

An Update on Leadership

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Bernard Bass, a doyen of leadership observed that: " The study of leadership rivals in age the emergence of civilisation, which shaped its leaders as it was shaped by them. From its infancy, the study of history has been the study of leaders - what they did and why they did it." Yet despite this heritage and the extensive and persistent research of social scientists, a comprehensive understanding of leadership remains elusive. The search is characterised by phases of investigation that have used different lenses through which to explore leadership. Each lens has offered some insights; no one lens can provide an adequate understanding of this very complex phenomena.

Most writers and researchers can agree that leadership involves the shaping of the behaviour of groups of people to achieve goals. The role and contribution of organisational and societal leaders is to act as pathfinders and catalysts, especially during times of crisis and transition. For some, leadership is distinguished from management; for others, leadership is seen as one of several managerial roles.

Behavioral scientists began their quest for understanding by examining the *characteristics* of great leaders. This was predicated on the assumption that leaders are born, not made. On the upside, research has identified some relatively common characteristics that could be used to select leaders. Attention was drawn to abilities such as intelligence and fluency of speech, and to personal traits such as high energy, stress tolerance, dominance and expressiveness. The failure to identify a comprehensive, stable and predictive leadership profile led investigators to pursue new directions.

Attention was then directed at *how leaders behaved*, with the implication that people could be trained to become more effective leaders. The most influential studies identified two sets of relatively independent and critical leadership behaviours: task and relationship or process behaviours. The primary weakness of this lens is that it fails to take account of situational demands made on the leader, such as the complexity of the task, or the experience expectations and motivation of the followers.

Predictably, the third phase of the development of our understanding of leadership involved closer scrutiny of the moderating impact of *the situation*. Such a perspective implies that a key leadership competency is the ability to read and adapt to different situations. This leadership approach revealed that, for example, effective leaders enabled their people to think that they could achieve their goals, and that such goal achievement would be satisfying and rewarded.

Attention has focused more recently on *how leaders add value to organisations, communities and indeed nations*. Two insights have been particularly powerful.. The first is the distinction between transactional and transformational leaders. The former are those who have the capacity to lead in steady state situations. In contrast, transformational leaders enable fundamental change in crisis situations or when people are required to make major change in their behaviour and context. These leaders are more likely to become charismatic in the eyes of their followers. Furthermore, some leaders may be capable of playing both roles.

A second development has been the shift in our thinking from *leadership as personal achievement to leadership as organisational capability*. This latter idea implies distributed leadership, leadership at all levels of an organisation. It requires the development of a critical mass of leaders who are aligned in their goals and values, and whose collective behaviour sends consistent signals to their people. This concept has become more relevant for two increasingly common organisational contexts. The first is in complex systemic organisations such as hospitals and IT companies. The second is in, for example, professional service firms and retail financial service organisations that rely on knowledge workers and service deliverers to add value directly to customers and clients. Such leadership capability is critical because of the need to influence large numbers of geographically dispersed and autonomous organisational members. The idea of distributed leadership requires new approaches to collective learning and development, a culture that supports collaboration and unity of purpose, and collective rewards and recognition.

Three further insights serve to describe the frontiers of our understanding, *First*, the balance of evidence supports the view that “leaders can be made and that leadership make a difference.” Clearly some leadership behaviours are relatively hard wired through genetic influences and early socialisation. However, key leadership behaviours can be influenced by development, performance management, rewards and an organisational context that supports the role of leadership. Thus early identification and sustained development are critical for the creation of leadership competence and capability. Such development can be easily justified by the compelling body of evidence that effective leadership impacts, for example, the financial performance of the firm, the attraction of talent, member engagement, performance and retention.

Second, to be successful, organisations may need to consider substitutes for leadership. Either the effective leaders are physically absent or such talent is just not available. Substitutes for leadership involve, for example, the development of autonomous work groups. Similarly, communicating and establishing commitment to an organisation’s aspirations, strategy and values provide cognitive controls that enable people to be more self directed in their work. These forms of influence and associated job and organisational redesign take some of the pressure off the provision of leadership.

Finally, in our intrigue with leadership there is a serious risk that we encourage people to abdicate their destiny to their leaders. For some, they demand that their leaders solve problems and resolve issues and in so doing make demands on leaders that are excessive or impossible to meet. In other situations effective leadership is not the solution. Not surprisingly a development that has gained momentum over the past decade is the concept of self leadership. For in a world of increasing change and uncertainty, the reality is that organisations and leaders can no longer focus on issues and problems that require each of us to respond and resolve.

In summary, it should be no surprise that leadership is at the top of the list of attributes expected of our CEOs. For our prevailing environment has created increasing demands for the contributions that effective leaders can add. Leadership will continue to be the subject of board discussions, speeches by CEOs, conferences, development programs and research agendas. Progress will continue to be achieved if we resist the search for simplistic approaches to the identification and development of our leaders. Progress will also be made if we reinforce leadership with other initiatives that complement the contributions of

our leaders. And progress will continue to be made if we successfully convey the reality that self leadership, taking charge of our own destiny, is an increasingly important requirement for all members of our organisations and communities.