

Moral Leadership: An Overview

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ABSTRACT. This paper develops and examines the distinctions between the process of leadership, the person of the leader, and the job of leading. I argue that leadership is a delicate combination of the *process*, the techniques of leadership, the *person*, the specific talents and traits of a/the leader, and the general requirements of the *job* itself. The concept of leadership can and must be distinguishable and definable separately from our understanding of what and who leaders are, although the phenomenon of leadership can only be known and measured in the particular instantiation of a leader doing a job.

Introduction

In 1948, Chester Barnard, noted management scholar, wrote that research in “leadership has been the subject of an extraordinary amount of dogmatically stated nonsense.”¹ In 1978, the dean of modern leadership studies, James MacGregor Burns, put it slightly more charitably when he wrote: “Leadership is one of the . . . least understood phenomena on earth.”²

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The sting and the irony of this criticism is even more painful when you consider that no other topic in the behavioral sciences has been more studied and more written about than leadership.³ Ralph Stogdill and Bernard Bass, in their separate and combined works, itemized and analyzed some 4,725 studies of leadership prior to 1981; and a recent study claims that, not counting magazine and newspaper articles, there were 132 books published on leadership during the 1980s alone.⁴

The problem then is not a lack of research, but rather a lack of agreement on fundamentals. As one wag has put it: “Next to economic theory, never has so much been written on the same topic – resulting in so little agreement on the most elemental propositions in the field.”

Joseph C. Rost in his important book, *Leadership For the Twenty-First Century*, claims that the problem is rock-bottom basic. The field of leadership studies lacks definitional clarity and consensus regarding its two most primary terms, leadership and leader(s).

Rost claims that most leadership scholarship has been a mishmash of mythology, mistakes and misunderstanding.⁵ Of the 587 books, chapters and articles (written between 1900 and 1989) Rost researched in preparation for his text, only 221 of them gave a definition of leadership. The other 366 offered no definition, either, he claims, because they assumed knowledge on everyone’s part or because they feared that an explicit definition would be proven wrong. Moreover, said Rost, of the 190 definitions offered, most did not distinguish leadership from the numerous other social processes which human beings use to coordinate, direct, control and govern others. And worse still, all of them, after analysis, can

be reduced to the equation: “Good Leadership is equal to Good Management.” (What Rost refers to as the fallacy of the “Industrial Paradigm of Leadership.) Rost contends that, for any discipline to be on solid ground and to pursue its topic in a focused manner, it must at least be able to define itself clearly.⁶

Unfortunately, even with this admonition, the problem which remains is that leadership is still conventionally defined, by scholars and laymen alike, either by the social role of leadership or by what leaders do.

According to John Gardner, leadership should never be confused with status, power, position, rank or title.

Even in large corporations and government agencies, the top-ranking person may simply be bureaucrat number one. We have all occasionally encountered top persons who couldn't lead a squad of seven-year-olds to the ice cream counter.⁷

And as my colleague Jill Graham has correctly pointed out: “Appropriate labels for the person giving orders, monitoring compliance, and administering performance-contingency rewards and punishment include ‘supervisor’ and ‘manager’, but *not* ‘leader’.”⁸

Just as leadership is not equivalent to office-holding, prestige, authority or decision making,⁹ a true and complete definition of leadership cannot be drawn simply from the personality traits and behaviors of particular leaders. Such an attempt may produce an informative biographical account of the leader in question, but may not result in any real insights into the art of leadership.

So the question remains, what is leadership and how can it be defined? I believe that leadership is a delicate combination of the *process*, the techniques of leadership, the *person*, the specific talents and traits of a/the leader, and the general requirements of the *job* itself. I am convinced that although the concept of leadership can and must be distinguishable and definable separately from our understanding of what and who leaders are, the phenomenon of leadership can only be known and measured in the particular instantiation of a leader doing a job. In other words, while the terms “leadership” and “leader” are not

synonymous, the reality of leadership cannot be separated from the person as leader and the job of leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to further develop and examine the distinctions between the process, the person and the job by offering a working definition of leadership, which draws heavily on the writings of Burns and Rost, and then by presenting a limited list of characteristics, conditions, talents and traits that make up the leader/leadership phenomenon and the specific jobs of leadership.

