Re-Thinking Leadership:  
A New Look at Old Leadership Questions  
Donna Ladkin  
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<th>Theme of the Book</th>
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<td>“What heroes and heroines discover when they embark on a quest is that it is the questing that counts, the journey which makes a difference.”</td>
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This book is a ‘quest’ to explore the underlying meanings and significance of leadership through a process of philosophical enquiry designed to challenge the assumptions that we have about ‘leadership’ and ‘leaders’.

Leadership as a study discipline has proved itself more than a passing management fad. It clearly represents something important in the way society and organisations seek to explain themselves. Using interrogative concepts such as phenomenology and hermeneutics from the school of Continental Philosophy, this book examines just why and how leadership has become such a popular concept.

In doing so, this book expands our understanding of leadership as more than just the study of individual leaders and their collective characteristics, and more than the collected evidence that can be gathered by objective, scientific observation. Indeed, by adopting the broader perspective offered by the rigour of philosophical enquiry it questions whether such approaches can ever yield an accurate or reliable picture of what ‘leadership’ really is.
Key Learning Points

• The subjective ‘lived experience’ of leadership is a more reliable guide to its true nature than scientific research into its observable components
• Leadership is essentially elusive in nature, and best understood as a fluid and context-driven phenomenon
• The reciprocal nature of the relationship between leader and follower is of critical importance in understanding the dynamic that links them
• Rather than being seen as an initiator of vision and change, leadership’s role should be seen as one of co-creation
• Charismatic leadership only exists in the eyes of followers – it has no independent, objective reality
• Wisdom in leadership is a function of the judgement that can be developed through the study of meaning.
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   Co-authored with Martin Wood and John Pillay

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Why study leadership from a philosophical perspective?

"What has often passed as leadership scholarship has, on closer examination, been dedicated to understanding ‘leaders’; those individuals who grab our attention amidst what is perhaps a much more complex intersection of contextual and personal factors."

The lack of clarity that exists about leadership suggests that this is in itself a part of its essence, and that this being the case a philosophical approach offers some advantages to understanding.

Leadership does not really lend itself to the same kind of logical analysis as other managerial activities – it is more akin to concepts such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’.

Examining leadership as a phenomenon, as an experience rather than a material thing, helps us understand its nature.

A scientific approach to leadership leads to the conclusion that its components can be identified, measured and developed in individuals with the aid of a development plan. This assumes that there is some ideal mixture of components that when achieved will result in the desired effect (eg ‘transformation’).

Such an approach leads to a bias in favour of ‘quantity’ over ‘quality’ – it ignores the ‘lived experience’ of leadership on the part of leader and follower, and is unable to incorporate the invisible aspects of leadership. The quality of followership and the number and type of opportunities to exercise leadership both individually and collectively at different hierarchical levels within an organization, have a profound effect on the experience of leadership that results.
Why are there so many different theories of leadership?

"…the places where leadership is traditionally sought, for instance in the personal traits of 'leaders', may not be the most appropriate starting places for identifying and studying it."

What is it about the nature of leadership that results in such a range of different, yet related definitions, and why has attention focused so much on the person of the leader rather than the leadership context? Rather than trying to study the subject in academic isolation as an abstract theoretical concept, a phenomenological approach requires us to study the subjective living experience, what Husserl called the ‘Lifeworld’, of the leader – they way things are used and the meanings that they hold for those who interact with them.

Taken further, this idea explains the multiple definitions of leadership (situation, servant, transformational and so on) as expressions of the subjective needs of different observers of the phenomenon. Human societies form an arena in which groups and cultures create collective understandings of abstract concepts (guilt, sin, economics, leadership), resulting in competing and overlapping meanings that change over place and time. These competing definitions are seen in phenomenological terms as 'sides' of the same entity, viewed from different perspectives. The sides we are unable to see directly from any one perspective are held to be ‘co-intended’ – existing but unseen – in the way that followers are part of leadership but sometimes assumed rather than explicitly acknowledged.

