

Leading is what you do in the moment

What is leadership and how do I become really good at 'it'? These questions seem to fall in those same ubiquitous yet elusive categories like dieting, fitness or happiness. We love to read and talk about them, often without getting slimmer, fitter or happier as a result. But why, despite a flood of expert advice, do we still seem to have this nagging feeling that we haven't quite gotten to a satisfactory answer of what leadership really is and how we get better at it?

We believe the answer is surprisingly simple. It lies in how we conventionally think about leadership. Most of the countless books, articles and videos about leadership available today are based on the same contestable assumption. This conventional understanding of leadership is so old that it has settled in the inaccessible areas of our thinking and our behaviours and is therefore very difficult to challenge and possibly to change.

So, what is this conventional myth constantly perpetuated amongst academics, managers, Human Resources professionals, management consultants and journalists about leaders and leadership that has surprisingly changed very little over the last hundred years or so? Ever since the first serious scientific attempts to understand the reasons why certain people achieved extraordinary results gathered momentum at the beginning of the 20th Century the question that fascinated academics and managers alike was, "*What special personality traits do these people have that distinguishes them from average people?*" This question is obviously based on the belief that these special people were mainly responsible for and instrumental in making outstanding results happen. In order to explain their extraordinary successes in building companies (e.g. Bill Gates at Microsoft), turning them around (e.g. Sergio Marchionne at Fiat Group) or making them grow exponentially (e.g. John Chen at BlackBerry Limited) these people must have had competencies and skills that other people did not possess thus turning them into leaders able to achieve something extraordinary that ordinary managers could not.

This thinking has of course also become one of the main justifications why many of today's CEOs are paid such astronomical salaries and bonuses. Yes, believe it or not but the rationale here is really that simplistic: The CEOs deserve such handsome compensation because they made the companies' extraordinary results happen. All by themselves. As we know, this rationale is not only used in business but in politics as well – just think of Gandhi, Churchill, King, or Mandela.

Everyone who has ever worked in any type of organization has most probably come across the one marginally varying standard answer as to what these special leadership ingredients are. By now, it has become unchallenged wisdom that in order to be an effective leader you must have extremely high degrees of abilities in areas such as visioning, strategic thinking, focusing, decision making, problem solving, courage, and motivating yourself and others. Still today, despite the emergence of countless other leadership theories during the last 50 years the fundamental notion that special people with special abilities do something special that causes special outcomes to emerge overwhelmingly influences our thinking about and dealing with the phenomenon of leading.

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Countless special people accounts about the heroes of politics, military and business typically sold at airports around the world, have helped to cement this view and turn it into an almost unchallengeable truism. To expose the flaws of this view, show its fateful consequences and reframe it in such a way that it resonates with and better explains our actual lived experience, instead of simply providing an unrealistic and therefore unhelpful abstraction from it, is the main reason for this short article.

In a very real sense, all special people explanations and theories unconsciously think and speak about leaders and leadership in capital letters. What we mean by that is that most thinking, talking and acting about leading is derived from the fantasy that it is an activity that places you outside of the game, as if you were moving figures on a chess board. And as if LEADERSHIP were a personal characteristic one could own like an Ironman suit. A more fruitful way to look at it is conceiving of managers as being participants in the organization alongside everyone else who works in it. Leading in this understanding is not based on what job or position you have, but largely on what you repeatedly do, what sense others make of that, and how much it resonates with them. In short, leading (and following) happens between people in the present.

Abstract concepts such as 'leaders' and 'leadership' are not only misleading, but also extremely unhelpful. Think about a typical day at work. Isn't what really happens at each moment, that people like us – no matter if we are working as receptionists, marketing managers, nurses, CEOs, or apprentices – say or do something that creates voluntary support from others around us, or maybe not? Think of the moment in a typical management team meeting in which the discussion and the mood in the room recognizably shifts as someone suddenly says something like, *"Is blaming our employees' lack of initiative really the only way to explain the slowness of our company? I don't think so! I would suggest that we need to talk about how our own behaviour contributes to the lack of speed."* A few courageous others might nod in agreement and suddenly what had been a typical going-through-the-motions discussion turns into an intense and fruitful conversation finally acknowledging and addressing the real issue and subsequently illuminating other and better action alternatives.

