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# Leadership: demythologizing some concepts

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**LEADERSHIP, DEMYTHOLOGIZING SOME CONCEPTS**

Leadership is a topic of almost universal fascination. Popular attention focuses on it because its overtones of success, power, and prestige are traditionally admired and pursued human goals; academic interest in it is intense because it is a central concept in social and behavioral investigations in both developed and developing countries. The breadth of coverage in the literature is enough in itself to inspire awe among writers and surfeit among readers. Most management and organization texts, for example, contain several chapters on the subject<sup>1</sup>.

Opinions on what leadership is and how it functions differ widely and at times acidly. Given these divergences, it is not surprising that close analysis unearths the existence of some mythology among the arguments. It may clarify the issue to examine some of the primary assumptions made by advocates of various persuasions, especially about corporate leadership:

- that leaders are born, not made;
- that leadership is grounded on a few specific character traits;
- that a forceful and aggressive leader brings out the best in the group he heads;
- that a leader leads and the group follows;
- that corporate and public leaders have the same personalities;
- that corporate leaders come only from top management levels;
- that leaders of stability are more effective than leaders of change; and
- that environmental influences on corporate leaders generally constitute negative constraints

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1. For a detailed bibliographical report, see *John P. Campbell et al., Managerial Behavior, Performance, and Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), pp. 500-528.

### *The Origin of Leadership*

What develops leadership in a person? Do successful leaders have an inexplicable, God-given talent? Or is leadership an acquired characteristic, one that can be developed with the aid of external stimuli? These questions derive from two polar assumptions about the fundamental nature of leadership. If leadership is regarded as inherently dependent on certain personality characteristics, then it would seem to follow that the function of leadership is intuitive. If, on the other hand, leadership is considered a skill that is gradually integrated and developed, then it follows that the function of leadership is acquired<sup>2</sup>.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, such a debate is purposeless, for it does not contribute much to our understanding of leadership or illuminate why individuals choose to assume authority. Nor does it take into account the juxtaposition of the right set of circumstances and the right time, which bear on a given individual just «happens» to be there and therefore has an advantage over others.

### *The Traits Theory of Leadership*

The traits theory of leadership holds that an effective leader integrates certain characteristics into his personality and that these characteristics will result in his eventual success<sup>3</sup>. The lists of causative traits vary, but the rationale underlying all of them is that each leader must possess some predetermined characteristics. It follows then that whoever has these traits will automatically become a leader and that whoever lacks them will not, no matter how qualified in other ways the individual might be.

Numerous studies have attempted to correlate personality traits with leadership. Among the traits that have been so identified are the following, listed in alphabetical order together with the number of studies reporting «positive» findings: (1) adjustment or normality, 11; (2) aggressiveness or assertiveness, 12; (3) alertness, 4; (4) ascendance

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2. An early commentary on this topic is found in *Peter F. Drucker, The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), *passim*.

3. See *Keith Davis, Human Relations at Work: The Dynamics of Organizational Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), pp. 97-100.

or dominance, 31; (5) emotional balance and control, 14; (6) enthusiasm, 3; (7) extroversion, 1; (8) independence or nonconformity, 12; (9) objectivity or tough-mindedness, 7; (10) originality or creativity, 13; (11) personal integrity or ethical conduct, 9; (12) resourcefulness, 7; (13) self-confidence, 28; and (14) tolerance of stress, 9<sup>4</sup>.

Examine this list carefully and the problems with the traits approach become crystal clear. The category with the greatest number of «positive» findings—ascendance or dominance—is clearly synonymous with leadership itself. The findings are therefore tautological; those who demonstrate leadership are those who demonstrate leadership. Other qualities reported as being significant are cancelled out by their mirror opposites, as in the case of adjustment or normality on the one hand, and originality or creativity on the other. This is like saying that a leader must be intelligent and stupid at the same time.

Still other personality traits are clearly dependent on the context in which leadership is exercised. For example, resourcefulness would be required of a guerrilla commander but might be frustrating as a quality possessed by employees of enterprises where a heavy premium is placed on routine, repetitive work. The context may vary over time; for example, the qualities sought in a President today—honesty, candor, openness—differ from those considered of prime importance before Watergate.

Other personal characteristics have been investigated and found wanting as predictors of leadership ability. Studies have shown that women do not rise to leadership positions as frequently as men, but this merely reflects a pattern of discrimination and tells us little about their leadership style and potential<sup>5</sup>. The most careful statistical studies of top business executives indicate that they come from all strata of society; social background is therefore not as important a factor as one might assume<sup>6</sup>. Even so, the studies only tell what the actual situation in this regard is; they do not inform us about the leadership

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4. *R. M. Stogdill*, *Handbook of Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1974) p. 79.