Moving around the subject, different sides become visible and create ‘aspects’ or viewpoints from which leadership may be observed. Two individuals with similar
proximity to a leadership team may have very different perspectives of their
leadership as a result of their different experiences, or ‘aspects’ of it. And
ultimately the entity itself will have an overall ‘identity’ which is greater than the
sum of its ‘sides’ and ‘aspects’, and which may never be completely known as
these latter are numerous, perhaps infinite, and therefore may not be reduced to
a single definition. In this sense we may never reach a definition of leadership, as
its true identity may never be directly observed or encompassed.

Phenomenology also examines subjects from the perspective of ‘wholes’
(complete entities serving a defined purpose), ‘pieces’ (components of wholes)
and ‘moments’ (things that are entirely dependent upon that of which they are
part). Thus a rug is a ‘whole’, a strand of wool is both a ‘whole’ and a ‘piece’ (of
the rug), and its colour or weight is a dependant ‘moment’.

If leadership is entirely dependent upon the existence of leaders, then it may be
classed as a ‘moment’ – it may never be defined separately from that to which it
belongs. So crisis leadership will inevitably differ from entrepreneurial, or
bureaucratic leadership. What works in one arena will look out of place and
dysfunctional in another. Leadership becomes dependent upon the social context
in which it arises. The leader’s task is then to understand the context and relate
effectively to its constituents, what Keith Grint calls ‘mobilisation’.

This indeterminate description of leadership may be frustrating, but it does
require us to ask a fundamental question before we engage with the topic – what
are we seeking, and what problem are we trying to resolve? This will help us
when our own view of leadership collides with and conflicts with that of another, whose 'aspect' of leadership differs from our own.

**Why is it so difficult to study leadership?**

“Any one trying to study this phenomenon is faced with the challenge of uncovering a multitude of impacting factors which are difficult, if not impossible, to identify. Furthermore, because they often operate at unconscious levels for both leaders and followers, they are very hard to elicit.”

Leadership seems to disappear the closer one gets to it. One possible explanation for this may be found in the work of Gibb and Gronn, who developed the concept of ‘Distributed Leadership’ in which the function of leadership migrates between individuals according to context, and has a strong systemic component (ie being the product of interactions rather than individual actions). In this manifestation of leadership the leader may not be in a position of formal authority, and may only retain leadership authority briefly, or may share it with others. The 'Critical' approach to leadership taken by Alvesson and Sveningsson goes further, and denies that activities identified with leadership actually take place at all.

Some of this elusiveness may be explained by factors which influence the leadership process but which may not be visible or present in the actual behaviours being observed in the moment: expectations, stories and culture. Leadership activity is embedded in an organisational culture, which itself may partly comprise stories told and heard about the organization and expectations between followers and leaders held but not articulated on the day.
Another possible explanation is that we may only stop to think about leadership when it stops working, and that this colours how we think about it – just as we think very differently about our computer at the moment when it crashes and ceases to perform its expected function. The computer is still there, but our sense of it has shifted. In phenomenological terms this is called the difference between ‘readiness at hand’ and ‘presence at hand’. By focusing on what is missing we may learn something about what should be there – as for example the absence of leadership in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina informs us about the nature of US government leadership at that time: the inability of anyone to step into the position of leadership required by the unique characteristics of the event, the lack of sufficient perspective in the leadership to see the true nature of the threat, and the absence of a visible leadership ‘face’ to provide focus and motivation.

What goes on in the relationship between leaders and followers?

It may be convenient to talk about distinct characteristics of ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ but in reality their definition has always been ambiguous, and it may be fruitful to explore the relationship between them as a distinct entity in its own right in order to develop our idea of how leadership works. Theories of relational leadership look at the creation of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ within organisations, and the development of social networks working towards shared objectives. The phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty may help us understand the nature of the relationship dynamic itself, or ‘intersubjectivity’.
Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of the individual’s physical experience of the world and others in it, and in leadership we can see this in the significance of our experience of the physical presence and impact of the leader. Our bodily experience is the core of our existence, and its sensory information informs our view of the world. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty also stresses the ‘reversibility’ of our experience of being – the intrinsic inter-activeness of life – that in observing we are also observed, in acting we are also acted upon. I cannot touch anything without myself being touched. For a leader in the goldfish bowl of leadership there may be a significant impulse to behave differently in the knowledge that one’s every move is being carefully observed by others.

