

FROM ‘LEADERS’ TO ‘LEADERSHIP’

Published in ‘Effective Executive’, ICFAI Publications, October 2006

Richard Bolden
Research Fellow
Centre for Leadership Studies
University of Exeter
Exeter
UK
Richard.Bolden@exeter.ac.uk
www.leadership-studies.com

and

Philip Kirk
Principal Lecturer
Bristol Business School
University of the West of England
Bristol
UK
Philip.Kirk@uwe.ac.uk
www.uwe.ac.uk/bbs

Introduction

Leadership has become perhaps the most talked about issue in business and organization. It is hard to turn on the television, open a newspaper or attend an event without coming across numerous references to leaders, leadership and leading. A search of *google.co.uk* in February 2006 returned 512 million pages for the word “leadership” alone, whilst *amazon.co.uk* revealed 19,116 entries in the books category and the Ebsco business and management publications database revealed 33,509 published articles; each a significant increase on previously cited figures (e.g. Storey, 2004).

Furthermore, the current focus on leadership is an international phenomenon, as is increased investment in leadership and management development. In the US, for example, Fulmer (1997) estimated an annual corporate expenditure of \$45 billion in 1997 (up from \$10 billion one decade before) and Sorenson (2002) identified 900 college or university leadership programs (double that of four years earlier), over 100 specialist degrees and a wide range of related activities. Within Europe leadership is regarded as the key ‘enabler’ in the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Business Excellence Model and, in the UK, centers of excellence in leadership have been established for nearly all parts of the public sector. Leadership, it seems, has become the panacea of modern times.

Amidst this flurry of activity, however, a number of concerns arise. There is no widely accepted definition of leadership, no common consensus on how best to develop leadership and leaders, and remarkably little conclusive evidence of the impact of leadership or leadership development on organizational performance. Like so much within the field of leadership studies the issue of leadership development and its impact remains highly contentious. Whilst many reports propose that enhancing leadership capability is central to

improved investment, productivity, delivery and quality across both the public and private sectors in most cases any investment remains a leap of faith.

One likely explanation for this disconnect is the fact that the theories and models upon which these practices are based still tend to be couched in a very individualistic notion of leadership whereby it is conceived of as a property of the 'leader'. Whilst this might make life easy for those recruiting and developing leaders (you simply need to identify the appropriate individuals and which skills/competencies to develop) it dissociates the practice of leadership from the organizational and situational context in which it occurs. Perhaps a more useful perspective is to consider leadership as a process – contextually situated within the relationships between people (be they 'leaders' or 'followers'). From this perspective what is more important than the leadership qualities of a number of individuals are the underlying processes that give rise to organizational effectiveness.

If considered in this way, it is perhaps possible to understand why many leadership development activities fail to achieve the sorts of outcomes desired by those investing in them. Whilst leadership can undoubtedly be instrumental in organizational performance, the development of a small number of individuals in isolation is unlikely to result in marked improvements to these or other outcome measures. As Raelin (2004, p.131) argues:

“Most leadership training that is being conducted in corporate off-sites is ill-advised [...] because the intent of most of this training is to *put leadership into people* such that they can transform themselves and their organizations upon their return.”
(Authors emphasis)

He, and other writers (e.g. Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004) propose that this simply does not work and, instead, that leadership (and management) development should be aligned with the organizational culture, context and objectives, amongst a wide array of other factors. To this extent, it could well be argued that much current leadership development is going to waste and that effort would be best spent on increasing the quality and precision, rather than the quantity, of provision (Burgoyne et al., 2004).

The changing nature of organization and its implications for leadership

It is not a new observation that the nature of organization has changed since the days of Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford, nor that new organizational forms have led to a blurring of organizational identity and boundaries and given rise to feelings of fragmentation and loss of control (Kallinikos, 2003; Child and Rodrigues, 2002).

