Theme of the Book

The focus of the book is the definition of leadership, which the author describes as ‘an essentially contested concept’ with multiple interpretations being both logically possible and likely. He contends, however, that how we define what leadership is can influence how leaders are selected and advanced in organisations, so exploring these differences has practical implications for how effective organisations are.

Leadership is usually contrasted with management, the latter being concerned with routines and the predictable; leadership being concerned with its opposite – the novel and the unpredictable. There seem to be as many definitions as there are books on leadership, and we are left aware of the differences but confused by them. These differences may not be resolvable, and seem to lie in areas that may be defined as person, result, position and process:

What makes a leader?

- Is it WHO leaders are?
- Is it WHAT leaders achieve?
- Is it WHERE leaders operate?
- Is it HOW leaders get things done?

The book considers each of those questions in the search for the limits and possibilities of leadership.
Leadership is a complex series of paradoxes that are not simply understood or reduced to a single formula; what we make of it depends upon our perspective, and the trade-offs that we are prepared to make.

It is the nature of leadership to be always contested as a concept between competing ideas and positions; there may be no consensus.

Leadership is a function of the relationship between leaders and followers, rather than simply focused on the person of the leader.

Leaders are ‘hybrid’ systems, comprising individual humans and the technologies, ideas and systems that facilitate their actions.

Leadership is learned best from experience, in particular from followers.

It is usually impossible to make simple correlations between leadership and results, and impossible to measure empirically everything that leaders are expected to achieve.

The ethical dimension of leadership is best judged by the subjective opinion of followers, then balanced with results.
Time for Leadership

The media today is full of references to and stories about ‘leadership’, whether in relation to global issues or national sports. What they have in common are notions about change, relationships and morality, although there appears to be little agreement. Is our understanding of what is leadership changing, in response to a perceived need? Is our notion of leadership evolving over time? What kind of leadership do we need, and is there a ‘best’ model along the lines of Carlyle’s ‘Heroic Man’ which implies that the qualities of leadership are ‘hard wired’ by our genetic inheritance and are eternal across all ages?

A linear approach to the impact of space and time on leadership leads to the idea that evolving organisational demands determine leadership requirements, in a steady progression from authoritarian tyranny to liberal democratic models. The continued presence of authoritarian leadership around the world seems to contradict the assumption of progression, however.

A contingency-based approach would have future leadership capabilities determined by a culture itself driven by material drivers such as economics and social change: an unstable dynamic world will require decentralised models of leadership, whereas a more stable world might see us revert to a more authoritarian and hierarchical leadership style.

We might also look at a circular approach in which society cycles from authoritarian to democratic leadership models, or even a pattern-less sequence of changes.

Turning these approaches around, we could ask what kind of organisations will be created by our current crop of leaders – many leaders (Hitler, Mao, Franklin Roosevelt) have laid the foundations for future social trends. But can we consider leaders as some objective phenomenon separate from their environment and their organisation? Leaders often define the context, present
it as an objective reality, and promote a response, as the experience of the Iraq War illustrates.

Moral Leadership

If it unclear whether there is a special need in the world now for something called ‘leadership’, then it is equally unclear as to the moral dimension that leadership might take.

Morality has always been an element in evaluating leaders, from Plato to the present day. The last 30 years has seen much debate about the integrity, authenticity, ethics and psychological health of modern leaders. The problem of identifying ‘good’ and ‘bad’ leaders is that all leaders probably perceive themselves as having a moral purpose. Morality is hard to define, and does not explain a leader’s success.

During the Crusades both Crusaders and Saracens believed they were acting morally, doing God’s work; in the modern world who defines who is a terrorist and who a freedom fighter? Democratic processes are often used by leaders as moral justification, but the democratic process does not produce clear or objective moral choices; neither does the role of emotional intelligence – a vague and ill-defined concept – help clarify matters: Hitler was very attuned to emotional forces but this does not make him a moral leader.

It may be more practical to accept Karl Popper’s scientific dictum that rather than seeking infallibility we should accept our leaders’ weaknesses and look to democratic processes to limit the leader’s capacity to do damage.
Leadership as Person

While huge effort has been made to reduce the ideal leader to his or her
essence – the quintessential characteristics or competencies or
behaviours of the leader – the effort of reduction has simultaneously reduced
its value.

Reducing leadership to its ‘essentials’ risks producing abstract concepts which bear little relation to the reality of the human leader ‘in situ’.