This leads to the notion of inter-subjectivity, with leaders and followers co-creating their own sense of leadership reality through interaction with each other. This co-created sense works only while there is a shared social identity – once the leader leaves the orbit of agreed social identity, then they lose the ability to lead. The failure of Margaret Thatcher to take her Cabinet with her when she re-aligned her views on Europe in the late 1980’s is one example of how this process can happen.

The challenge for leaders is therefore to understand and work to strengthen the quality of lived experience between themselves and their followers, and this challenge is made all the more difficult by the ephemeral nature of the inter-subjective experience – the simple fact that we are unable to perceive both sides of the experience.
simultaneously, and can only at any one time focus on ourselves or the other. Barack Obama’s innovative use of e-mail and the internet to stay in apparently personal touch with and mobilize his supporters during the 2008 Presidential Election campaign is an example of a leader consciously working to strengthen the relationship space that Merleau-Ponty refers to as ‘the flesh’ of experience. Trust and inspiration are key components of ‘fattening the flesh’.

**What is charismatic leadership?**

“…it is not enough for leaders just to describe a context in a particular way for them to be hailed as charismatic. Followers must also accept the leader's version of the situation.”

Students of leadership have debated the nature of charisma and its role in leadership since Weber first wrote about it over 80 years ago. Weber said that if charisma is the product of an extraordinary gift – oratorical skills, or vision, for example – then it is also dependent upon the receptiveness of its audience. Subsequently theories such as transformational leadership built on this idea, and current thinking on the topic focus on the capacity to communicate a radical yet grounded vision in an innovative and captivating way. Barack Obama’s election night address in November 2008 is held to be a most recent example. Yet little study has been devoted to the nature of the impact on followers, the risk of
dependence and suspension of rational judgment, and the complexity of the charismatic interaction.

The philosophy of aesthetics, a line of philosophy descended from Plato which studies the nature of ‘felt sense’ – how we go about making judgments on what we experience through our senses – might help us explore the paradox of charisma. In the eighteenth century Kant distinguished between our capacity to perceive the beautiful – things of intrinsic aesthetic goodness which we learn to appreciate by the development of ‘good taste’ – and the sublime. By sublime he meant those things that overwhelmed our senses with the sheer power of the experience they evoke – be it a range of snow-capped mountains or a ferocious mountain lion. We rely on our rational mind to guide us to a measured appreciation of the sublime in order to avoid the emotional overwhelm of the experience – and in this sense sublime experiences originate in the mind of the perceiver (his/her capacity to rationalize). In leadership terms, the sublime impact of Obama’s ‘Yes We Can’ message is entirely dependent upon his followers’ capacity to explain it in terms of their own aspirations, and it may explain the unease that some experience at the sometimes transported and passive response that charismatic leadership can engender – indeed for Weber this surrender of will was an essential element of charisma. We might conclude that by Weber’s definition charisma is not about invoking followers to access their own aspirations, but rather overwhelming the followers’ rational capability to create dependent identification with the leader’s message.
An analysis of Obama and Clinton campaign speeches during the Democratic primaries in 2008 clearly shows the powerful connection that Obama made through language and subject matter with a sublime sense of empowerment for his followers, compared with the much more pragmatic and self-focused words messages from Clinton. Physically Obama was able to represent a greater aesthetic sense of difference and change than Clinton, and - reflecting follower bias - as a man the self-deprecating ‘we’ that he used was easier for him than for his opponent. Obama’s capacity to invoke the sublime echoed John Kennedy’s ‘moonshot’ speech from 1960, and like Kennedy Obama carried a conscious sense of his own physical aesthetic and the significance of health and vitality to the presidential bid.

