



Why 'leadership' is so difficult – and elusive

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Abstract

This paper suggests that as the focus on 'leadership' has intensified over recent years, the quality of management in both public and private sectors has diminished. The two phenomena may be linked. Our capacity to run things properly and to manage people in a dignified and productive way has been trammelled by an over-emphasis on the behavioural and a consequent under-emphasis on authority, role clarity and task. The managerial vacuum thus created has been filled, imperfectly, by executive coaching and a range of other 'learning and development' stratagems. In the real world of complex systems, management and leadership are merely opposite sides of the same coin.

Key words

Leadership; management; public good; managerial leadership; failures; coaching.

All we can say for certain is that nowadays we are awash with 'leadership' – or at any rate we are obsessed by the idea of leadership. Bookshelves groan under tomes on the subject, the airwaves are filled with learned discourse on the subject and the public at large apparently yearns for it – whatever it is. Yet there is no easy way to pin down what it is we pine for. We talk of 'leadership failings' and of a 'crisis of leadership' – especially in politics – without actually being able to specify what we lack or what we want. There has never been a shortage of lists of supposed leadership traits – each one contradicted by special cases, by those people acknowledged as 'leaders' who seem to break all the rules.

It wasn't always like this. Forty years ago, if we re-examine the media and textbooks of the time, our collective anxiety was attached to 'management' – especially in British business and industry. The fear was, justified it seems,

that we were not very good at running things properly. Things were always going wrong, sometimes expensively so, and the people in charge of things ought therefore to be trained in 'modern management techniques'. In the 1960s we created a couple of prestigious business schools in London and Manchester, modelled on the Harvard Business School, to teach these 'techniques' and within a very few years scores of copycat institutions emerged from the academic establishment.

In parallel, all the big bean-counting firms climbed aboard the management bandwagon and began to offer 'management consultancy' to the private and public sector alike. The new business schools began to churn out MBAs to staff all the new consultancies. As time passed, many of the real 'managers' – the people tasked with running things properly – began to rely on the professors and consultants to tell them what to do. In other words, they

stopped doing any managing at all and began to take dictation. It was at this point, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the 'leadership' notion began to take over.

The source of management

If we are to learn from experience (after all that is what the most effective managers do), it might pay us to examine where the 'management' idea came from in the first place. Modern management was more or less invented by the late Peter Drucker (1954) after World War Two but he was building on an older idea with an intriguing history in Britain. The neologism 'management' actually entered the English language in the early 16th century – as a general description of the act of running things, or running things properly.

Initially, it was spelled interchangeably – *maneg* or *menag* – which tells us that right from the start it was a kind of unisex word. The *maneg* spelling derived from *maneggiare* (the Italian for controlling a horse or other unpredictable challenge) and the *menag* from *menager* (the French for careful housekeeping or similar pursuit). So, by the 20th century, it made perfect sense for a 'manager' of industrial relations (the chief union-basher) to ask his wife (with two sick kids and a broken washing-machine) 'how did you manage today?'

At any rate, it was Drucker who appropriated the word to describe the activities of the men (rarely women) charged with running very large enterprises properly. Drucker had grasped that complexity was the new enemy and that the operation of the biggest post-war firms required a systematic approach – as well as inspiration and decisiveness. So he virtually invented the management movement and thus, by extension, management theory, management education, management consultancy, 'management by objectives' and, arguably, a management 'industry'. In redefining management, he took the leadership component of the work for granted.

Drucker died only in 2005, late enough to be appalled by the way that 'leadership' had swamped and distorted the homely idea of running things properly. In 1947, he had said: '*management is leadership!*' (quoted in Edersheim, 2007). He knew that competent management was mainly what most employees

down the line really wanted and needed. He was backed up by virtually every survey of employee attitudes conducted over the last 20 years. With remarkable consistency, the two main employee dissatisfiers turned out to be the perceived incompetence of higher management and what was euphemistically referred to as 'office politics'. In other words, once the 'leadership' bandwagon started to roll, the boys in the top 'management' suite started to seem increasingly like self-interested dummies.