Further, if by definition leaders require followers then we must consider whether ‘distributed’ or ‘deep’ leadership, where leadership is shared through the organisation, is not a more representative picture. When we examine some classic examples of apparent ‘leadership’ (for example, the discovery of penicillin) we find a more complex story of interaction between several individuals, each of whom contributed leadership.

Western society seems, then, to have a fetish for identifying the single individual, the ‘heroic leader’ who is responsible for delivering ‘leadership’. The myth of the omniscient leader has the effect, however, of disempowering followers, and inducing a state of irresponsible ‘Destructive Consent’ among them – they agree, without sufficient thought for the consequences, to “inappropriate subordination”. An example is the autocratic style of former Marks & Spencer boss Sir Richard Greenbury in stifling board discussion, contrasted with the legendary Alfred Sloan of General Motors who tasked his consenting board with giving themselves “time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.”
The relationship between leaders and followers is plotted in the above matrix in terms of the degree of commitment to organisational goals and the degree of dependence on the leader. The Emperor model is probably the most typical in organisations, where the leader is seen to possess superior qualities that sit with responsibility for solving all the organisation’s problems. By contrast, the Cat Herder’s task is impossible, lacking any cohesive community or any dependence among followers. Constructive Consent within the Theocratic model only works if the leader’s qualities are authentic and aligned with the values of the community – where idols have feet of clay, consent becomes destructive.

In the final quadrant, heterarchic leaders recognise their own limitations in a Socratic fashion, with leadership switching according to needs, rather like a rowing squad (from coach, to captain, to stroke, to cox and back again), or the flexible system of Mission Command employed by the armed services which sets general objectives and allows subordinates latitude in the specific means of achieving them. In this model, “the power of leaders is a consequence of the actions of followers rather than the cause of it.”
Leadership: Limits and Possibilities

It isn't the consciousness of leaders that makes them leaders or makes them effective, it's their hybridity; not how they think but how they are

Can we even think in terms of the leader as an individual without the integral support of non-human factors and resources? Non-human factors can ‘lead’ and direct people, for example the technology of the production line. ‘Hybridity’ is an essential element of leadership – the leader acts through non-human as well as human agencies, including technologies and ideas. Technologies and ideas cannot lead without human agency, but without the non-human elements leaders cannot lead. A study of the effectiveness of leadership during the D-Day landings in 1944 clearly shows the impact of protective ‘hybrid systems’ in facilitating the effectiveness of leadership in an intensely hostile but critical environment.

Leadership as Results

If a leader never realises his or her potential, if no product is forthcoming, then it is hard to consider them as a leader, or other than as a ‘failed’ leader. But how do we define ‘results’ – the word has multiple meanings, some tangible (profit), and some intangible (morality). The problem is that what gets measured is often what gets done, whether relevant or not, and vice versa.

However, can the output of an entire organisation be reliably attributed to the individual leader, or a single decision or policy initiative? For example, studies of the relationship between zero-tolerance policing methods and crime levels in New York tend to disprove any simple connection. The story of Enron’s collapse shows how too narrow a measurement (in this case shareholder value) blinded the organisation to other important aspects of performance. Some leaders ‘fail’ on tangible measures, but succeed on the intangible – Mahatma Gandhi is an example of this, having inspired a sub-continent, he failed in his attempt to orchestrate a peaceful partition of Pakistan and India.
Leadership: Limits and Possibilities

Does the leader even have any choice, or agency, in the context of technology, genetic inheritance, and social coercion? There is a long tradition of leaders who are seen – and see themselves, as driven by fate or destiny that generates great self-confidence: Joan of Arc, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King are all examples. Does destiny, as Tolstoy believed, preclude choice and agency and is the leader then not merely a lightning conductor for praise or blame depending upon how things turn out?

Furthermore, does the process by which results are generated actually matter? Is the school bully or despotic tyrant who achieves results through coercion to be seen as a leader? This takes us back to the arguments about morality. By contrast, the uncharismatic leader may be very effective at getting things done but may also be invisible in the organisation. Results-based leadership must encompass both possibilities.

Even under the most severe coercion – Roman slavery and Nazi labour camps - leadership can emerge to form organised resistance, provided that the cultural background of the group, and its political and military skills, were adequate.

