The Arts of Leadership

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Oxford University Press 2001
ISBN: 0199244898, 452 pages

Theme of the Book

The book looks at the problem of defining leadership, and uses the metaphor of leadership as a portfolio of arts rather than as a science to explain the complexities and uncertainties surrounding our understanding. In a series of extended case studies, the book examines the application of the Leadership Arts through two types of leadership story: contrasting parallels and extreme leaders.

The case studies of contrasting parallels where marginal differences have a big effect on outcomes include:

- Freddie Laker and Richard Branson and the struggle to create an independent force in transatlantic commercial aviation;
- The Spithead and Nore mutinies of 1797;
- Florence Nightingale in the Crimea and in England,
- The British and Zulu armies at Isandhlwana and Rorke’s Drift in 1879

The case studies of extreme leadership performance comprise:

- Henry Ford and the qualitative leap from craft to mass production,
- Horatio Nelson and the success of England’s greatest admiral,
• Adolf Hitler and the creation of the most destructive regime of the 20th century,
• Martin Luther King and acquisition of civil rights for black Americans in the 1960's

**Key Learning Points**

The book provides a structure for looking at leadership as a series of relationships between the leader and

- Him/herself - the personal vision
- Followers and communities – the collective vision and motivation
- Opponents – the interplay of competition
- Social context – the social, economic and cultural forces that shape the world

This book will show you, through vivid examples,

- How great leaders have gone about creating the shared identity and strategic vision necessary for success.
- It reveals how successful leaders exploit their resources to best effect, and turn their opponents’ strengths against them.
- Finally, it demonstrates the components of inspired communication that turns fellow-travellers into committed followers.
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The more we try and analyse leadership, the less it seems we understand – there is a contradiction at the heart of the subject, and research data tends to produce either complex and contradictory findings or one simple but useless conclusion – that successful leaders are successful!

One of the main reasons that we have so much difficulty in explaining leadership and in trying to enhance the leadership qualities and skills of those who are leaders is that we have adopted a philosophical perspective that obscures rather than illuminates the phenomenon...... the more scientific our methods become, the less likely we are to understand leadership because it is not accessible to scientific approaches.

The complexity of the subject makes objective analysis impossible – for example, trying to analyse the relationship between the performance of Everton FC under six different team managements over a 13 year period and the impact of the individual team manager, even when a previously successful manager returned for two further stints.

The capacity of the leader to change anything on his or her own seems severely limited, and results would appear to be most successful when the problems are delegated to followers.

So leadership is at its heart a series of paradoxes. In order to understand these paradoxes, it may be easier to see leadership as a portfolio of arts rather than as a science, and to start with some fundamental questions:

In sum, leadership is critically concerned with establishing and co-ordinating the relationships between four things: the who, the what, the how and the why?
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- Who are you – an identity constructed out of the amorphous baggage of myth and historical interpretation;
- What does the organisation want to achieve – a strategic vision that imagines a possible future;
- How will they achieve this – organisational tactics that represent forms and manoeuvres interacting with the competition and uncertain in outcome;
- Why should anybody follow – persuasive communication that induces an audience to believe in the identity and the vision.

There are four Leadership Arts viz.

1. The Philosophical Art
2. The Fine Art
3. The Martial Art
4. The Performing Art

Within each ‘Art’ the leader may choose between key drivers that define the scope for developing each element of the co-ordinating process:

1. The Philosophical Art: Who are We and How is the Leader’s Identity Constructed

The creation and definition of identity is the Philosophical Art of leadership.

Machiavelli said that the leader’s identity itself is a fabrication, because the followers never see the ‘real’ leader but only an image constructed for the purpose of government. But the creation of identity is not just about the
identity of the individual leader  Leadership is a social phenomenon and needs to create a communal identity among followers if it is to operate effectively. Such collective identities are imagined, not real, as any definition of ‘Englishness’ shows when compared to the reality of the cultural diversity of the English population – in this sense identities are ‘forged’, both made and made-up, like the ‘ethnic’ identities of Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda created by Belgian colonial administrators.

