Introduction
Leaders are in the reality creation business. They make the world — obviously within constraints — the way they want it to be.

Few people have done that as remarkably as Alexander the Great, who not only conquered much of the known world but also did so with astonishingly creative strategy, whether it was becoming the first to defeat a navy from land or routinely defeating superior armies.

The reality creation process can be called enactment — an individual takes an action whose outcome changes the world, to which the individual subsequently responds. That actor might be a leader, manager, parent, general, politician or coach. He or she changes the environment, situation, perceptions, rules or ideas.

This reality creation activity of enactment can be broken down into four distinct processes:

1. Reframing problems
2. Building alliances
3. Establishing identity
4. Directing symbols

Reframing Problems
To reframe a situation is to change what people pay attention to or deem important. The meaning given to problems and the manner in which they’re defined is critical. For example, by transforming an unsolvable task into another, solvable one — as Alexander did time and time again — the world to which we respond is essentially changed.

The most important job for leaders is to create reality for their organizations. A fundamental way to do that is to frame and reframe problems presented to the organization. For example, a good vision statement — stressing that the customer is first, or quality is first — is a simple reframing that can transform the organization. The reframing occurs because the leader declares it or makes it so, which transforms reality.

Alexander the Great sometimes reframed a problem by creating another problem. When he solved this new, created problem, the original “unsolvable” problem became irrelevant, trivial to solve, or moot. This process of “problem displacement” is a key to recreating reality.

Alexander didn’t accept perceptions of his environment as limitations to be accommodated. Perceived problems were reframed into alternative problems, which were then solved.

In trying to penetrate into Persia, he needed to secure water routes in order to bring in his supplies. But Darius III, the Archaemenid king who controlled
Persia, commanded a formidable navy of about 200 veteran warships, compared to Alexander's small coastal fleet and food-carrying barges. How could Alexander defeat this navy when his strength lay on land?

His solution was so brilliant that it's studied today in every naval war college on the planet. He determined that his opponent's key weakness was the need for fresh water, which required his ships to come back to shore every few days. To safeguard his supplies, Alexander simply had to secure all sources of fresh water within about two days' traveling distance of his food barges' route. His army garrisoned all sources of fresh water — rivers, wells and lakes — or poisoned those sources they couldn't control or didn't want to control.

But that still left him with another big problem: overcoming Tyre, an impenetrable island with unlimited fresh water from its aquifers, which it sold to the Persian fleet. The island had in fact survived a 13-year siege by the Persian fleet.

Alexander's solution was to build a peninsula to the island. It took seven months — during which he had to withstand attacks from the Tyrians — to close the gap of about seven-tenths of a mile. When that was completed, he could lay siege to the fortified island as though it were a city on land. Tyre fell quickly — in about two weeks.

Building Alliances
Building strong alliances via reciprocity has become a critical strategy for modern leaders. Similarly, the effective and deliberate construction of alliances was extremely important to ancient leaders.

Alexander formed alliances throughout his life — seamlessly building important relationships with individuals, organizations, cities and peoples. Those alliances changed the world to which he subsequently responded.

At some level, one can argue that Alexander was a conqueror, pure and simple. However, on numerous occasions he preferred alliances to conquests, and co-opting the enemy instead of destroying it.

For example, Alexander defeated the army of Porus, the Indian king, who lost two of his three sons in the battle. Wounded, Porus rode his elephant away with unimaginable feelings of failure and loss.

Alexander gave chase, and when he'd caught up to Porus, asked a question. There are two versions of the conversation that transpired. The first has Alexander asking, "How shall I treat you?" Porus, with great aplomb, answered, "Kill me, or treat me as the king I am." He didn't use the past tense in the phrase but stressed the title still held. Another version has Alexander asking what to do with Porus, who answered, "I am king." Asked further what he wanted, Porus replied that the word "king" contained all the information that Alexander needed.

Whatever the exact words, Alexander was so taken by Porus' answer and demeanor that he promised him his kingdom intact — and even enlarged it. So beholden was Porus that his heirs remained loyal to Alexander's successors for generations.

Alexander had reframed the situation from having to occupy the conquered lands to making an important ally. This created the most enduring alliance to come out of his entire campaign.

It's a reminder that a convert often becomes a vocal supporter. Giving a second chance to budding leaders who made a mistake but who clearly learned from it is an opportunity to exhibit great leadership. That type of magnanimity and trust creates loyalty out of indifference. Bringing leaders into the corporate fold after an acquisition or merger, when they expected to be cast off or marginalized, also creates zealots out of them (but may alienate others who desire those very jobs).

Alexander took the same tack when he routed the Persian army at Issus, his second great battle.
army captured the Persian baggage train carrying all the royal possessions and Darius’ family. The hostages included the king’s wife, mother, harem, numerous slaves and household items.