The response of many organizational leaders to this change has been to increase effort to exercise control, to hold things together. The current ubiquity of management and leadership competencies is testament to this desire to reassert clarity and control yet, as Salaman (2004: 75) concludes “... the problems it promised to resolve are not capable of resolution and its promise consisted largely of a sleight of hand whereby organizational problems were simply restated as management responsibilities” (see Bolden and Gosling, 2006 for further elaboration of this argument). Instead, perhaps, leaders in organizations should be seeking to hold things apart. In times of disorder and uncertainty, where a leaders' capacity for knowing is challenged it has been suggested that the need is to develop a “negative capability” that enables him/her to work creatively and authoritatively with complexity and the anxiety it provokes (French, 2004).

While such developments in leadership theory provide a new dimension in leadership training and development, we argue that the organizational landscape has fundamentally changed and that old forms and notions of leadership cannot of themselves meet the new realities and possibilities provided by new organizational forms: new wine for new wine-skins. We argue for the urgent need for organizational leadership that is widely rather than narrowly dispersed within organizations. Although this assertion is now widely echoed in the academic literature (see for example Heifetz, 1994; Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2004) there remains little more than rhetoric for the establishment of such ‘distributed’ leadership. The shift from the individual to the collective rather than illuminating the practice of leadership seems to have further shrouded the actual practice of leadership (i.e. what people are actually doing when engaged in acts of leadership), leaving the sense of leadership as something abstract, diffuse and ultimately ephemeral. Instead, there is a need to ground the notion of leadership as collective action within the acts of individuals, in effect, to provide a theory of action that makes shared leadership achievable.

From individual capability to system capability

Whilst much leadership education endeavors to develop the skills, capabilities and awareness of key individuals usually little thought is given to the processes by which this learning can become transferred to and embedded within the wider organization. By way of consequence when such individuals move on, as they often do when returning as transformed individuals to an unchanged system, the resultant learning is lost to the organization. This is not to underestimate the importance of developing such people, who are instrumental in setting and maintaining the structures within which an enterprise can flourish, but to highlight that where organizational leadership is located entirely with these ‘top of the house’ individuals we have a monochromatic view of leadership which is essentially limiting. The reason for this is that it neglects the bulk of leadership capacity: that residing in every one of the people who are members of the institution/group; and the importance of situation and context in the successful achievement of goals. To take the analogy used by Drath (2001) by focusing just on leaders at the top of the organization, taken out of context, we are only noticing the crests of waves and missing the deep blue sea from whence they come. In this article we aim to present a view of institutional leadership that is a relational process of organizational members (and other key stakeholders, such as parents, governors and students in a school), irrespective of position or status, taking up their role in the purposes of the enterprise. As individuals take up their personal roles, so they exercise individual leadership. As people associated with the task of the enterprise take up their roles in relation to one another in pursuit of a common enterprise, we witness the act of collective leadership: system or systemic leadership.

One way to think about system leadership development is to liken it to the art and labour of weaving textile or tapestry: there is a warp and a weft to it (in weaving the “warp” are the threads running lengthwise on the loom, placed prior to beginning the weaving process, and the “weft” are the threads weaved across the warp to create the fabric). Let’s say for argument that the warp represents those people who have senior organizational roles. As we have said, their role is crucial to implementing and maintaining the structures, systems and processes required for system leadership however their importance has been over emphasized (John Kenneth Galbraith proffered this view nearly forty years ago in his book *New Industrial State*, 1967). Take Marks and Spencer’s for example, where a new Chief Executive is hailed as the saving grace for a company now seen to be failing - as of course his predecessor was only a

few years earlier. In a similar vein Henry Mintzberg (2004) responds incredulously to Fortune magazine's assertion that "within four years, Lou Gerstner added more than \$40 billion to IBM's shareholder value. *All by himself?*" (p. 22, initial emphasis). The dependency is unrealistic and, in fact, hides the other side of leadership, one which we want to bring out of the shadow or perhaps out of the glare of heroic institutional leaders. Without the weft, leadership becomes 'warped' – a one-sided affair.