Leadership contrasted

As we turn our attention to 'leadership' it is worth remembering that Drucker was never a businessman or an academic. Throughout his long and illustrious career he remained essentially a journalist – but an incredibly well-connected one. He grew up in a wealthy and cosmopolitan household routinely peopled by the great and the good of between-the-wars Vienna. While he remained in Europe, his main employment was with the rather successful Rothschild family. Once he got to America, a fugitive from his fellow Austrian Adolf Hitler, he got to work with the most senior bosses of AT&T, General Electric and other business behemoths. He always kept good company, and he kept his eyes open.

This is important because if we are ever to understand what 'leadership' really means today, we might have to adopt Drucker's approach. He never set out to 'research' management systems or to codify management rules or to dictate how managers should behave. He simply described, as a good journalist should, what the most successful managers actually did – because it seemed to work. Drucker was an empiricist. He was in good company. His near contemporaries Sune Carlson (2001: *Executive Behaviour*) and Russ Ackoff (1957: *Introduction to Operations Research*) were simultaneously drawing attention to what happens in practice – rather than lecturing others on what they ought to be doing. And, like Drucker, they assumed that the managers of the new big systems had to deal with complexity by exercising their best judgement.

The Chartered Management Institute in the UK very sensibly refers to both management and leadership in its various publications, thus avoiding the bad habit of the American academic world of splitting the ideas in two – on the one hand management (seen

as plodding and rather bureaucratic – ‘doing things right’) and on the other leadership (seen as inspirational and bravely risk-taking – ‘doing the right things’). If we proceed from the usual litany of employee dissatisfactions, we can see that management and leadership are actually opposite sides of the same coin. Those people who combine an instinct for running a ship-shape operation with the skill to position the operation sensibly in relation to the external world are the people remembered with gratitude and affection as ‘good bosses’.

Most people hate to be caught up in a system that just doesn’t work – it is dispiriting and energy-sapping and in the end depressing. John Seddon (2008) points out that we have now created a ‘failure demand’ industry in which armies of call-centre workers attempt to deal with corporate failure with very little chance of actually adding value by solving customer problems. It is soul-destroying, endlessly repetitive work, which is why these ‘factories’ (Seddon’s term) always experience such high staff turnover. No doubt the bosses of these factories are exhorted by their bosses to exercise ‘leadership’ of their demoralised staff. But how?

Conversely, most of us have had some experience in our lives of being part of a seamlessly well-functioning team – enough, at any rate, to know how incredibly rewarding, in the spiritual sense, it can be. So there is more to good management than mere efficiency – helping to produce good quality outputs in a timely fashion gives us the same satisfactions that we used to get in nursery school when we achieved something difficult. It is quite a basic need.

But producing good outputs is only half the battle – the managerial side of the equation. Producing good *outcomes* calls for an extra layer of contextualisation. The good boss managerially makes sure that the operation runs smoothly – the good boss as leader draws us into the uses to which our outputs are put ‘downstream’ and helps us to see why it is important and valuable to the outside world in the longer-term – how it ‘adds value’ in the jargon of systems. When this happens, the *destination* determined by the boss becomes the ‘leader’. Of course, that additional leadership dimension cannot be achieved at all if the overall enterprise’s purposes are trivial, opaque or even pernicious.

The public good

Take the case of Enron, which began life as the Houston Natural Gas Company – dedicated to piping various gases and fluids to where they were needed to be useful. If it was run well it was well managed, and modestly profitable. If all its employees, from top to bottom, were signed up to the practical benefits that its pipes brought to the surrounding communities, then we may argue it was well-led – towards serving that need. The management and the leadership proceeded in lock-step so that it would have made sense to describe the act of running the enterprise as ‘managerial leadership’. In its useful phase, the company was not obsessed by ‘leadership’ at all because the destination to which the firm pointed had a taken-for-granted usefulness.