Leadership as Process

If leaders act differently from non-leaders, what does this mean? Is this about context, or about the essence of the individual? Are leaders expected to embody consistency, or are they allowed to require followers to ‘Do as I say, not what I do?’ Are there different contexts in which each is more effective than the other? Horatio Nelson is a classic example of a leader who practised contradictory leadership – requiring absolute obedience from his subordinates whilst himself breaking every rule in the book.
Leadership: Limits and Possibilities

Perhaps process skills are more dependent upon the leader’s capacity to coerce or inspire followers – in other words it has a relational rather than possessional basis.

It may be that we can recognise leadership by the behavioural processes that differentiate leaders from followers, but this does not mean that we can simply list the processes as universally valid across space and time.

It is not enough for the leader to solve the problems that followers face in the organisation – they must also be able to persuade their followers to face up to their own responsibilities, in a context where novel thinking and behaviour is required. In this definition, leadership becomes a process of dynamic collaboration.

A comparison of the quality of relationship with immediate followers of both Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill provides an illuminating contrast – the latter being generous in his tolerance of dissent, the former becoming increasingly isolated and dictatorial. Another example of the difficulties of ‘top-down’ leadership is the failure of the British Army to foster initiative among lower ranks during WW1, and its reliance on aristocratic notions of noblesse oblige and amateurism that prevented officers from empowering their subordinates or ‘talking shop’ with each other.

The follower is teacher to the leader. The challenge to the notion of the omnipotent leader is that since leaders cannot be omnipotent (without being God) then leaders must, like followers, undertake some sort of learning process – and this learning is best obtained from followers, in Communities of Practice that embody the notion of ‘praxis’ or the translation of ideas into action. Experience, under the guidance of experienced coaches and within a heterarchy of supportive peers (and that includes reflection and feedback) is the most effective form of learning: ‘do-review-apply’.
Leadership as Position

More traditional views of leadership emphasis position within the organisation – formal and informal – as a critical element. It emphasises the capacity of those in formal position to ‘drive’ change from the top, or ‘Leadership-in-Charge’.

But does the hierarchy of position match the hierarchy of power within the organisation? Obedience is never guaranteed, even in the most disciplinary of organisations. Thus the capability of low-level leaders who serve at the ‘sharp end’ may be critical in determining the success of the organisation – ‘Leadership-in-Front’. Fashion leaders and film-makers may also be considered ‘Leaders-in-Front’, taking on the role of informal guides to new thinking and behaviour without official hierarchy.

Leadership from a positional perspective is defined by characteristics of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ (driver-or-guide), and of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ (hierarchical-or-collaborative); one is central and authoritarian, the other dispersed and devolved.

The American Civil Rights movement and al-Qaida are both examples of the power of heterarchic Distributed Leadership that challenges the traditional notions of hierarchical organisational forms as essential for the practice of leadership. Distributed Leadership emphasises the collective nature of responsibility and flexibility, abandoning the notion of reliance on a single charismatic leader or a bureaucratic structure. It is both a method and a philosophy, but is essentially morally neutral, involving the creation of Scale Free Networks of linked nodes that provide some structure but are also resilient to disruption.

Distributed Leadership organisations may lack the capacity to focus and direct the kind of massive resources commanded by conventional structures, but like
Leadership: Limits and Possibilities

the mythical hydra they are exceedingly difficult to define, locate and destroy. Simple force is not enough if the source of the network’s strength is a hybrid idea rather than the physical person of a leader.

Conclusion

If leaders act on the basis of position, then only those in formal positions of power will be recognised as leaders, and in consequence followers will be discouraged from accepting responsibility, taking risks, or showing initiative. This can produce a bureaucratic, torpid organisation.

On the other hand, if organisations consider leadership to be manifest largely through results, then this opens the way for metrics to be manipulated to generate the required outcomes even if by other measures performance deteriorates. Hospital waiting lists in the UK and the failure of Enron are examples where limited measurement distorted overall performance.

If we look at the processes of leadership – what leaders actually do – then it is unclear whether there are generic behaviours that apply regardless of context, or whether leadership requires exemplary behaviour. The outcome can be that we create leaders who ‘act’ rather then ‘do’, who are preoccupied with manipulating the image of outcome rather than the outcome itself.

Finally, looking at the person of leadership, still no consensus emerges, because leadership appears to require the interaction of humans and systems or ideas as ‘hybrids’, in an improvised performance rather than a pre-written script.

Leadership remains an Essentially Contested Concept.
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