5. *M. Cussler*, *The Woman Executive* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), *passim*.

6. *Scientific American*, *The Big Business Executive*, 1964 (New York: *Scientific American*, 1965), *passim*.

potential of groups—blacks, women, etc.— who have traditionally been discriminated against in American society.

One «trait» that does seem to correlate closely with leadership is intelligence, but there are some caveats even here. There is considerable disagreement in the psychological literature as to whether one should consider «intelligence» as a unitary trait or a very complex combination of specific abilities. Moreover, some studies have indicated that there should not be too great a gap in IQ between a leader and his subordinates<sup>7</sup>. Thus, even where the existence of a trait seems most obvious, the «common-sense» point of view turns out not to have so much validity. The degree of intelligence required of a leader probably varies with the many possible combination of factors and situations.

Thus, the traits theory does not stand up to modern behavioral findings. A combination of universally applicable, personal, professional, or personality features, no matter how carefully selected, cannot guarantee success, for it does not take into consideration such variables as the situation demanding leadership, the characteristics and behaviors of followers, and the external conditions in which the leader and led will be called on to perform<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, traits fashionable today may not be desirable in the future. Nor can one isolate leadership from the nature and aims of the group or the personalities of its members, singly or in interaction. Finally, traits that prove effective in one situation might be irrelevant or counterproductive in another.

Characteristics deemed acceptable seem to be generated more by moral and ethical denominators of behavior than by any other<sup>9</sup>. Whenever a traitist stresses one particular quality over another, he is unwittingly, even perhaps unconsciously, making a value judgment. As often as not, his selection of characteristics is based more on his own prejudices than on what he has researched and found to be a common denominator of leaders everywhere<sup>10</sup>.

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7. E. E. Ghiselli, «Intelligence and Managerial Success», *Psychological Reports*, 1963, 12, p. 898.

8. Davis, p. 100.

9. E. E. Ghiselli, «Traits Differentiating Management Personnel», *Personnel Psychology*, Winter 1959, pp. 535-544.

10. Robert Tannenbaum, Irving Weschler and Fred Masarik, *Leadership and Organization: A Behavioral Science Approach* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.

*Forcefulness as a Catalyst*

The traits theory places a heavy premium on such qualities as aggressiveness and authoritarian control primarily because society also regards these as indices of personal ambition and purpose<sup>11</sup>. But the validity of the philosophy of leadership through force is as dubious as is the socio-political principle that might makes right.

If there is one realm where aggressiveness and authoritarian control would seem to be necessary, it would be the military. For decades, the armed forces of the United States attempted to develop such useful leadership traits as aggressive behavior, physical and moral courage, decisiveness, endurance, enthusiasm, and initiative<sup>12</sup>. More recently, the military has acknowledged that its concepts were outmoded and has made a strenuous effort to incorporate modern behavioral concepts into its training programs<sup>13</sup>. The new military leader is expected not only to know the values and goals of the men under his command but to be prepared to derive his legitimacy through making the individual's goals congruent with organizational goals. Control under battlefield conditions remains crucial, but that control must be exercised through the development of a sense of participation and involvement in subordinates rather than through the normal patterns of authority<sup>14</sup>.

In a broader context, the trauma of aggression seems to be an integral part of human culture. Within strictly curtailed behavioral limits, pressure tactics may be meaningful; but if they are exercised

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1961), pp. 22-23. The authors state: «it was assumed that leadership effectiveness could be explained by isolating psychological and physical characteristics, or traits, which were presumed to differentiate the leader from other members of his group. Studies guided by this assumption generally proved none too fruitful. Almost without exception universal traits proved elusive, and there was little agreement as to the most useful trait».

11. *Davis*, p. 100.

12. United States, Department of the Army, *Military Leadership, Field Manual 22-100* (Washington: GPO, November 1965).

13. United States, United States Army, *Leadership in the Post-1970's. A Leadership Workshop Conference Sponsored by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel and the Superintendent, United States Military Academy* (West Point: U.S. Army, June 1969).

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

in a limitless sway of egotism, the chances are that both leader and group will suffer eventually from personal frustration as well as from interpersonal conflict. Much of the effectiveness of force-oriented direction depends on the leader's aim and manner. Is he trying simply to display his ascendancy over his underlings? Or does he make a conscious effort to relate these overt acts of emphatic behavior to demonstrably valid purposes, helping his subordinates develop these traits themselves so that they can become leaders themselves in the long run? These techniques must be properly channeled and monitored to assure that they have the desired impact<sup>15</sup>. Even when the techniques are properly channeled and monitored there is some question as to whether leadership can be taught effectively by such methods.

