



# Leadership Paradoxes

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**Guest Editors: Morgen Witzel, Richard Bolden, Nigel Linacre**

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# Leadership paradoxes

Morgen Witzel, Richard Bolden and Nigel Linacre



***Paradox** n. a seemingly absurd though perhaps well-founded statement; self-contradictory or essentially absurd statement; person or thing conflicting with pre-conceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.*

Oxford English Dictionary

## Why this volume?

Seven years ago, leadership scholar Keith Grint (2006) estimated that there were 20,000 books on leadership in print. That number will only have grown in the intervening years. If we add to this the tens of thousands of articles and essays – including, of course, those in this volume – then we are faced with a truly colossal body of literature and ideas, far more than any one person can master. Do we really need yet more writing on leadership to add to the mountain that already exists?

And yet, when we look at that mountain, we are perplexed not just by its size but by its opaqueness. It is a truism to state that there is no universally agreed definition of leadership. Put twenty leadership scholars and practitioners into a room and ask them to define the concept, and you will probably get twenty-two definitions (at least two will change their mind during the course of the discussion). How can it be that such a vast body of work has been produced on a subject that no one can define? Is there any other subject (apart from perhaps religion) where so much discussion had produced so little illumination?

## What more can usefully be said about leadership?

We believe the answer to the first question is yes: there is still a great deal that can usefully be said about leadership. But we doubt whether attempts to define leadership will ever amount to very much. Leadership is by its nature vague, fuzzy and uncertain. To the annoyance of scientists, it cannot be measured or quantified (at least not in a way that offers practical value for anyone other than the scientists doing the measuring). Leadership, however defined, has a direct impact on organisations and societies; apart from that, we can't say too much else with certainty. To describe what constitutes leadership and how it works is a little like photographing a kaleidoscope; no matter how accurate your vision at that place and time, within a few moments the picture will have changed.

In this special issue of *e-O&P* we suggest that, if we are to fully understand the fluidity and dynamism of leadership, we need to accept that leadership is full of paradoxes. In the West we are not generally very good at dealing with paradox (East Asian cultures tend to cope rather better) and, upon being confronted with a paradox, our impulse is usually to try to 'resolve' it, to render down the conflicting statements so that they agree and the apparent contradiction dissolves. But this is to mistake the nature of paradoxes. They are not puzzles to be solved or opposites that can be reconciled. They simply *are*. Rather than dissecting them, we need to learn to accept them as wholes, to learn to live with them and perhaps even to embrace them.

The writer and naval officer Stephen King-Hall (1927) once remarked that any statement made about China is both true and, simultaneously, not true. His point was that China is a complex place and cannot be described in simple statements. This is still true today. We can say, for example, that China is an economic superpower (it is the world's second largest economy) and that China is a developing economy (one in six of its population live in absolute poverty). Both statements are correct (and to take King-Hall's point, both are therefore incorrect). It might be possible to reconcile these differences to come up with a single agreeable statement, but in so doing, a great deal of richness of understanding would be lost. Recognising this paradox is key to understanding what makes China what it is.

So it is with leadership. We can think of leadership in so many ways. Leaders can be autocrats who rule through command and control, or they can servants of the organisation who put its interests before their own. They may be lofty and above the organisation, or they may be in close communion with their followers. Leadership can be a role that people adopt in order to be more effective, or it can be 'authentic', drawing up on people's own hearts and souls. It can be an exercise in democracy, or a road to tyranny.

### Accepting and considering paradoxes

Among those 20,000-plus books, we find that a very great many are devoted to advancing one statement and promoting this as the best model of leadership, the 'one best way' of leading. A few even offer 'proof' that this is so. But what if we were to accept that in each pair of statements, both are true? What, indeed, if we were to accept that *all* of these statements about leadership (and many others) are simultaneously true – and not true? What would this do to our understanding of leadership?

One of the reasons why taking this position makes us uncomfortable is that, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, paradoxes are things that conflict with our pre-conceived notions of what is real or possible. We all have pre-conceptions, and very often we find it hard to put them aside. But that is just what accepting paradox does: it requires us to look beyond what we think we already know, and see the world differently. It requires us to consider that, to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, the improbable may turn out to be the most reasonable explanation.