What is so important about the ‘vision thing’?

“A hermeneutic rendering suggests that in order for meaning to be truly forged between people, both must be open to the other. Such openness necessarily requires that leaders take into account their followers’ perspectives and meanings as well as for followers to consider the perspectives of their leader…”

The creation of a vision which engages with and carries meaning for followers is widely accepted as an integral part of leadership. But what is so special about this process, and how does it work? Do such visions in fact create new meaning for followers at all, and what if the process is more like a dialogue between leader and follower in which meaning is really co-created?
Current leadership theory suggests that the role of the leader’s vision is to articulate a shared understanding that already exists in the organization, and that the quality of the meaning is therefore dependent upon the quality of the interaction between leader and follower. But it remains unclear how differing meanings that inevitably exist within organisations are dealt with, or whether they are heard at all.

Hermeneutics is the study of how meaning is derived from language, and originated in the work of Aristotle and was developed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and in the last century by Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger the human experience of being hurled unbidded into life – ‘thrownness’ is a natural driver to achieve understanding of the world around us – its language, norms and customs. As we all are thrown into different circumstances, it follows that our understanding will also differ. It follows that rather than our making history, history makes us – and that leadership is inevitably the consequence of circumstance, rather than leaders somehow determining events.

Heidegger went on to say that in order to resist the helpless sense that comes with ‘being thrown’ into life, we have a tendency to ‘attune’ ourselves to filter out that evidence which confirms our helplessness. We deny our lack of control. So the leader who issues proclamations and fiats expecting them to have a direct and definable impact on events may really be like a pilot pulling levers which are not connected to any of the control surfaces of the airplane. This is the “fiction of agency”.
For Heidegger three aspects of ‘attunement’ influenced the capacity to relate to others:

- Intentionality (or purpose)
- Foresight (the perspective from which intentionality derives), and
- Ways of thinking (established cognitive maps for decision-making)

The quality of leadership effectiveness might be interpreted by the degree of alignment of these characteristics between the leader and followers.

Gadamer developed the idea that meaning-making is an iterative process highly dependent upon the language used in a given context, and that understanding is enhanced by the degree of openness we each have to each others’ difference, and embedded prejudice (pre-judgments) about the world, and the quality of questioning and listening. The objective is a ‘fusion of horizons’ – a co-created vision, and creating spaces where such genuine dialogue can occur is a critical role of leadership. A good case study is the creation of the Eden Project in South-West England, where conflicting understandings of ‘sustainability’ had to be reconciled for the project to succeed.
How do leaders lead change?

“…wherever ‘leadership’ is exercised during the formal organizational change processes, an important aspect of ‘leading’ is using one’s authority, whether it is positional, expert or referent, to ‘declare’ a version of reality which can then be engaged with by other organizational members.”

What if we start by accepting that change is the natural state of things rather than stasis, and that rather than initiating change, leaders engage with it? This challenges the accepted notion that the role of the leader is to initiate change, and the image of the leader-as-turnaround-champion, embedded in theories such as Lewin’s ‘force-field’ model of freeze-unfreeze-freeze’. Do leaders really do it all by themselves, or even at all? Against well-crafted dictums such as Kotter’s recipe for change leadership is the well-documented fact that the vast majority of change initiatives apparently fail to achieve their objectives.

Ideas taken from Process Philosophy (derived from the work originally of Heraclitus in 500BC and in the 20th century by Alfred North Whitehead and William James) may help us explore this paradox. Process philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness between things, the inevitable impact of the simple chronology of events on a current state, and the concreteness of experience (the fact that every event is a unique and real confluence of circumstance, and cannot be readily reduced to abstract concept, if at all).

Applied to the phenomenon of change, events (such as the collapse of Lehmann Brothers) are seen is points in a complex interplay of aligned processes (the history of Lehmann, the prior collapsed of Bear Sterns, the political culture in
Washington, the administration of the Federal Reserve, the global economic climate). The event itself is where a latent occurrence – a fault-line in an assumed chronology – becomes real. Process philosophy would also characterize leadership as an ‘event’ – a nexus of psychological follower, organisational, and market circumstances which creates a ‘leadership space into which an individual steps, to chair a meeting for example.