The weft of leadership represents the leadership role that resides as a latent capacity within the enterprise's wider membership. To weave the weft it is indeed necessary to have the warp (as represented by senior leaders and the organizational systems, structures and processes that they put in place), but without the weft the fabric does simply not exist. Leadership must be seen as an endeavour for all people connected with the common enterprise. This, in turn, signifies endeavour, connectedness and a common enterprise of worth, of value to everyone associated with the project. This is not sentimental and illusory unitarism, but rigorous pluralism. It is a demanding endorsement of leadership, which will lead to the separation as well as connection, once the choice is clear and the obligation and responsibility of membership is recognized. Distributed leadership can either be a sentimental aspiration with no chance of being achieved, or it can be an expectation that is unavoidable, and one that the 'warp' of leadership seek to encourage, develop and frankly depend upon.

Our unease with traditional views of leadership and leadership development is to do with the continuing aggrandizement of 'leaders' and the portrayal of 'followers' as mindless sheep. Leadership studies stretching over more than half a century (reported in Yukl, 2002; Northouse, 2004) seems to have been primarily concerned with the question "what makes for an effective leader?" Irrespective of whether the unit of analysis is leader *traits* (Stogdill, 1950), *functions* of a leader (Adair 1973), leadership *style* (Blake and Mouton 1964), *leader-follower relations* (Katz and Kahn, 1978) and situational *contingencies* (Fiedler, 1964; Hersey and Blanchard, 1977) the objective remains the same: how to develop and use knowledge about leadership to make better leaders. What goes round appears to come around again in leadership studies, just repackaged. Thus over recent decades neo-traitist theories have returned in the guise of *charismatic* leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1987), *transformational* leadership (Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985) and even *servant* leadership (Greenleaf, 1970).

That these studies make a valuable contribution to understanding the nature of leading is not debated. They do however continue to feed the assumption that leadership is the property of a few people with the title "leader". It is the reductive consequences of this implication that gives rise to concern. It places the responsibility of leadership on a few people rather than viewing leadership as a system wide attribute. Thus leadership in the minds of successive generations of its students and practitioners has, at least in Western cultures, associated leadership with the person of the leader in charge. Now the point of concern is that this association is limiting and exclusive. It ignores the processes (and capacity) of leadership in the system. So when we think about leadership we think about the person in charge, and he or she becomes the primary focus for research. In this perspective institutional leader and institutional leadership is one and the same thing. There was a time when similar logic was applied to quality and customer service but most organizations have now come to realize the damaging implications of this.

Not only does this limiting notion of leadership influence successive generations in Western cultures, but because English has become the global lingua franca, this particular notion of

leadership increasingly becomes received wisdom, a general truth about leadership worldwide. The picture of leadership in a widening collective consciousness is that the concept is to do with the individuals in charge: the presidents and chief executives of companies, directors of public sector bodies, senior politicians and community dignitaries. This top of the pile mentality dominates leadership studies. The concern is that we are entrapped in a narrow circle of inquiry that neglects the entirety of leadership in the system, and thereby diminishes potential of the system as a whole. A more appropriate question then is not “how do we make better leaders” but “how we improve leadership in the system?” This requires a shift in focus from the individual to the system.

