

Augustus Rylands
Entry number 132

“The power of the man and the power of the moment”*

New Ideas and Perspectives on Leadership

Part 1: Throw out the manual

There is so much analysis of leadership today that the discussion has gained ascendance over the subject. In this case, analysis has led to obfuscation rather than clarification: the leadership manuals for sale in airport bookstores are about as convincing or useful as similar works that offer happiness, success, marital bliss or better sex. It’s an attempt to package and sell something that can’t be bought, and to give substance (and a price) to an abstract concept. At the same time, it transforms a straightforward idea into something mystical and obscure, into an elusive essence that people chase through the lines of self-help manuals and never quite grasp.

The fact is, trying to list the characteristics of a leader is like trying to read a man’s character in his face: more than impossible, it’s misleading. Leadership certainly doesn’t come from reading books of advice, nor is it conferred by a position – a manager who issues orders by dint of his hierarchical status in a company is not a leader, nor necessarily is the president of that same company. Keeping an office or business turning over, like turning the cogs in a machine, is not leadership. Just because you’re out there in front, doesn’t mean you know where you’re going.

Leadership is this: action fuelled by exceptional insight. In a word, a leader is a strategist. He or she is a catalyst for change and for achievement beyond normal routine or expectations. And that is why leadership is often a title applied after the fact, like a badge or a medal, an *a posteriori* recognition. Leadership is never an end *per se* and that is the fundamental fallacy of books on leadership. Leadership is always tied to a separate achievement or activity, whether that is winning a general election, supervising exceptional growth and expansion of a multinational company or captaining a winning

* Matthew Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, 1865.

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world cup team. You don't achieve leadership: you achieve something else, and you become a leader, like a badge of merit – so all those books on leadership should be telling you how to achieve that something else. The time would be better spent practicing your penalty shooting, rewriting your soap box speeches or reading the Financial Times.

As for the question of “What new ideas and perspectives will characterize the successful leaders of tomorrow?” – at the risk of sounding glib, I believe the question answers itself. New ideas and perspectives are what will characterize the leaders of tomorrow – as they always have in the past. A leader is characterized by his willingness to embrace, boldly and decisively, new ideas, technologies and trends – or better still, to be the one to instigate those new ideas, while others hesitate.

The concept of leadership isn't applied only to people, but to all front-rank endeavors: we speak of leading charities, companies and organizations. These are characterized by much the same features as a human leader. A recent example is the choice by *The Independent* to issue itself in tabloid format – a very successful decision quickly imitated by *The Times* and *The Guardian*. Imitation, of course, is the sincerest form of flattery. Leading companies, and the men and women that run them, are characterized by the desire to expand, to break new ground and to innovate.

Part 2: There go my people

It's misleading to think of leaders in terms of having followers, inspiring obedience or slavish respect. This attitude is another myth perpetuated by the manuals. Nor is leadership a popularity contest. If leadership depended on charisma and “people skills”, then con-men, game-show hosts and pop starlets would be among our greatest leaders. I said above: “A leader is characterized by his willingness to embrace, boldly and decisively, new ideas, technologies and trends – or better still, to be the one to instigate those new ideas”. Leaders are not simply a source for strategic planning and original thinking, but must be able to promote them in others. Leadership today is about empowering individuals, helping them to achieve, not controlling them. As Ralph Nader

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states, “I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers”.

The ever wider accessibility of education and the recent astonishing development of communication technology have created a context in which talent and originality can flourish like never before. Barriers of communication, class, privilege, nationality and diversity continue to fall. In most of the developed world, we are fortunate to live in a society which not only tolerates but actively rewards individuality, original thinking and entrepreneurship.

In a corporate context, the personal productivity of office employees has increased exponentially thanks to email, cell phones, international networking, mobile office technology and cheap travel. It is impossible for managers to supervise and follow their employees as closely as they did before. Increasing delegation and individual freedom of movement is inevitable, and this is reflected in the disintegration of the traditional workplace. Thanks to laptops, people can work from at home or abroad. It is increasingly common to have relaxed dress codes in offices. A fluid international job market means people can shop for jobs and change jobs more easily than ever before. In many cases it is no longer the firm that dictates an employee’s career, but rather the employee himself who forges his or her way forward from position to position up the employment ladder. The onus is on the companies to find new ways to motivate and inspire loyalty in their most expensive asset: their workforce.