In this interpretation of change the leader’s job is to attend to patterns, identify emerging trends, and use his or her ‘declarative power’ to mobilize resources within the organization to respond to novel circumstances. Leadership may also be exercised by creating disruption within existing systems in order to make ‘fault-lines’ visible.

How can individuals take up the leader role wisely?

“…participating in a community of wise others is critical to developing the kind of character which grows into the enactment of virtue.”

Leaders often face the challenge of taking decisions in the face of competing ethical arguments – for ethics is essentially about the relationships between people and power, and this naturally falls into the realm of leadership. However, doing the right thing when faced by such ‘wicked dilemmas’ requires wisdom: where there are no right answers, what is required is the ability to ask the right questions. Practices taken from the schools of phenomenology, hermeneutics and aesthetics can help us navigate such dilemmas, through the application of phronesis, or practical wisdom.
Phenomenology recognizes the subjective limitations on human perception and knowledge. The notion of ‘dwelling’ – being in reciprocal relation to the world – asks that we recognize the impact of our actions on others. It also asks us to pay proper attention to the other in order to fully appreciate that impact, and comport ourselves in such a way as to allow this to occur. Consideration and respect are at the cornerstone of this thinking.

The co-construction of meaning posited by hermeneutics encourages us to get to grips with uncertainty by committing to uncovering those questions which are as yet unspoken – to engage with issues in a spirit of enquiry. This requires courage, humility and persistence, and is epitomized by the myth of Parsifal and his search for the Grail. It requires us to pay attention to our unease and allow dissonance of meaning to surface and be explored, including the relationship between ‘parts’ and wholes’ in order to build perspective for the decisions being faced.

The school of aesthetics would require us to spend time honing our judgment of the different aesthetic qualities so that we can recognize the true essence of things. By learning to identify what is harmonious we may improve our judgment of ethical dilemmas.

Aristotle’s concept of phronesis holds that such wisdom can be learned – chiefly through engagement with a virtuous community rather than through isolated study. The lesson for leaders is that they should seek to place themselves in communities of practice that espouse the values and behaviours that they seek to emulate. By learning to engage in dialectic – the ability to hold opposite ideas
in productive tension (‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’) – leaders will learn to tolerate and navigate the paradoxes that lie at the heart of leadership.

What has it meant to re-think leadership?

Researching leadership-as-phenomenon is not possible using conventional analytical methods, as by definition it is always moving and changing, and is essentially subjective. A starting point is to pay attention to the questions being asked, why they are being asked and from which perspective. By focusing on what is intangible or absent, such as the lived experience of leadership, we may learn more than by looking at what is readily visible.

The Western cultures’ preoccupation with leadership appears to seek to use leaders as a scapegoat for collective failure, a dance of guilt and blame. However, if leadership is genuinely co-created, contextual and essentially the product rather than the initiator of events, this attitude is unsustainable. Instead, each of us engaged in the ‘leadership moment’ has responsibility and impact in creating the ‘leadership’ we desire.

If leaders, like philosophers, are to avoid being paralyzed by uncertainty, then they must continue to ask questions, and then to live them.
About the Editor

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Donna Ladkin is Senior Lecturer in Organizational Learning and Leadership at Cranfield School of Management where she is also Director of the Masters in Management Research leading to the PhD degree. She has wide experience as both a leadership scholar (having Directed the Masters in Leadership Studies at Exeter University) and as a leadership developer. Her current research interests focus on the ethical practice of leadership, leadership as an aesthetic phenomenon, and exploring the role leadership plays in enabling organisations to mobilise towards ecologically sustainable ends. She is the author of numerous articles which have been published in journals such as The Leadership Quarterly, Leadership, The Academy of Management Learning and Education, and the Journal of Business Ethics.