Leadership Development in Management Education
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It is possible to summarise the objective of leadership as “direction setting”. In a large organisation these two simple words encapsulate a host of intriguing problems, sometimes nearly impossible to resolve because they involve arts of persuasion, intuition, and sheer bravado just as much as sciences of analysis, synthesis and design. But this article is about leadership development in the context of management education, which provides us with a certain degree of purchase on the problems, which I will try to set out in the following.

The problem with defining leadership as “direction setting” is analogous to the problem of defining strategy as competitive positioning. It becomes too cerebral, theoretical and may be little more than wishful thinking. Just as MBA strategy courses now take into account problems of facilitating emergent strategies, and all the human and group dynamics associated with the processes of change and organisation, so also must the question of leadership development. We must go beyond the intellectual activity of setting directions to the pragmatics of getting things done. In organisations things get done via people and via organising. Thus, we can see approaches informed by psychology on the one hand, or sociology on the other. Perhaps the least developed of these two is the sociological account of leadership, which went out of fashion with organisational development (OD), and the study of the distribution and exercise of institutionalised power. (However, I believe these are now due for a comeback).

Leadership development has been dominated by psychological approaches, often reduced to so-called ‘people skills’. Many MBA programmes now include sections on team-building, coaching, performance management reviews, presentation skills and even rhetoric. Indeed, there is a long and honourable history for treating these as essential leadership skills, stretching back to the ancient Greeks in, for example, the advice that Alcibiades gives to Socrates.

With the growth of “Executive MBAs”, more focus is put on the predicaments facing people in leadership positions. This is for obvious reasons. Participants on these programmes tend to be reflective about their own circumstances and, unlike many immediate postgraduates, have a good deal of experience with which to compare the theories presented to them on programmes. As a result, leadership development on EMBAs tends to focus on the dilemmas of responsibility and especially the ethics of personal choice and conduct. The emphasis in business ethics courses tends to be on precisely these aspects of honourable behaviour rather than, for example, more systemic questions about the nature of the good towards which specific acts of leadership are engaged, or meta-ethical questions about the kinds of moralising present in a multicultural milieu.

The predicaments faced by leaders has also led to a revived interested in psycho-dynamic aspects of organisation in which leaders are perceived as the products of (and recipients of)
the projected hopes and fears of their colleagues and of wider society. Experiential 'working conferences' examine unconscious as well as conscious relatedness of organisational members, exposing emotion-laden processes of projection, introjection, identification and idealisation as they influence the emergence of specific power relations and the felt ability of individuals to take authority or be driven into leadership positions. This is a long and honourable tradition in UK management education - well over 40 years - and still found in several MBAs in the UK. But it is rather at odds with the more ubiquitous individualism, which encourages reflective practitioners to examine repeating patterns in their own experience of leading and being led, often resorting to psychometric models of personality to sum up and explain these patterns.

Thus, improving their chances of successful experiences in leadership becomes a matter of either selecting the right environment, including other team members, industry-type, etc. or adjusting their personality in some way. Pursuant to this, leadership development, even in educational settings, is often perceived as a kind of ‘character-building’.

Much of the foregoing describes what goes on in the specific setting of MBA classrooms (and their outdoor activity extensions). Seated in rows, taught a series of topics presented as discrete functional disciplines or as bounded problems to solve, it is not surprising that students approach leadership as a matter of personality and skill. Furthermore, a sense of identity and success based on a basket of skills and carefully groomed persona is consonant with the narcissism that may be essential for anyone seeking to be a leader. But it is by no means clear that this is enough to enable them to take up positions of authority, nor to exercise power in a responsible manner - perhaps a more realistic definition of leadership than that with which we started.

This implies an identity more related to the duties that go with the role - principally to discuss and enact the kinds of choices that express values (what we consider to be good) rather than simply to discover the ‘right’ answer to a well-bounded problem. Case-study teaching goes some way towards addressing this if students are able to really get inside the shoes of the principal characters; but they can't possibly share the same burdens of accountability. Better still to encourage a classroom in which participants present and ponder their own real time dilemmas, and to build in visits to each other's workplaces to discover the real political and business contexts in which their fellows must act. Leadership is network dependent - structurally, on others who become followers; technically, on the quality of the relationships amongst actors; andystemically on the specific and concrete work in which all these people are engaged. Leading is a ‘practice’ of a community - which also involves some technical skills and often some personality adjustment. These latter two receive most attention on MBAs, but to develop 'real' leadership we would need a course design that emphasised the discursive and relational process of leading. Fortunately such a thing exists in the International Masters in Practicing Management (IMPM)

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So what are the key elements? Firstly, participants should be practising managers with current leadership responsibilities that oblige them to be realistic about suggestions for action. Secondly, they should work in groups to enable detailed and empathetic consideration of all the angles. Thirdly, at least half their time in classroom should be spent on their own issues - which means that only half the time can be taken by lecturers. Fourthly, they should approach the subject in ways which encourage fresh thinking and which are open to emotional and ethical content - which means working in various mindsets, instead of through the traditional business functions. Fifthly, they should include structured observation of power relations in real time, both in the workplace and in the classroom itself.

Many so-called EMBAs have the basis for this kind of education, though few take up the opportunity. But the traces are there if only we can get away from the idea that leadership should be developed as a functional specialism. This is a form of organisation, which in universities is driven by research oriented organisation and our need for professional identity, rather than the learning process that will most help our students. All in all, leadership development within management education should develop the 'character', integrity, skills and discursive intelligence necessary for the responsible exercise of power.

2 Described in Mintzberg and Gosling, Educating Managers Beyond Borders, Academy of Management Learning and Education, 1:1, 2002