Alexander could have returned them to Darius, making a magnanimous gesture, or demanded a ransom, or killed them. Instead, he retained them, befriended them and allowed them to retain their royal status. Eventually he became a close friend to Darius’ mother, and later married Darius’ oldest daughter, which further helped to cement Alexander’s identity as the Persian king. He knew how to build alliances, to reframe the world.

Establishing Identity

Identity is a shared process by which members of organizations arrive at a shared understanding and attach a shared meaning to their activities. Many scholars have demonstrated that identity is a socially constructed phenomenon. The process of forming an identity creates unity where it was previously lacking. Identity can be built by an individual, or among individuals, cities or peoples. Alexander often manipulated the development of identity among his conquered subjects.

The process transpires on at least two levels, and they’re intermingled. First we create our personal identity, in childhood. Second, as leaders, we establish our organization’s (or political unit’s) identity. The intermingling is when the two processes occur together.

Alexander was raised to believe he would be heir to his father Philip’s kingdom. But on the occasion of Philip’s eighth and final marriage to a woman called Cleopatra, Alexander overheard her uncle, a general of Philip’s, invoke a divine blessing that this union would result in a legitimate heir. Not yet 20, Alexander exploded in a blind fury, causing his father to draw his sword against him, and only extreme drunkenness on Philip’s part saved Alexander’s life. Alexander and his mother, Olympias, were exiled from the court and his succession was thrown into doubt. After Philip’s murder, Alexander and his mother fought furiously for Alexander to win the throne. Alexander knew when to bide his time and when to act decisively to fulfill his identity.

Heroes help to establish our identity at a young age. Alexander revered Homer, sleeping with a copy of The Iliad under his pillow. He admired the heroes Homer wrote about, learned from them, and paid obeisance to all the Trojan War heroes when he was near the site of Troy, especially Achilles, Ajax and Priam.

When promising young leaders attain seemingly outrageous accomplishments, people wonder who they are, and the leaders must let the world know. Alexander did that with a letter to Darius after the battle at Issus. It was clear and assertive — a masterpiece of reality and identity creation, as the ending shows:

“And in future, let any communication you wish to make with me be addressed to the King of Asia. Do not write to me as an equal. Everything you possess is now mine; so, if you should want anything, let me know in the proper terms, or I shall take steps to deal with you as a criminal. If, on the other hand, you wish to dispute your throne, stand and fight for it and do not run away. Wherever you may hide yourself, be sure I shall seek you out.”

Directing Symbols

There’s a robust literature that investigates when and how people attribute actions to leaders, even when the attribution is wrong. A leader can direct the use of symbols and thus influence followers’ attributions, due in large part to the salience of the leadership role and the cognitive response elicited by the symbols. Symbols are also important because through them a leader can create sustained meaning, shared interpretation and joint action. Controlling symbols is a source of power for leaders.

Using symbols and cognitive attribution assigned to these symbols was critical to Alexander, who viewed
symbols as part of tactics. In one instance, he ordered the utter destruction of a town when his army was outnumbered on the western coast of modern-day Turkey and the people refused to rally to his call to overthrow their Persian overlords. Today that town’s name is unknown because court historians were told not to record it, thus making the erasure of the town complete.

The recalcitrant town was besieged and conquered. Alexander’s army looted it, tore down the city walls, burned the buildings and salted the fields so nobody could grow crops in the future. The women were then systematically raped while the men watched. Then all the men and male children were killed while the women watched. The women, female children and possibly some young boys were sold into slavery. Needless to say, the other cities and towns in the area capitulated.

Traveling further through Turkey, Alexander encountered the Gordian Knot, of which in antiquity it had been said, “He who can untie the Gordian Knot will rule Asia.” The knot was made of special bark, folded under itself while wet, so when it dried it became impossible to move at all, let alone be untied. One version has it that Alexander figured out how to pull out a pin from the middle of the knot to undo it. The more likely version is that in frustration he withdrew his sword and cut the Gordian Knot. The truth is irrelevant. Alexander’s entourage — and history — believed he’d fulfilled the legacy of the knot.

Alexander always led from the front. He ate and slept with his soldiers on the march. He knew the names of 10,000 soldiers. When crossing the Gedrosian Desert, one of the planet’s most inhospitable deserts, Alexander and his army ran out of water. People started to die. Having shared so much hardship over the course of the campaign, the army had become so loyal to Alexander that they pooled their remaining water (literally squeezing it out of their goat-bladder canteens) and offered it in a silver helmet to their king, hoping he would live. He poured the helmet full of water into the sand in front of the assembled army, saying, “I will share your fate.” He redefined their fate from thinking they would die to believing that under their strong-willed leader they could live.

Conclusion
Leading is an art. There’s some science behind it, but artistry makes the difference between a good leader and a great leader. Alexander the Great was a leadership artist. From him, we learn four big lessons:

1. Reframing problems is a cognitive tool that can change the world.
2. Building alliances is a common part of a leader’s tool kit.
3. Establishing identity is paramount to leadership.
4. Directing symbols is vital to leadership success.

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