Then, a few bright sparks figured out that you might be able to make much more money by inventing a new kind of ‘market’ for trading options and futures and, better still, that market could be made so complex that no public regulator could possibly get to grips with its intricacies. It was only when Enron got into this new kind of ‘business’ that it began to sell the idea of ‘leadership’ to its staff and to its shareholders. It was almost as if the useful outcome itself had previously provided the leadership context all by itself – there was no need to sell the idea. This may explain why charities and not-for-profit organisations are rarely obsessed by leadership – the destination of the enterprise, the objective of the leading, is obvious to everybody and manifestly valuable.

On the historical evidence, both Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler were poor managers and the latter was surprisingly lazy as well. As to leadership, we could argue that Hitler’s achievement was the more remarkable because it entailed seducing millions of Germans away from their religious and civic principles – quite a feat of persuasion. Churchill had the easier leadership job because the value-add (protecting the motherland against barbarians) was so much more attractive than the German task of projecting the fatherland into aggressive plunder. Yet, very few people see Hitler as a great leader because his project was so wicked. It seems we reserve the notion of ‘leadership’ for the prosecution of some kind of public good.

If we accept that all positions of authority contain a managerial element (throughput plus output) and a leadership element (outcomes)

then we can pinpoint what goes wrong and what leads to subordinates' dissatisfaction. The desired outcome may be valuable but the means by which it is achieved may be indefensible. Life insurance, for example, is an undoubted good but the means by which it may be mis-sold is sometimes shameful. By contrast, Hitler's *gauleiter* probably carried out their duties diligently and efficiently; the problem was the duties themselves. No one doubts that the intentions of all public services are honourable, but sometimes public service itself can be disfigured by careerism, internecine competitiveness, gross inefficiency and a structural disconnect between the throughput process and the supposed beneficiaries. When this happens, people tend to complain about their 'leadership'.

Failures of leadership

This latter problem can be corrosive, and not just in public service. It doesn't matter how well a manager conducts the department or section internally – if there is no clear delivery pathway to a better situation for citizens then there can be no leadership as such. 'Motivating' people without connecting to true value-adding is merely psychological conjuring. The traditional civil service division between 'policy' and 'delivery' can make the contextualisation of work impossible. In the absence of a means of dedicating oneself to achieving valuable outcomes, people can easily fall into the displacement activity of chasing promotions instead. Then the tail wags the dog.

The constant shifting of government departmental boundaries adds to the sense of churn and disconnect. What is the logic behind these reconfigurations and which civil servants offer strong advice on the unworkability of illogical groupings of activity? Who else is in a position to exercise clear intellectual leadership when it comes to the machinery of government itself? The civil servant placed in charge of an unmanageable collection of activities may be blamed by subordinates and superiors alike for failures of 'leadership' when the true cause is structural. The 'Sir Humphrey' version of events suggests that all this obfuscation is quite deliberate – a way of thwarting ministers' intentions and protecting civil service jobs.

When employees are asked to list all the hundreds of activities that their system engages

in, it turns out to be quite easy to pinpoint those particular activities that cannot be shared with the boss – that is, those activities which only the boss can be held accountable for. Bosses in the private and public sectors alike need to know what these activities are so that they can concentrate on doing them well. On the managerial side, they are fairly straightforward – prioritising and timetabling work, auditing performance against targets, acting as advocate for the group, deploying resources, co-ordinating with other groups, planning improvements, disciplining staff and bringing energy to the work. It is a straightforward list but an important one – failure to cover all the bases can be disastrous, as Drucker recognised in the 1950s (Drucker, 1954).

On the 'leadership' side, it is also easy enough for subordinates to identify the activities that the boss must be accountable for, though others will share in their commission. On the intellectual side, the key activities are discerning future needs and giving strategic direction towards a valuable destination. On the human side, leadership consists in motivating staff towards the group's value-add, coaching individuals and acting as an exemplar of good behaviour. The importance of this aspect of leadership cannot be overstated.