I am hopeful that my efforts will not just add to the accumulation of bibliographical mishmash that I spoke of earlier. The aim of this paper is simply to help focus the debate into a more (dare I use the term?) manageable format.

The process

Leadership is a power and value laden relationship between leaders and followers/constituents who intend real change(s) that reflect their mutual, purpose(s) and goal(s).¹⁰

Given this definition there are a number of essential elements that must be present if leadership exists or is occurring.

Power

All forms of leadership must make use of power. However, power need not be coercive, dictatorial or punitive to be affective. Power can also be used in a non-coercive manner to orchestrate, mobilize, direct and guide members of an institution or organization in the pursuit of a goal or series of objectives.

The term power comes from the Latin *posse*: to do, to be able, to change, to effect. In general power is about control, the ability to produce intended effects or results. To have power is to possess the capacity to control or direct change. According to Adolf Berle, power is a universal human experience. Every person has had a measure of power, whether great or small, for a brief moment or for an extended period of time. Berle believes that there are five basic laws of

power. These laws apply wherever and at whatever level power appears, whether it be that of a mother in her nursery, a CEO of a Fortune 500 firm, an elected politician or the dictator of a nation state.

- (1) Power fills any vacuum in human organizations. In a choice between power and chaos, power always prevails.
- (2) Power is always personal. There is no such thing as “class power”, “elite power” or “group power.”
- (3) Power is based on and emanates from a system of ideas or philosophy.
- (4) Power is exercised through and depends on institutions. Institutions limit, control, confer and/or can withdraw power.
- (5) Power always acts within and is responsive to a field of responsibilities and tasks.¹¹

The central issue of power in leadership is not will it used; but, rather, will it be used wisely and well? In the best of all possible worlds scenario, those who seek power should seek it out of a sense of stewardship and not for the purposes of personal aggrandizement and career advancement. The ideal model of this can be found in *The Republic* where Socrates’ guardians see their office as a social responsibility, a trust, a duty and not as a symbol of their personal identity, prestige and lofty status.

Of course, the juggling act of wielding power ultimately lies in the ability to balance and integrate the natural conflict which exists between standard definitions, utopian ideals, historic necessity and the peculiar quirks and needs of the individual personalities who aspire to power.

Value laden

I believe that Tom Peters and Bob Waterman were correct when they stated: “The real role of leadership is to manage the values of an organization.”¹² All leadership is value laden. All leadership, whether good or bad, is moral leadership.

To put it more accurately, all leadership is ideologically driven or motivated by a certain philosophical perspective which may or may not

prove to be moral in a more colloquial or normative sense. The point is, all leadership claims a particular point of view or philosophical package of ideas it wishes to advocate and advance. All forms of leadership try to establish the guidelines, set the tone and control the manners and morals of the constituency of which they are a part.

Although we regularly hold up for praise the moral leadership of Lincoln, Churchill, Gandhi and Mother Teresa; like it or not Hitler, Stalin, Hussein and David Koresh must also be considered moral leaders of a sort!

Leaders and followers/constituents

One of the most common errors in leadership literature is the equation of leadership with the ability of a leader to lead.¹³ Leadership, however, does not exclusively reside in the leader. Rather it is a dynamic relationship between leaders and followers alike. Leadership is always plural; it always occurs within the context of others.

E. P. Hollander has argued that while the leader is the central and often the most vital part of the leadership phenomenon, followers are important and necessary factors in the equation.