### *Group and Leader*

The traditional dichotomy between commander and commanded stimulates the belief that the former's job is to lead and the latter's is to follow. Inherent in this generalization is the judgment that the leader is an «active» person whereas the followers are «passive» people<sup>16</sup>.

With the revolution in values of the past decade, it is unrealistic to expect human beings to adopt such simplistically defined roles today. In fact, the work «follower» has become an anachronism in an era of involvement, directness, and pursuit of shared goals. The functions of leading and following can no longer be so easily isolated. It has been shown that the roles frequently overlap and intermingle, which makes it difficult to distinguish one from the other<sup>17</sup>. Experience teaches this to anyone who, for example, participates in a team project whose titular head is displaced de facto by another member with better qualifications for the task assigned and the circumstances. Moreover, a leader who deliberately cuts himself off from the give-and-take of the group processes will most likely antagonize his gollowers and lose the opportunity to generate new ideas.

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15. *Davis*, p. 100.

16. *E. E. Ghiselli*, «The Validity of Management Traits in Relation to Occupational Level», *Personnel Psychology*, Summer 1963, pp. 109-13.

17. *Mary Parker Follett* was one of the pioneer writers to refute this concept. See her *Dynamic Administration* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942), *passim*.



A number of researchers have found that the least efficient management system is where management has no confidence or trust in subordinates since they are seldom involved in the decision-making process. Decisions emanate from the top and are passed down through the chain of command. Subordinates are made to perform by the use of fear, threats, punishment, and rewards. The small amount of superior-subordinate interaction which takes place is usually tinged with fear and distrust. While the control process is highly concentrated in top management, informal organizations develop which oppose and sabotage the goals of the formal organization<sup>18</sup>.

At the other end of the continuum, the most efficient system is one in which leaders have confidence and trust in their subordinates, and decision-making is widely dispersed throughout the organization. Communication flows up and down among peers. Workers are motivated by participation and involvement in developing goals, improving methods, and appraising progress. There is extensive and friendly superior-subordinate interaction<sup>19</sup>.

«Concern for people» and «concern for production» can be laid out on a grid and charted like a demand-supply curve. The individual or system that ranks high on both axes develops followers committed to accomplishment of work, whose sense of interdependence through a stake in the organizational process leads to relationships of trust and respect<sup>20</sup>. The implication is that substantive excellence is still required of a leader; he should have an excellent grasp of the details and strategies of the job at hand, whatever it may be. But skill in the substance of the job is not enough if it is not combined with human relations skills as well.

### *Corporate vs. Public Leaders*

A logical extension of the traitist theory of leadership is that a leader is a leader everywhere, in all institutional or organizational contexts. Thus a person possessing the «right» characteristics would

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18. *Rensis Likert*, *The Human Organization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), passim.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *R. Blake and J. S. Mouton*, *The Managerial Grid* (Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Co., 1964), passim.

be as effective contrasting the Democratic Party's election platform as chairing a meeting of General Motors stockholders.

Public and corporate leaders have less in common than more<sup>21</sup>. A public leader may find it relatively easy to arouse enthusiasm and political commitment at a public rally through his charisma and his oratory, but may fail miserably as a decision-maker in a business firm, or be unable to generate the necessary loyalty and trust of his peers and subordinates.

A public leader who is appointed to an important public post obtains this recognition not because the qualities required in the two arenas are similar (they are not), but because of his own prominence and accomplishments in the business world. The reverse is also true; public acclaim does not automatically assure leadership within the corporate setting. As a corollary, military command cannot necessarily be transmuted into civilian authority; Dwight D. Eisenhower earned much criticism for his indecisiveness and his reliance on advisers during his two terms as President. As a military man, however, he was praised for his ability to make difficult decisions involving the fate of hundreds of thousands of men and of entire countries.

### *Top Management and Leadership*

Most people equate corporate leadership with top executive positions. It is automatically assumed that all senior administrative posts are held by people exhibiting all the required and advocated ingredients of leadership.

Such an assumption rests on several mistaken notions about both the role of authority and formal organizations. An effective leader in a firm may not possess a high formal title but rather enjoy extensive informal power that more than offsets his lack of official status<sup>22</sup>. Conversely, a top administrator according to the organization chart may possess only a veneer of leadership, which will not

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21. *William P. Sexton*, *Organization Theories* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1970), pp. 393-401.