Changing contexts and relationships

Whilst a focus on the ‘leader’ may have been sufficient for ensuring effective leadership in past generations, the current and future shape of organization increasingly demands a more holistic understanding and response. These pressures offer a potentially beneficial destabilization which provides opportunity for alternative thinking about leadership, as the following examples illustrate:

- ***Widening scales of operation.*** Collapsing or permeable organizational boundaries allow for inter-agency working. Strategic alliances and joint ventures make it possible for different organizations to combine in shared enterprises of a scale larger than possible for individual organizations. Here community leadership through governance models of stakeholder participation challenge the more traditional “one person in charge” models.
- ***Shortening time frames.*** The need for flexibility, rapid change and community accountability require organizations to engage in a more interdependent way with stakeholders (clients, suppliers, distributors, retailers, shareholders and the community). People work in several project groups (with varying life spans) being members in some groups and formal leader in others. This challenges the traditional fixed hierarchical notions of leadership.
- ***Remote working.*** Another feature of the boundary dissolution for the organization is its physical location. The “one activity in one building in one place” notion of work is changing, with people increasingly working from home or other locations connected by technology. The distance from a formal leader and the potential for working autonomously strains traditional forms of direct supervision.
- ***Money.*** The financial cost of sustaining hierarchical forms of leadership is increasingly questioned. In the UK Health Service and in voluntary organizations, the attempt is to reduce the management proportion of total costs while calling for bold and vigorous leadership. To take another example in the Anglican Church, reduced attendance and lack of funds are leading to reductions (in some cases dramatic reductions) in the number of salaried clergy. This stark reality challenges the church on financial as well as theological grounds to consider how church leadership can be exercised in ways other than the one vicar one parish model.
- ***Transparency.*** Increasing pressure from the media and stakeholders for organizational transparency and accountability is driving a pressure for ethical business practices throughout the organization.

An alternative view of leadership

If there are cracks emerging in the dominant model which personalizes leadership into the “great leader”, the Alpha male or Alpha female, what other models are possible? Three lines of thought, from very different experiences, provide an alternative understanding of leadership:

1. Eulogies

The first line of thought was prompted by a phrase heard by one of the authors at three funerals in successive months: “what kind of life did he/she lead?” Each eulogy responded to that question by giving an account of the life the person led. The rather obvious thought that this gave rise to was that leading one’s life involves us all. The implication is that the exercise of leadership is an act that occurs in all domains of life (work included). The question is directed to each person; it is for everyone: in life and in work how are you exercising your leadership?

Leadership is a universal responsibility.

2. Game of opposites

The second line of thought came from a word game of opposites. If it is possible to come to an understanding of what a concept is by thinking about what it is not, then what is the opposite of “leadership”? Three responses occurred to us. The first was followership, the second was anarchy, and the third was sloth.

Followership suggests a relational association between people where one exercises leadership and the rest don’t. This antonym characterizes leadership in an exclusive tradition. An experience of a class working at its best is when the common enterprise of learning is shared by all, with teacher and student (from their different roles) exercising authoritative leadership. The metaphor of leading and following does not fit that experience.

Leadership is universal and is not permanent, but becomes evident in those moments when people are connected in an enterprise they value.

Anarchy was the second antonym to leadership. The root meaning of “anarchy” is without leadership. The expression of the concept in its negative form appeared initially not to take the search for the meaning of leadership very far. However, it was felt that in anarchy’s colloquial interpretation the sense of everyone doing their own thing, separated and disunited, does suggest that positive system leadership depends on a sufficient acceptance by members of the system of a primary aim or enterprise (Armstrong, 1988; Reed, 2001), a shared sense of purpose.

Leadership is universal and relationally connected.

Sloth as an opposite of leadership came unexpectedly through listening to BBC Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* on the car radio. The talk was about sloth. Most people are familiar with it as one of the seven deadly sins in Christian tradition and understand it as laziness. The speaker however explained that behind this common understanding of idle existence was an abandonment of hope and purpose, disillusionment with God and life. That, rather than just laziness, was the real sin. Called “accidie” (from the Greek “akedia”) which signifies weariness it was first used by Evagrius of Pontus in the fourth century and St. Gregory the

Great subsequently included it among the seven deadly sins. Indeed it was seen to be the most deadly - if the point of life and endeavor was lost, then there was ready access for the other sins of gluttony and lust for example. The virtue opposed to accidie is hypomonā, patient endurance or perseverance.