If we accept this, then absolute objectivity is impossible, and there is no way to be absolutely and permanently sure of the ‘truth’. This, of course, allows the leader to re-define a situation according to need – one person’s defeat is another person’s ‘mother of all victories’. So why are some leadership stories more successful than others: what makes them persuasive?
One clue is the nature and extent of the leader's use of symbolism as a means of creating social cohesion – to convince people that their similarities are greater than their differences. Often there are competing versions of the truth: Hitler the housepainter and Hitler the Man of Destiny; the Zulu as noble warrior or as bloodthirsty savage. In many cases, the leader adopts a very different personal style from their followers to symbolise his or her special nature.

2. The Fine Art: What Strategic Vision Does the Leader Invent?

Strategic vision may be defined as the Fine Art of leadership – the ability to paint a landscape of the future that also draws on the past and imposes a vision on the collective; where skill and imagination combine to differentiate the journeyman painter from the Grand Master.

Leadership is primarily rooted in, and a product of, the imagination.

To imagine ‘what has not been experienced’ is to relay to one’s followers the hope of a better future, or to recall a prior better state of affairs to which the leader wishes to return.

In this way leadership creates a community narrative or myth – a narrative that roots a community in the past, explains its present and conjures up a preferred future.

The imagination of the ‘follower community’ is relevant, but universal acceptance is by no means essential – there are many examples where only a proportion of the community are ideologically mobilised by the leader, but a sufficient core to persuade the remainder to go along. The soldiers in the trenches may have little idea why they fight, but may be persuaded by their
peer group, their regimental loyalty and the rigors of military discipline to go along with a cause they does not share. There may also be a strong element of self interest that overcomes the lack of a shared meaning – a transactional contract (‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’)

Most successful leaders appear, however, to be capable of creating a strategic vision that captures the spirit of their age – for example during the Napoleonic Wars, Horatio Nelson’s strategic vision of the destruction of the French fleet dove-tailed neatly with overwhelming fears in Britain of French invasion.

3. The Martial Art: How Does the Leader Get Things Done

The outcome in leadership is never certain – this is the Indeterminacy of Leadership, and a critical weakness in conventional approaches to studying leadership, which tend to assume that ‘if all things are equal’ then the ‘better leader’ will prevail. After all, logic would suggest that Henry V’s army had no chance of success at Agincourt, and yet he won a stunning victory.

The gap between theory and practice – between the conception and issuing of an order and its implementation – is the political sphere of how followers are persuaded to follow. Foucault refers to power as a relationship rather than a property with the implication is that networks of different kinds of power are essential to leadership success. Strauss calls this the ‘negotiated order’ of organisational existence. Leaders depend upon followers to deliver, and the quality of ‘follower motivation’ can be critical to success.

So, equally, can the quality with which resources are applied by the leader. The martial arts are a metaphor for the application of resources in a strategic context. Where sides are evenly matched, a battle of attrition is likely to result.
On the other hand, where there is a mismatch of resources, the advantage may be neutralised by avoiding rather than resisting the superior force. Hitler’s use of legitimate means of achieving power in 1933 neutralised the democratic opposition in Germany which had assumed that he would use illegal means – thereby putting them off-balance.

Another widely used and often successful tactic is based on the notion of using the strength of the stronger side against itself, or inversion. At the Battle of Cannae in 216BC the Carthaginian general Hannibal annihilated a much larger Roman army by taking advantage of the Roman strength – their ability to fight in close formation – and enticing them into a trap from which they lacked the speed and agility to escape. At Agincourt the speed and power of the French mounted knights worked against them in the narrow, slippery mudpatch of Agincourt, where the sheer press of numbers made manoeuvre impossible. In the modern era the fall of impregnable fortresses – the Maginot Line in 1940, Singapore in 1942 are further examples; Dell’s selection of direct mail as a means of competing against established distribution channels in the personal computer industry in the 1990’s is a more recent example.

4. The Performing Art: Why Should Anyone be Persuaded to Listen?

Many leaders ignore the necessity of selling the future to their followers. This is the Performing Art of leadership – the capacity to create a theatrical performance using the skills of rhetoric and negotiation to achieve movement. Just as Shakespeare in Henry V begins with his Chorus calling the audience to utilise their knowledge.
imagination in accepting the stage as the ‘varsity fields of France’, so Hitler used film and theatre to create the triumphal images of Nuremburg in the 1930’s.