22. *Mabel Newcomer*, *The Big Business Executive* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), passim; and *W. L. Warner et al.*, *The American Federal Executive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

provide any productive organizational guidance<sup>23</sup>. To blindly equate high position and leadership *per se* is therefore erroneous.

Administrative levels should not be regarded as much more than incidental to the process of real command. The president of a firm as such has no more claim to factual leadership than does a foreman or a superintendent. Incumbency in a job with authority is only a mandate to lead; it does not follow that the challenge will be effectively met.

### *Organization, Chain of Command, and Hierarchy*

Most people make the assumption that the best way to conduct any activity is to subject it to rational control by establishing lines of authority, fixing responsibility, and assigning supervisors to oversee all. The principles of hierarchical organization and chains of command are so deeply ingrained that possible alternatives are almost never contemplated. However, there is nothing sacrosanct about such an organization; if it is effective and true to human nature it can be perpetuated but if it is not something better may be found to take its place.

One of the problems with the type of organization that seems so effective is that it tends to stultify mature human beings. To the extent that individuals are mature, they will want to perform jobs that are active, independent, and utilize their highest abilities. Normal organizational practices are the direct opposite. Individuals are unable to be active, independent, and utilize only a fraction of their highest abilities; they therefore tend to become apathetic and indifferent, masking a deep reservoir of humiliation and hostility<sup>24</sup>.

The organizational assumption, although it seems a natural one to adopt, is in reality just an assumption. Methods of administration have been developed and adopted in some agencies and companies that attempt to provide individuals with jobs that are active, independent, and utilize their highest abilities.

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23. See *Follett*, pp. 275-279; and *Donald E. Porter et al.*, *Studies in Organizational Behavior and Management* (Scranton, Pa.: Intex Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 285-323.

24. *Chris Argyris*, *Personality and Organization: the Conflict Between System and the Individual* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), *passim*.

### *Leadership in Change and Stability*

The traditional view of leadership has always placed helmsmen of stability, who preserve the status quo, on a relatively higher plateau than advocates of change, who search for new directions. This evaluation perceives leaders of stability as guardians of convenience, drastic, and ruthless, dedicated to leading in accordance with established and traditional values.

In fact, it is impossible to pigeonhole leaders according to this dual classification. There are many intermediate levels and orientations. An effective leader does not rigidly advocate or execute either continuity or new directions, but rather integrates as many variables in his decision as he can define. He assesses the demands on and the profile of his group as well as the factors of the situation, adopting innovation, alteration, or a combination as his course of action in accordance with what promises the greatest success<sup>25</sup>.

### *Environmental Influences on Leadership*

Until quite recently, the public at large and the business world alike considered that corporate leaders were conditioned and motivated only by internal concerns — issues that fell directly within the corporations' purview. This philosophy, which effectively insulated the firm from its societal setting, perpetuated an isolationism that precluded involvement with the community beyond the seller-buyer dyad. In fact, any other external relationships were regarded as potentially restrictive on the company's best interest.

Today, business leaders respond not only to the force fields at play within the parameters of their corporate structure but also (and more importantly) to vectors in the external environment<sup>26</sup>. These influences do constitute constraints on executive decisions, to be sure, but they also provide constructive stimuli and valuable new ideas.

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25. *Abraham Zaleznik*, «The Human Dilemmas of Leadership», *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1963, pp. 49-55.

26. For a discussion of this point, see *Kenneth Barrien*, «Homestasis Theory of Group Implications for Leadership», in *Luigi Petrullo and Bernard M. Bass*, eds, *Leadership and Interpersonal Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

They furnish management with a broader perspective than the limited horizons the corporate enclaves allow, thus enlarging the scope of purposeful company activity. They revitalize the sometimes stagnating calm of an inbred corporate life<sup>27</sup>.

A contemporary leader cannot conveniently choose to ignore the society that gives his organization its *raison d'être*; no business firm in particular can focus its attention only on its inner world. Leadership today is basically a situational product, serving not to direct a course of action unrelated to any consequences aside from earnings, but rather to harness all factors affecting, and affected by, a decision and to guide them toward the desired goal.

#### ABSTRACT

Some misconceptions about leadership have been accepted for a long time under the influence of the traitistic theory of leadership. Alternative points of view about these «myths» and the reality of modern management are critically analysed. Strong issues such as the biological determination of these gifted characteristics that make leaders and their great effects in the business world are skeptically reevaluated.

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27. See *Robert J. Mockler*, «The Situational Theory of Management», *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1971, pp. 146-155.

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