Without responsive followers there is no leadership . . . (Leadership) involves someone who exerts influence, and those who are influenced . . . The real “power” of a leader lies in his or her ability to influence followers . . . Leadership is a process of influence which involves an ongoing transaction between a leader and followers.¹⁴

In fact, I believe the argument can be advanced – in partial response to the “bewhiskered question”¹⁵ are leaders born or made? – that leaders, good or bad, great or small arise out of the needs and opportunities of a specific time and place. I believe that great leaders require great causes, great issues, and most importantly, a hungry and willing constituency. If this were not true, at least in part, would any of us have ever heard of Lech Walesa, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Nelson Mandela? “Leaders and followers,” Burns wrote, “are engaged in a

common enterprise; they are dependent on each other, their fortunes rise and fall together.”¹⁶

Leaders and followers intend real change(s)

All forms of leadership are essentially about transformation.¹⁷ Leadership is not about maintaining the status quo; it is about initiating change in an organization. Simply sustaining the status quo is equivalent to institutional stigmatism. “The leadership process,” said Burns, “must be defined . . . as carrying through from decision-making stages to the point of concrete changes in people’s lives, attitudes, behaviors (and) institutions . . .”¹⁸ While the process of leadership always involves a certain number of transactional exchanges – that is, short-term changes and the trading of benefits to meet immediate and appropriate wants and needs – transformational change means the pursuit of new concrete, substantive and not incidental changes.

Of course, while the ultimate test of practical leadership is the realization of actual change that meets people’s enduring the long term needs, the real issue in the process is the Kantian one of intent.¹⁹ Transformation is about leaders and followers *intending* real changes to happen and pursuing them actively. As John Gardner has pointed out, consequences are never a reliable assessment of leadership.²⁰ The quality and worth of leadership cannot be measured solely in terms of achievements. Ultimately and ethically, commitment and concerted effort are as important as outcome.

Mutual purposes and goals

If leadership is an active and ongoing relationship between leaders and followers, then the central requirement of the leadership process is for leaders to evoke consensus in their constituencies, and conversely, for followers to inform and influence their leadership.

“Leadership mobilizes, naked power coerces”, said Burns.²¹ Leadership must “engage” its followers, not merely direct them. Leaders must serve as models and mentors, not martinets.

Leaders must be effective teachers and through education and the policy of empowerment make their followers “collaborators”²² and reciprocally co-responsible in the pursuit of a common enterprise. In the end, says Abraham Zaleznik, “Leadership is based on a compact that binds those who lead with those who follow into the same moral, intellectual and emotional commitment.”²³

However, as both Burns and Rost warn us, the nature of this “compact” is inherently unequal because the influence patterns existing between leaders and followers are unequal. Responsive and responsible leadership requires, as a minimum, that democratic mechanisms be put in place which recognize the right of followers to have adequate knowledge of alternative leadership styles, goals and programs, as well as the capacity to choose between them. In leadership, writ large, mutually agreed upon purposes help people achieve consensus, assume responsibility, work for the common good and build community.²⁴

The person

Given my definition of leadership and the thesis that the process of leadership cannot be separated from the person as leader, I now want to examine those traits and talents that are required of an individual if he or she is going to adequately fulfill the role of leader.

Character

In *Character: America’s Search for Leadership*, Gail Sheehy argues that character is the most crucial and most illusive element of leadership. The root of the word “character” comes from the Greek word for engraving. As applied to human beings, it refers the enduring marks, engravings or etched-in factors in our personality which include our inborn talents as well as the learned and acquired traits imposed upon us by life and experience. These engravings define us, set us apart and motivate our behavior.

In regard to leadership, says Sheehy, character

is both fundamental and prophetic. The “issues (of leadership) are today and will change in time. Character is what was yesterday and will be tomorrow.”²⁵ For Sheehy, character establishes both our day-to-day demeanor and our destiny. Therefore it is not only useful but essential to examine the character of those who desire to lead us. As a journalist and long time observer of the political scene, Sheehy contends that the Watergate affair of the early 1970s serves as a perfect example of the links between character and leadership. As Richard Nixon demonstrated so well: “The Presidency is not the place to work out one’s personal pathology . . .”²⁶

Leaders rule us, run things, wield power. Therefore, says Sheehy, we must be careful about who we chose to lead. Because who we chose, is what we shall be. If character is destiny, the destiny our leaders reap will be our own.