Leadership as a performance is not just about repeating a script, but about the way the words are heard and interpreted – Lincoln’s Gettysburg address is an example of a speech that redefines the audience’s understanding of the present in the way that it offers equality as a defining principle of the American constitution when in fact this did not form an explicit part when it was drafted some 100 years before. The speech only has meaning for those who understand the context in which it was given – in this case in the context of a divisive war in which freedom for slaves was a defining issue.

In this way carefully chosen words have a power as great as actions to initiate change, even though we commonly disparage words as ‘less than’ deeds.
The Case Studies

Laker’s Skytrain & Branson’s Virgin Atlantic

The identity Branson created for Virgin was much more sustainable than Laker’s. Strategically, Branson was able to learn from Laker’s mistakes – the delays in launching the service, the need to look beyond price as the main mechanism of competition, the need to time initiatives to take advantage of regulatory change. Here Branson was much more imaginative and successful at minimising the risk and cost of failure.

Tactically, Laker was arrogant and blustering where Branson was shrewd – a negotiator who hid his skill and determination behind a casual façade. His key tactic was to invert the resource advantage of his competitors by taking the moral high ground and winning huge amounts of free and favourable publicity in the process. In doing so he encouraged his competitors to make mistakes.

Not a natural performer, Branson carefully exploited set piece PR stunts that avoided his lack of verbal fluency, where Laker’s more outgoing personality made do with ad hoc opportunities.
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The Spithead and Nore Mutinies of 1797

Following closely upon the successful Spithead mutiny which obtained much improved service conditions for England’s hard-pressed seamen, the Nore mutiny failed in a flurry of recrimination and executions. Why? The answer lies not in any different approach taken by the two leaders of Spithead and Nore, but in the different response of the opposition – the British Admiralty – which fundamentally changed the basis on which leadership could succeed. What had worked once could not be repeated.

Having accepted the Spithead mutineers as loyal sailors airing grievances, the Admiralty successfully labelled the Nore mutineers as subversive revolutionaries making extreme demands. In fact their strategic visions were identical, but the Nore mutineers failed to ensure that their version of events was heard, and failed to allow for the rapid change in law that enabled the Admiralty to enforce discipline that had been lacking at Spithead. Thus the resource inversion available to the Spithead mutineers – the lack of support within the navy and the Government for drastic action - was denied those at the Nore.
In the Crimean War in 1854, Florence Nightingale was faced with the appalling reality of neglect and incompetence in the treatment of sick and wounded British soldiers that led to thousands of unnecessary deaths. She chose a strategy of working within the existing organisational structure to effect change rather than campaigning against it. The strategy was effective, for it ensured that the public accountability for failure rested squarely on the shoulders of those responsible – the incompetent army medical and supplies services. The accepted view of both the ordinary soldier and his nurse – both viewed as brutish and promiscuous - changed forever in the public mind.

Later, in England, with public opinion disengaged from the trials of war, her attempts to reform the nursing profession were repeatedly blocked by the interest groups threatened by her reforms – the army, the medical profession and the government. Her strategic vision had not changed, but that of the British ‘establishment’ had.

Never a great communicator she selected a communication medium – writing thousands of campaigning letters - that protected her shyness. Nevertheless she become herself an icon of public adoration with which she was unable to cope, becoming a recluse rather than transforming it into a mass movement for change.
Isanhlwana & Rorkes Drift, 1879

On 22\textsuperscript{nd} January 1879 at Isandhlwana, 1300 British soldiers were annihilated in their encampment by 25,000 Zulu warriors. The same evening a few miles away, a detachment of 140 British soldiers successfully defended the Rorke’s Drift trading post against repeated attacks by some 4,000 Zulus.

On the day, poor organisational and tactical leadership at Isandhlwana condemned the British to defeat – their command was split, and they failed to exploit the technology of their greater killing power over the Zulu army by creating a solid defensive formation and inviting the Zulus to throw their faster, nimbler but less well-armed formations against their static lines. The Zulu tactic was to neutralise the British advantage by attacking them at river crossing points where defensive lines could not be formed – the British leadership made this unnecessary, and they left themselves open to the Zulu strengths.

At Rorke’s Drift inexperienced leadership nonetheless selected the correct tactic and defended a stoutly fortified compound against a Zulu general who ignored his own leader’s standing order not to attack defended positions.