The managerial leader as steward

Psychologists tell us that the family, in all its many manifestations, is the crucible of our behaviour and our deepest needs. If we have had the blessing of good parenting, we will continue to need that 'firm but fair' contexting throughout our lives. If we then find ourselves reporting to a person who cannot supply this nurturance, our dissatisfaction may be utterly demoralising. If we have not been so lucky in the family department (brought up fatherless, for example) we will still pine for an idealised version of family life whenever we fall under due authority. We may mistake it for crude power for a while but we have likely envied other, happier, families in the past and we will respond in the end with the utmost gratitude to the firm but fair hand. And we will be urged on to stretch ourselves and to do our very best to add value to our client system. The human side of leadership is much like good parenting – and example is all.

In the good family, as in the good organisation, there is a taken-for-granted quality about 'how things are done around here'. The rules may be written down but are probably not, although everybody understands what they are. There are no walls to proscribe errant behaviour, but clear lines on the ground to mark any transgression. It is not that the children are strictly disciplined but that they understand what the family is for – what its values are. Discipline largely comes from within. Above all, the good family is fair to everybody and expects all its members to do their best for everybody else. The whole is suffused with love. In the great organisation, everybody 'loves' the task at hand because its outcomes are so valuable and the work of achievement is so challenging. This is usually taken-for-granted in the not-for-profit world but only occasionally in the business world. It used to be taken for granted in public service.

So, in defining leadership, it makes sense to embrace both the strategic and the inspirational aspects. The destination has to make sense and the authority relationships have to be dignified and enriching if we are to accept that proper leadership has been exercised. Harry Truman is supposed to have opined:

'a leader is a man (sic) who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do – and like it!'

That captures the commonplace American view nicely – the essence of leadership lies in persuasiveness. So that definition would work for the call-centre manager charged with enthusing his demoralised people. It made sense for Arthur Miller in writing the great American play *Death of a Salesman*. The new fashion for 'leadership' in business – as opposed to good old-fashioned management – coincides with the rise of consumerism and materialism in society. In the last 30 years, bosses in big business have had to be increasingly persuasive.

Managerial leadership in the public sector

In 2010, there is a discernable concern about 'leadership' in governmental and public service systems – in general, a worry that the government and governance 'machine' may

be ailing or broken. In Australia, much of the concern has focused on ethical behaviour in and around government, following a series of 'public interest' scandals in recent years. So the forthcoming review of the Australian Public Service is bound to hone in on the provision of 'frank and fearless' advice, on the protection of whistle-blowers and the role of various ombudspersons. A former customs official, Alan Kessing, has become the Australian Clive Ponting or Daniel Ellsberg – except he was found guilty of leaking embarrassing information to the media.

In the UK, both the Institute for Government and the Sunningdale Institute seem to be more concerned with the way that the system itself functions or malfunctions as to 'joined-up' government and managerial competence generally. In both countries, there is worry about 'churn' of people (both ministers and 'high-flying' civil servants) and policies (churned out to order for the daily news cycle) – to the point where nothing seems to be sufficiently stable to ensure that a valued outcome can actually flow, over time, from a flurry of throughput and output initiatives. The centre, it seems, cannot hold.

There is a parallel worry about the connectedness of the 'policy' subsystem to the 'delivery' subsystem – a tacit acknowledgement, perhaps, that Drucker's worst fears have been realised – a total disconnect between the leadership element and the managerial aspect of productive work. So, if the people who dream up the bright ideas have no accountability for the prosecution of those ideas, and the people at or near to the 'frontline' have no authority to influence or shape the ideas, then not only has management become very difficult indeed but leadership has become, in a technical sense, impossible. If a system is set up to fail, it will fail. In that setting, teaching 'leadership' to anybody in an unmanageable system becomes a mug's game.