For us, that is what we call a moment of leading and following that creates voluntary movement between people. To think of the person speaking up in this example as a leader and what she did as leadership would be an unhelpful abstraction or distancing from what really happened, that is, someone says something that resonates with and is actively supported by a few others thus changing the nature of the conversation – making it possible for better outcomes to emerge.

We very deliberately distinguish between leading and managing – the two ways to create movement amongst people in organizations. When you manage you are in a hierarchical position that enables you to tell the people who report to you what you want them to work on and achieve. Managing thus is based on and limited by the particular job position you have. In contrast, at the moment of leading you create voluntary movement amongst people (most of whom might not even have to follow you

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because they do not report to you) by doing something that inspires them to support or join your move because they perceive it as meaningful, too. That means, leading and following are not position-based

but behaviour-, issue-, and context-based and thus much more effective and expansive than your managerial moves. During his so-called Salt March in 1930, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and about 80 of his followers walked 240 miles in 24 days from his Sabarmati Ashram home base to the coastal town of Dandi. When Gandhi arrived on the beach at Dandi approximately 50.000 people awaited his arrival. Not because they had been ordered to do so, but because Gandhi's act of civil disobedience against the Salt Act¹ of the British Raj resonated with them so much that they wanted to be a part of this act.

By now, you will have realized that we are outlining a relatively unconventional way of thinking about leading and following. This is a shift from thinking and talking in abstractions and concepts (such as leadership, followers, manufacturing, or strategy) to taking our daily lived experiences as interconnected human beings as the things that matter. Hence, we have to pay attention to our breathing, sweating, laughing, speaking, dreaming and thinking together to create momentum in which leading and following can happen.

This way of understanding leading and following as on-going interactive process requires a significant refocusing of managers' attention. Instead of being solely preoccupied with mechanical aspects such as structures, targets, levers and measurements, they have to pay attention to how they personally interact and connect with other people from moment to moment. In order to this, managers have to hone their craft in the following five psychological and sociological aspects:

1. **The quality of presence** – how do I/we have a longer-term intention or plan and at the same time work with what is actually going on right now?
2. **The quality of participation** – how do I/we ensure that the appropriate people participate in the significant conversations within the organization?
3. **The quality of conversation** – how do I/we talk about what we need to talk about in a way so that we can really understand each other?
4. **The quality of holding unpredictability, paradox and anxiety**– how do I/we cope well with not knowing and not being in control while being responsible at the same time?
5. **The quality of diversity** – how do I/we utilize different views, approaches, ideas, backgrounds etc. to disrupt existing patterns and create fresher ones?

¹ Britain's Salt Act of 1882 prohibited Indians from collecting or selling [salt](#), a staple in their diet. Indian citizens were forced to buy the vital mineral from their British rulers, who, in addition to exercising a monopoly over the manufacture and sale of salt, also charged a heavy salt tax.

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This, of course, is not achieved by simply reading about the practice of leading and following, but by relentlessly practicing one's craft of leading. Just as reading a book about running in the comfort of your armchair is one thing. Going outside to run at 6 a.m. in the middle of winter when it is still dark, cold and snowing is a very different matter and requires a much higher degree of determination and it needs action. Make no mistake, Borg, McEnroe, Sampras, Nadal and Federer did not just read books about playing tennis but practiced very hard indeed every single day of their careers. Why would a dramatic improvement of one's practice of leading be achieved any differently? Your practice of leading and following, like any craft, be that running, skiing, painting, woodcarving, playing tennis or a musical instrument can only be developed through deliberate, disciplined practice based on concentration, connection, experimentation, and reflection and is not due to any given character traits or inner abilities.