Charisma

While the exact role, definition, and function of a charismatic leader is the center of much controversy in the literature of leadership, I want to make a much more modest claim for the necessity of charisma in the person of the leader.

I am convinced that leadership is as much an emotional relationship between leaders and followers as it is a jural or legalistic one.²⁷ Whether through personality, performance, presentation, image, mind or message, effective leaders must win-over, at a very basic human level, those they lead.

By charisma I do not mean spiritual aura, celebrity status, hypnotic powers or even rhetorical eloquence. I mean, as a minimum, that leaders must possess enough self esteem to be seen, heard and understood in order to engender confidence and cooperation from their constituency. Warren Bennis in his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, offered a definition of a leader which he did not specifically refer to as charismatic, but one, I think, that nicely sums up the definition I am suggesting

[Leaders are] People who are able to express themselves fully. They know who they are, what their

strengths and weaknesses are, and how to fully deploy their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. They also know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others in order to gain their cooperation and support.²⁸

Political ambition

Although I have argued against those that covet power for purposes of personal aggrandizement or career advancement, there must be those who seek and want power. Without ambition we are caught in the Socratic conundrum of having to force leadership on otherwise reluctant individuals by dint of mythology, prescribed duty and the force of law.

Ambition is not necessarily bad or pathological, and political ambition need not simply be the quest for power to the exclusion of other motives. Citing the works of Abraham Maslow, Burns contends that ambition, fueled by a strong sense of self esteem, is the most potent and beneficial motivator for those who seek power. According to Maslow, people who possess self esteem (self-actualization) have a clearer sense of self and others, egoism and objectivity, individual and communal rights, basic and growth needs and are not threatened by ambiguity, conflict and consensus. Self actualizers, Maslow believes, are not motivated by unfulfilled ego needs. They do not need “recognition” or to “make a mark.” Rather they seek to “make a difference,” by contributing to the collective whole.²⁹ They seek to contribute in the way that John Adams sought to contribute.

I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, in order to give their children the right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.³⁰

Know-how

Perhaps the most important contribution of Joseph Rost's *Leadership For the Twenty-First Century* is his thesis that leadership should not be studied solely from the perspective of a single discipline such as business leadership, educational leadership or political leadership. Leadership studies, he claims, requires a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to fully understand and practice leadership.³¹

While I want to agree with this overall thesis, I also want to uphold the principle that leadership as practiced in a particular profession is different from leadership as practiced in other professions. In other words, while the general techniques of leadership and the qualities of the leader remain the same, the specific task requirements of leadership vary with the "business" at hand.

Leadership in different areas requires different technical expertise. To use Warren Bennis' term, leaders must possess "business literacy". That is, leaders must have knowledge of and be experts at what they are doing. They must have horizontal and vertical knowledge of how the "business" works and a full understanding of what is required to do the task well.³²

The jobs of leadership

Lifting a page from John Gardner, I want to turn to a short list of the jobs of leadership and the leader. While individuals differ strikingly in how well they perform these various jobs, how they perform them will determine, to a large extent, how their leadership skills will be evaluated.³³

Vision

The first and central job of leadership is that effective leaders must create and communicate a clear vision of what they stand for, what they want to achieve and what they expect from their followers.

This is the phenomenon that George Bush derisively referred to as "the vision-thing". And

both his comment and the issue, in a very real sense, helped to bring down his presidency. Too many Americans saw Bush as a bureaucrat and a clerk, but not as an innovator and leader on the issues. As one political analyst summed up the last six months of the Bush administration: "Without vision, leadership degenerates into crowd control, and, more often than not, ineffective crowd control at best!"

However, even though vision is central to leadership, the visions offered need not always be Nobel Prize winning accomplishments or involve Herculean efforts. For success to be possible, visions must be doable, attainable. Any task or vision – no matter how vital or important – when too large, will, more often than not, prove too overwhelming to accomplish or even attempt. At the very least, the visions of leadership must offer direction as well as hope.