The rise of coaching

There may be a connection between all this dysfunction and the seemingly inexorable rise of 'coaching' as a leadership development tool. The fashionable rise of leadership coaching coincides with the waning of management. This may be more than coincidence. Senior executive coaches often report that their work

has become so necessary because nobody is being managed any more; the coaches are thus filling a managerial vacuum – in some senses taking over the managerial task from the formal 'line' of authority; yet another example of government outsourcing. In the old days, you could rely on the formal manager to supply the 'firm but fair' discipline and encouragement. Nowadays, it sometimes seems as if managerial authority and decision-making has been handed over to the big management consultancies in the hope that they can reduce genuine complexity to simple solutions – a very big tail indeed wagging the civil service dog.

If we take a leaf out of Peter Drucker's book and reverse-engineer our definition of 'leadership' we will take account, just as he did, of what seems to work and what most sensible people (and especially employees) take to be the essence of the activity. If we insist on separating out the managerial and the leadership aspects of running things properly (Drucker never saw the need to do so) we may conclude that management is mainly concerned with managing human role relationships in the process of turning inputs into value-added outputs and leadership is mainly about establishing an appropriate future destination for the particular enterprise or unit. That would mean acknowledging that:

- the unit to be led has to have a discrete 'whole task' to perform (neither half a task nor a task-and-a-half).
- the task's output has to be linked causally with a definable outcome in the outside world (perhaps in another 'downstream' department)
- the outcome has to be valued by all concerned – seen to 'add value'
- the person in charge is prepared and able to undertake a 'firm but fair' parent-like duty of care for all the staff concerned.

With those conditions in place, the 'leadership development' professional can get to work. Everything else – keeping the ship going – is 'management'.

It looks straightforward but if the wider system is structured in such a way that none or only a few of these conditions are satisfied, then the learning and development (L&D)

professional will be limited to 'management development' (valuable, but not the same thing). As one wag put it – the equivalent of giving a beautifully-engineered Ferrari to a man with the wrong map – he will get to a pointless place faster.

The good news and the bad news

The new enthusiasm for 'leadership' has led to the emergence of specialists in 'leadership development'. These professionals have to decide what the best way of discharging their duties is, bearing in mind that there is still a pressing need for management development in more-or-less chaotic systems. There is a gloomy and a not-so-gloomy view of their prospects.

The gloomy view says that true leadership is impossible in a system in a state of constant churn and disconnectedness. The L&D specialist is likely to be reduced to supplying coaching of the hand-holding variety – helping terminally frustrated managers and professionals to cope with professional disappointment. The very best coaching clients – those who seriously aspire to make a difference because they entered public service to serve the public good – will be most in need of the hand-holding. The ambitious machine politician who regards the civil service primarily as a device for providing career advancement built on constant promotion will have no need of such coaching. Chaos actually suits his or her interests.

The more positive prospect for L&D casts the practitioner as an organisational development-oriented systems thinker, adept at analysing the properties of complex systems and therefore good at devising better structures and processes – the kinds of professionals who understand that the word 'system' implies much more than 'IT' or 'ICT' and that you can't improve the quality and effectiveness of work until you understand the concept of 'throughput', 'value-add' and the difference between an output and an outcome. Such people, even if they are defeated in the quest for better systems, processes and structures, may master the black arts of getting around the roadblocks and helping their clients to do the same. If you can't beat them, subvert them skilfully with the higher good in mind. That, in its own way, could be seen as a form of leadership.

Implications for leadership in practice

- The conscious attempt to exercise or teach 'leadership' is doomed to failure. Leadership is a natural feature of successful management.
- Public sector work is more complex and demanding than most private sector work – and more important. Lessons imported from big business are rarely relevant or helpful in the public sector.
- Coaching is an essential element in managerial leadership. The rise of professional coaching speaks to a failure of Drucker's basics of good management.

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