Leadership is universal, relationally connected and mobilized with patience and persistence to purposeful enterprise.

3. Two stories from Tanzania

The third line of thought, which developed our thinking about leadership, came from two stories, both from Tanzania.

Bishop Simon Chiwanga was the Bishop of the Diocese of Mpwapwa in Tanzania. When the author met him he was, in addition to his Episcopal role, the elected Head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. He was interested in bringing collaborative leadership to his Diocese. He wanted to return to an African tradition where leadership in communal life is expressed through “ubuntu” where individual identities are defined and caught up in the extended family relations of the community (see Chiwanga, 1995). He wanted to move away from the “Monarch Chief” mentality which he saw as a way of expressing devotion to the Chief and then letting him do all the leadership work! It was observed however that these two concepts, “Ubuntu” and “Monarch Chief”, co-exist in paradoxical tension. While the principle of Ubuntu was espoused and worked towards with integrity, the Bishop played the Monarch Chief role with great gusto, polished aplomb, and not without considerable relish! The two realities co-existed.

In a hill village that housed the Cathedral and looked across a great plane below, an old woman talked about the village women’s tree project. Soil erosion had rendered much of the land barren, and poor for growing vegetables and grazing. She and the other women of the village embarked on a project to plant trees. This was a work of great sacrifice. The women had to go several miles into the bush to find good soil and seedlings from indigenous species of acacia. To nurture the seedlings they had to collect many discarded plastic grocery bags which littered the town a mile or more in the valley. They then cut the bags and sewed them to make pots for the seedlings. Once planted, the seedlings had to be watered. This had to be bought and collected from the town. When enough money was raised, a woman would carry the water from the town on the one village bicycle. The two enormous plastic containers (in a pannier construction across the rear wheel) were cycled up the hill back to the village. When the author asked how it was that elderly women could undertake this feat she dismissed the question saying that if one was alive one could do it! The real problem was lack of money. In the garden in front of her dwelling were row upon row of acacia seedlings withering for want of water. This woman, a grandmother, had little money and she would be absorbed by the work needed to feed and clothe her family. And yet she was embarked on a long term project about whose success she could not be sure, and whose results, even if successful, she would not see in her own lifetime.

These two stories demonstrate that ***leadership is the mobilization of human effort in a collective enterprise*** and that this is not a romantic ideal. This was endeavour that took place within realities that encompassed all contradictions, power differentials, inequalities, conflicts, disappointments and hopes.

Conclusion

The ideas presented in this article are the result of considerable leadership research and development in a diverse range of contexts. They highlight the shortcomings of a 'heroic' view of leadership arguing, instead, for a more inclusive, emergent and relational perspective. From this perspective, whilst the qualities and abilities of formal 'leaders' are undoubtedly important they must be considered within the wider context. Success, in this case, is more likely to result from nurturing a culture of shared and inclusive leadership than the skills or capabilities of any one individual.

In this article we do not have space to elaborate on the implications for the selection, development and reward of leaders but suffice it to say, traditional approaches aimed at senior organizational leaders alone are unlikely to be sufficient. If leaders wish to improve their practice and the quality of their relations with 'followers' they need to look beyond inputs and outputs to interactions, traits and behaviors to ethics and values, the individual to the collective, and performance to purpose. There is no quick fix – leadership is universal, relationally connected and mobilized with patience and persistence in the pursuit of a valued and shared purpose.