Managing

Leadership and management are not the same thing. One can be a leader without being a manager. Conversely, one can manage without leading. Nevertheless, logistically these two jobs often overlap.

Abraham Zaleznick offers a reasonably neutral definition and distinction between the two terms.

The crucial difference between managers and leaders is in their respective commitments. A manager is concerned with *how* decisions get made and *how* communications flow; a leader is concerned with *what* decisions get made and *what* he or she communicates.³⁴

This definition implies that leaders are involved in strategy, and that managers are more concerned with the operational side of a given enterprise. But what this definition does not imply is the all-too-common fallacy of associating the people practicing leadership with the "good guys in white hats"; and the people practicing management as the "bad guys in black hats" who are mediocre, bungling, bureaucrats, unqualified and unsuited to lead.³⁵ Nor does this definition imply that management is an important but insufficient process in the operation of

organizations; whereas leadership is necessary and needed at all times.

Management and leadership are two distinct and necessary ingredients in the life of every organization. Leadership is not just good management, but good management is part of the overall job description of every leader. To turn around a quote from H. Ross Perot: “In successful organizations, both its people and its inventories are well led and well managed.”³⁶ Moreover, given our definition of leadership as a dynamic relationship between leaders and followers, at times – leaders must manage managers, and managers must manage by leading.

Stakeholdership

Through their conduct and policy, leaders, within the context of any job, must try to make their fellow constituents aware that they are all stakeholders in a conjoint activity that cannot succeed without their involvement and commitment. Successful leadership believes in and communicates some version of the now famous Hewlett Packard motto: “The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined efforts of each individual.”

At the operational or “shop-floor” level, at least three overlapping policies must be operative in order to translate the concept of stakeholder-ship from theory to fact. *Participation*: Leaders must actively participate in the life of an organization. But it is not enough to just walk through the shop, say hello and be seen. Participation means asking questions, getting involved, spending time, and trouble shooting.³⁷ *Trust*: Trusting one’s constituents means living out the belief that people will respond well when treated like adults. Certainly, some individuals will abuse that trust, but the hope is that most will thrive, grow and prove more productive because of it. *Risk taking*: Successful leaders must clearly communicate that creativity and innovation are prized commodities. Therefore, autonomy and experimentation are encouraged, and, conversely, failure is tolerated and not viewed negatively. The message here should be a clear one: “Only those with confidence and ability sometimes fail. The

mediocre and those who are insecure in what they are doing never dare to risk either success or failure.”

Responsibility

“Leadership”, said Burns, “is grounded in conscious choice among real alternates. Hence, leadership assumes competition and conflict, and brute power denies it.”³⁸ Leaders, of whatever particular profession, do not shun conflict; they confront it, exploit it and ultimately take responsibility for the choices and decisions they are able to hammer out of it.³⁹

Leaders must assume full responsibility for their choices and commitments, successes and failures. If and when they promise certain kinds of change and cannot bring about that change, they must be willing to stand down.

The final job of leadership is knowing when to go.

Conclusion

Leadership is never tidy. “Any attempt to describe a social process as complex as leadership inevitably makes it seem more orderly than it is.”⁴⁰ Few examples neatly fit into the definitional molds we have fashioned. Nevertheless, I want to conclude my remarks with an example which, perhaps, brings together the three issues of this paper “the *Process*, the *Person* and the *Job*.”

In a recent book, *The Mask of Command*, the British war historian John Keegan argues that Alexander the Great was one of the most, if not the most, effective generals in history. Keegan’s contention is based on the fact that Alexander both made the plans for battle and then literally led his troops into battle.

Keegan maintains that Alexander’s men followed him, had confidence in him as well as in themselves, because Alexander shared their life and all of their risks. In many ways, said Keegan, Alexander’s army was a collection of individuals who shared the same ideals and goals. They knew that their literal survival – not just financial success and career advancement – was totally

dependent on the commitment and energy of their fellow worker-warriors.