Google – while falling from grace in many respects – has found an excellent way of empowering and motivating their skilled workforce. By requiring that their staff spend one fifth of their time on personal projects, they stimulate innovation, show appreciation for their employees and have found an excellent means to scout and promote leaders and original thinkers in their ranks.

Leadership today isn’t always about knowing the right answer, but it is about recognizing it when you see it – and appreciating the value of its source. As the French revolutionary

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Alexandre Ledru-Rollin commented, “There go my people. I must find out where they are going, so I can lead them”.

Part 3: Spreading the good word

In an ideas-based society leadership has come to focus on the empowerment of others not control. The age of the *eminence grise* has passed. It is partly through the cult of leadership created by a society that reveres entrepreneurship, original thinking and decisive action – as well as through communication technology – it is ever easier to hear individual or dissenting voices, and for catalysts of change to stand out. The internet, one of the principal means enabling this entrepreneurial society, has developed thanks to the leadership of individuals: Jeff Bezos, Pierre Omidyar, Larry Page, Sergei Brin, Craig Newmark and Jimmy Wales.

The internet has also put the world in the palm of our hand. Julius Caesar believed he “would rather be first in a village than second in the empire”. Today, there is no such thing as a village. Globalization and the internet have united the world. A recent article in *The Times* discussed organized protests by doctors in Germany over wages. Doctors in Germany are paid an average of 60,000 euros a year, while the same doctor in the UK would receive more than the equivalent sum in pounds. The result was – thanks to the EU – a migration of medical professionals from Germany to the UK. The resulting shortfall in Germany is being filled by Polish doctors, who are very happy to receive 60,000 a year, in comparison to the 9,000 euros a year they could expect at home. In this new reality, Leaders can no longer afford to think locally or even nationally. (Meanwhile, who’s curing the Polish is anyone’s guess.)

Not only is the world a smaller place, the pace of change has accelerated. In India outsourced call centers have created – in a matter of a few years – a whole new class of young urban professionals. They adopt western names, speak multiple languages and live their lives according to the rhythm of the time-zone they work in, sleeping when their clients across the globe sleep, and working when their clients work. Their work link to

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the west has led to cultural change too, and the lifestyles of these young Indians more closely resembles that of their western counterparts – night clubs, alcohol and fashionable clothing – than many of the older generations in India would like.

We divide the world between developed countries and developing countries. Some see the economic growth of developing countries as a threat to the dominance of the West and are afraid of the competition that they increasingly represent, but these need to be seen as opportunities and new markets. Ralph Nader's quote about "the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers" holds true in the development of nations too.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, the Twentieth Century was The Age of Extremes. So far, it seems like the Twenty-First will be The Age of Change. A leader, whether intellectual, political or corporate has to face a world that is demographically and technologically changing faster than ever. Indeed it is his role to help bring this about.

Conclusion

Leadership is action fuelled by exceptional insight. Leading is always a means to an end, never an objective in itself. Leadership is impossible to define except in these general terms, because it is applicable to almost every sphere of human activity. Throughout this brief essay I have concentrated on what is generally applicable, on ideas and perspectives that will motivate and challenge leaders, whatever their field of activity. Creating a society of leaders rather than followers, seizing the opportunities offered by modern technology and facing up to the challenges of a globalized world are incumbent on us all.

There is one aspect of great leadership that exists as a constant, both in the past and in the future. Great leadership is characterized by an ability to see beyond the short-term risks and rewards of a given situation and not to be limited to narrower considerations of profit and loss, instead looking towards a greater good for all. This is more arduous than just acting unselfishly or philanthropically; it calls for an ongoing commitment to reconciling

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the ambitions of the few with the needs of the many. In short, keeping one eye on the ground and another on the horizon. This is, of course, easier said than done.