, the Tupelo model, then and now, are both successes. However, in a leadership perspective, was the Tupelo model sufficient? Since a leader's work should always be ongoing, did McLean succeed in creating a sustaining change?

In the book *The Work of Leaders* by Straw, Davis, Scullard, Kukkoken and Franklin, the authors explore the idea of staying true to your vision - "Finally, don't reject an idea just because you aren't sure how it will be implemented. Being caught up in the logistics at this point can keep you from exploring a full range of possibilities. Remember that there will be plenty of time for planning and problem solving later." The same idea can also be found in *Better Together*, "the Tupelo model can be learned and replicated, despite what he sees as obstacles caused by people's negative stereotypes about Mississippi, their inclination to dismiss him as an academic, their tendency to say that 'this won't work here - our town is different,' and their focus on the resources they don't have." Vision is always an overarching goal, a greater picture, and should never be beaten down just because a leader is unsure how it will work out. Though it can look almost impossible, a leader will attract followers as long as the vision is relevant and common to all, and a leader achieves more with a team than all by themselves.

Finally, I conclude that the Tupelo model is most definitely a portrayal of the sustaining change McLean created, despite his unpopularity as a Tupelo local. It can be easily observed that even until this day, the direction that the Tupelo Community Development Foundation is still pointed towards the same ideal McLean had set for the city since back in the 1940s, and the alignment and execution work are consistent to what he had set as an example back then. Despite that, I can still say that the Tupelo city has improved (rather than remained constant) since the change implemented by McLean, due to the constant growth in scale of their work. The vision stays true to what McLean had in mind, but the challenges and obstacles had grown greater. It is always rewarding to hear for our work as leaders to be inspiring others, and in McLean's case, he most definitely achieved that. His success tells everyone that, "If Tupelo could do it, so can we."

"Keep telling the story...Tell people the story and keep telling it."

"Tell the story and try to keep people faithful to its meaning, evaluating their actions against the principles of community development, nudging them in the right direction when they fall short."

I believe that what's said above applies to a context beyond the Tupelo model. "Persistence is key." This statement found in *Better Together* applies to so much more in life than the work of a leader. I am sure that if McLean had heard that Tschinkel from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta express that "Tupelo is what we always come back to in economic development circles," he would know that his work was indeed a sustaining change. McLean succeeded to be a leader that managed to leave

his footprint on changing the way the world was, and his ideals need to be told to everyone, leaders or followers.

Creating a sustaining change is important to leaders, and I hope that through the knowledge I learnt in LEAD100, I too will create something that others come back to.

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