References

- Adair, J. (1973) *Action-Centred Leadership*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Armstrong, D. (1988) *Professional Management*. London: Grubb Institute.
- Bass, B. M. (1985) *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Bennis, W. and Nanus (1985) *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Blake, R. and Mouton, J. (1964) *The Managerial Grid*. Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing.
- Bolden, R. and Gosling, J. (2006) Leadership Competencies: time to change the tune?, *Leadership*, 2(2), 147-163.
- Burgoyne, J., Hirsh, W. and Williams, S. (2004) *The Development of Management and Leadership Capability and its Contribution to Performance: The evidence, the prospects and the research need*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Child, J. and Rodrigues, S. B. (2002) "Corporate Governance and New Organizational Forms: The Problem of Double and Multiple Agency", Conference Paper, Joint Symposium on 'Renewing Governance and Organizations: New Paradigms of Governance?' Academy of Management Meeting, Denver, Colorado, August 2002.
- Chiwanga, S. (1995) Beyond the monarch/chief, in Mbigi, L. (Ed.) *Ubuntu: the spirit of African transformation management*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Conger, J. A., and Kanungo, R.N. (1987) Towards a behavioral theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings, *Academy of Management Review* 12(4), 637-647.
- Drath, W. (2001) *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fiedler, F. (1964) A contingency model of leadership effectiveness, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 1, 150-191.
- French, R. (2004). Negative Capability, in Goethals, G.R., Sorenson, G.J., & Burns, J.M. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Leadership*. London: Sage.
- Fulmer, R.M. (1997) The evolving paradigm of leadership development, *Organizational Dynamics*, 25(4): 59-73.
- Galbraith, J.K. (1967) *New Industrial State*. London: Penguin Books

- Gosling, J. and Mintzberg, H. (2004) The education of practicing managers, *Sloan Management Review*, 45(4), 19-22.
- Greenleaf, R. (1970) *Servant as Leader*. Center for Applied Studies.
- Gronn, P. (2002) Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis, *Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 423-451.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, Belknap Press.
- Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. (1977) *Management of Organizational Behaviour: Utilizing human resources*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Kallinikos, J. (2003) Work, human agency and organizational forms: An anatomy of fragmentation, *Organization Studies*, May 2003.
- Katz, D. and Kahn, R.L. (1978) *The Social Psychology of Organizations (2nd edition)*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mintzberg, H. (2004) Enough Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, 82 (11), 22.
- Northouse, P.G. (2004) *Leadership: Theory and Practice (3rd Edition)*. London: Sage Publications.
- Raelin, J. (2004) Don't bother putting leadership into people, *Academy of Management Executive*, (18), 131-135.
- Reed, B. (2001) *An Exploration of Role*. London: Grubb Institute.
- Salaman, G. (2004) Competences of managers, competences of leaders, in J. Storey (ed.) *Leadership in Organizations: Current issues and key trends*. London: Routledge.
- Sorenson, G. (2002) An intellectual history of leadership studies in the US, paper presented at the *EIASM Workshop on Leadership Research*, Saïd Business School, Oxford 16-17 December.
- Spillane, J.P., Halverson, R. & Diamond, J.B. (2004) Towards a theory of leadership practice: a distributed perspective, *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 36(1), 3-34.
- Stogdill, R. M. (1950) Leadership, membership and organisation, *Psychological Bulletin*, 47, 1-14.
- Storey, J. (2004) Signs of change: 'damned rascals' and beyond, in J. Storey (eds) *Leadership in Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends*, London: Routledge.
- Yukl, G. (2002) *Leadership in organizations (5th edition)*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Author Profiles

Richard Bolden, *Research Fellow, Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter*

Richard is an experienced researcher and educator in the fields of leadership, management and organizational psychology. His current work explores the interface and interplay between individual and collective approaches to leadership and leadership development and how they contribute towards social change within organizations and communities. His interests span a wide range of organizational sectors and activities and his international experience includes sub-Saharan Africa, France, Egypt and the Balkans.

Philip Kirk, *Principal Lecturer, Bristol Business School, University of the West of England*

Philip has many years of working on consultancy, research and leadership development projects with leaders who share the experience of exercising leadership in times of change, and have a common aim of adding value to the communities and organizations they serve. He has wide international experience with projects in Africa, India, Vietnam and the USA. Organizations he has worked with include the Health Service, Local Government, Education, the Police and the Anglican Church.