For Keegan, Alexander was an heroic leader because he inspired achievement and took the risks. Alexander did not simply command or demand obedience from his men. Rather, he convinced them of his vision and lived it out with them.

Not so surprisingly, said Keegan, when, because of his many wounds, Alexander was no longer able to participate in battle and lead by example, he lost control of his army and they voted to stop their conquests, turn back and go home.⁴¹

To reiterate the words of Abraham Zaleznick: "Leadership is based on a compact that binds those that lead with those who follow into the same moral, intellectual and emotional commitment."⁴²

Notes

¹ C. I. Bernard: 1948, *Organizations and Management* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge), p. 80.

² James MacGregor Burns: 1979 *Leadership* (Harper Torchbooks, New York), p. 2.

³ W. B. Bennis: 1959, 'Leadership Theory and Administrative Behavior: The Problem With Authority', *Administrative Science Quarterly* **4**, 259-301.

⁴ J. C. Rost: 1993, *Leadership For the Twenty-First Century* (Praeger, Westport, Connecticut), p. 69.

⁵ Rost, p. 149.

⁶ Rost, pp. 94, 136, 179.

⁷ J. W. Gardner: 1990, *On Leadership* (The Free Press, New York), p. 2.

⁸ J. W. Graham: 1988, 'Transformational Leadership: Fostering Follower Autonomy, Not Automatic Followership.' In J. G. Hunt, B. R. Baliga, H. P. Crachler and C. A. Schriesheim (eds.), *Emerging Leadership Vistas* (Lexington Books, Lexington MA), p. 74.

⁹ P. Selznick: 1957, *Leadership in Administration* (Row, Peterson, Evanston, III), p. 24.

¹⁰ Rost, p. 102.

¹¹ A. A. Berle: 1969, *Power* (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York), p. 37.

¹² T. Peters, B. Waterman: 1982, *In Search of Excellence* (Harper and Row, New York), p. 245.

¹³ Rost, p. 43.

¹⁴ E. P. Hollander: 1978, *Leadership Dynamics* (The Free Press, New York), pp. 4, 5, 6, 12.

¹⁵ Gardner, p. 6.

¹⁶ Burns, p. 426.

¹⁷ Rost, p. 123.

¹⁸ Burns, p. 414.

¹⁹ Burns, p. 461.

²⁰ Gardner, p. 8.

²¹ Burns, p. 439.

²² B. Nanus: 1989, *The Leader's Edge* (Contemporary Books, Chicago), pp. 51, 52.

²³ A. Zaleznick: 1990, 'The Leadership Gap', *Academy of Management Executive* **4**(1), 12.

²⁴ Rost, p. 124.

²⁵ G. Sheehy: 1990, *Character: America's Search for Leadership* (Bantam Books, New York), p. 311.

²⁶ Sheehy, p. 66.

²⁷ W. H. Kracke: 1978, *Force and Persuasion: Leadership In An Amazonian Society* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), p. 34.

²⁸ W. G. Bennis: 1989, *On Becoming a Leader* (Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA), p. 89.

²⁹ Burns, pp. 116, 117.

³⁰ Burns, p. 31.

³¹ Rost, pp. 1, 2.

³² W. G. Bennis: Sept. 7, 1992, *NPR - Marketplace* (USC Radio).

³³ Gardner, p. 11.

³⁴ Zaleznick, p. 14.

³⁵ Rost, pp. 140, 141.

³⁶ Rost, p. 141. (H. Ross Perot, 'People cannot be managed. Inventories can be managed, but people must be led.').

³⁷ John McDonald: 1989, *Global Quality* (Mercury Books, John Piggott Lowdon).

³⁸ Burns, p. 36.

³⁹ Burns, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Gardner, p. 22.

⁴¹ J. Keegan: 1987, *The Mask of Command* (Viking Press, New York).

⁴² Zaleznick, p. 12.

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