In the longer run, the disaster at Isandhlwana and the heroism at Rorke’s Drift provided the British Government with the opportunity to create an identity of the Zulu’s as a threat to British colonial rule in South Africa – directly opposite to the Zulu king’s own strategic objective of defending his homeland – and justify a war to eliminate the Zulu nation as an independent political and military power. In this case, neither side understood or recognised the strategic objective of the other.
Ford is an example of a leader whose monomaniacal pursuit of a vision first created then very nearly destroyed a huge industrial enterprise. His strategic vision was simple – to create a car that would revolutionise personal transport – and it was closely aligned to his personal vision of himself as mechanical inventor and all-American boy. There was a price for this strength and alignment of vision, however:

Ford could not see the self-defeating logic of his vision – that once everyone had one of his ‘perfect’ automobiles, the market would disappear. He refused to replace the successful standard Model T for years after his rivals had clearly demonstrated the advantages of upgrading models annually and offering consumers more choice for their discretionary spending, ceding his dominant market leadership to General Motors and Chrysler. He never developed that tactical versatility to respond to competition.
Horatio Nelson

Nelson is a clear example of ‘do as I say, not what I do’. At the heart of his success lay a paradox – the very unconventional means by which he achieved success and notoriety were not allowed to his subordinates, who were expected to follow his plans in order to deliver success. Opportunism in the leader had to be matched by conformism among the followers. This is an unavoidable element of ‘leading by example’.

Nelson was undoubtedly fixated by his strategic vision, and there are few if any examples of leaders of repute who have achieved success by being anything but fanatical in their pursuits. Nelson was hugely successful at aligning the particular skills of his subordinates with a set or organisational tactics which made best use of those abilities. He had a clear strategic vision that was compelling to a nation frightened at the prospect of invasion – the destruction of the French fleet. It made him a difficult man to resist.

He consciously created a mythical identity and image by openly accepting that the price of his glory was almost certainly death, mirroring the British cultural preoccupation of the time with romantic heroism – decorations for bravery were only useful so long as they were accompanied by glittering baubles that could adorn his chest, with all the attendant publicity (often self-generated). This trait reached its apotheosis at Trafalgar where, in full regalia, Nelson presented himself fatefully as an open target to French marksmen, with fatal results. In Nelson’s case, the strategic vision never had the opportunity to degenerate into tunnel vision.
Adolf Hitler

Part of Hitler’s genius as a leader was to create an identity for the German people that was so compelling, and matched his own perverted vision, creating an identity for the Jews and the political left as the problem and for the Nazis as the solution. This mobilisation was not based on consensus, but on difference – the creation of a common enemy.

Tactically, his dominance of the Nazi party machinery, and later the German state, was built on the notion of permanent mobilisation for struggle and competition between subordinates for his attention and approval. His use of legitimate means of winning power in the elections of 1933 put his opponents off balance, and his careful nurturing of the German army – at the expense of his own Nazi supporters the SA – created a power base that was eventually institutionalised by the personal oath of loyalty that every German soldier swore to the Fuhrer.

As a military leader, however, he lacked any strategic novelty or coherent tactical awareness, and once his political skills failed – when Britain and Russia refused eventually to capitulate – he was unable to formulate a response. He repeated the mistakes of those who – like the French with the Maginot line – had originally enabled him to apply the tactic of resource inversion and bypass their strength. His end was hastened by the inability of subordinates to compensate for his mistakes.
Martin Luther King

One of King’s achievements was to maintain an ambiguous position at the centre of an alliance of disparate black and white organisations loosely coordinating efforts to achieve civil rights for the black population of the United States.

King’s vision was concrete in its aims – the same rights for blacks as whites already had – and also idealistic in its pursuit of economic equality, an aim seldom if ever achieved.

At the heart of his tactical style was another paradox – the only way he could attract attention and support for his core principle of non-violence was by provoking his opponents to act violently towards his supporters. This they were willing to do, so after initially withdrawing from confrontation King was able to invert his opponents’ resource strength.

Ultimately King’s greatest leadership art was his power of communication – his skilful deployment of rhetoric. The structure of his famous ‘I have a dream’ speech utilised many classical rhetorical devices – the List of Three, the Two Part Contrast, but beyond that we can see alignment between speaker, spectators, the situation, the words and their social interpretation (the common meaning taken from the speech by all) that constitutes the ‘5-S Model of Speech-making’.
Author

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