We ask therefore that, whilst reading the articles in this issue, you set aside your pre-conceptions and consider the paradoxes we offer. We don't ask you to accept everything we say at face value; we certainly don't expect you to! Our hope, however, is that by considering these paradoxes, you will re-examine some of your own ideas and assumptions about leadership and perhaps alter or amend them; and, in the absence of a universally agreed definition of leadership, that is certainly a good place to start.

**The articles** in this issue fall into four related groups. Respectively, they concern a paradox in attitudes towards leadership; paradoxes in the practice of leadership; paradoxes in leadership attribution and reward; and paradoxes in leadership education and development. In the following paragraphs, we offer a flavour of each contributor's perspectives on such issues.

### **A paradox at the very heart of leadership**

First of all, there are paradoxes in the ways we think about and define leadership. In the first article, **Morgen Witzel** suggests that there is a paradox at the very heart of leadership. It is generally accepted that people *need* leaders, but do they *want* them? This article argues that there is a tension inherent in our attitude to leadership, and that even as we accept the control that leaders have over us we also kick back against it and try to assert our own control as followers.

### **Paradoxes in the practice of leadership**

These paradoxes of understanding lead in turn to paradoxes in the practice of leadership. **John Lawler** and **Jeff Gold** propose that most leaders don't really understand how leadership works, and do not recognise their own lack of control. They refer to this as the 'leadership conundrum' and call on leaders to find ways of seeing through the 'fog' in which they operate. Taking a systemic perspective, in which leaders develop an awareness of the complex network of relationships through which they work, they argue, can enhance the potential for influence.

Following on from this, **Nigel Linacre** suggests that leaders are also caught in a spatial and temporal paradox that requires them to be both 'here' and 'elsewhere'. Leaders must be part of the group; but at the same time, their status as leaders sets them apart. And leaders must manage in the present; but at the same time, they must also think constantly about the future.

Finally, **Jennifer Board** considers the idea of moral courage, seen as essential to leadership, and asks whether this is always true. There may be times when moral courage requires leaders to turn a blind eye to 'wrong' in order to achieve the 'right' result. She cautions that while necessary, these kinds of judgement can also be dangerous; taking the position that the end justified the means can, over time, be morally corrosive.

### **Paradoxes of leadership attribution and reward**

There are also paradoxes in how we recognise, attribute and reward leadership. **Scott Allison** and **Jefferson Cann** take two different perspectives on the idea of heroic leadership.

**Scott** describes the often paradoxical ways in which we create heroes, and notes that while we all agree on the idea of heroism, we usually have quite different ideas about who our heroes are. Strangely, the heroes most people can agree on are characters from fiction. We also tend to ascribe heroic status to people only once they have gone. Thus our only truly heroic leaders are either dead, departed, or never existed at all.

**Jefferson** notes the traits ascribed to heroic leaders and shows how very few people ever succeed in achieving heroism. Instead, many turn into tyrants. Acknowledging our need for heroes, he suggests instead a kind of 'post-heroic hero', a hero who knows his or her limitations and realises the need to work with followers.

To conclude this section, **Katie Porkess** uses social identity theory to show how leaders succeed by becoming 'prototypical' members of their groups, embodying the values, ideals and dreams of the rest of the group. Yet, she argues, in order to lead, leaders have to behave in ways outside of the norms of the group. Even more paradoxically, they do so with the consent and encouragement of those very members of the group who identify with them most closely. She uses research evidence to demonstrate the risks associated with these identity processes and the potential for the emergence of unethical and corrupt leadership behaviours.

### Paradoxes of leadership education and development

Finally we turn to leadership education and development, a field with a whole sub-set of paradoxes of its own. **Jonathan Gosling** and **Peter Case** describe the paradoxical mismatch between the perceptions of participants in leadership training, who are often looking for a 'quick fix' that will rapidly turn them into better leaders, and programme developers, who offer a 'slow fix' development process over time. Rather than taking one position or the other, they argue, programmes should simply concentrate on the 'fix' - getting the development needs of the individual right rather than sticking to pre-conceived ideas about the 'best' way.

**Keith Kinsella** looks at the vexing issue of the gap between theory and practice in leadership education, which too often fails to put leadership into context or provide enough richness of experience for participants to make sense of what they are learning. He offers some thoughts on new models of leadership education that embrace paradox rather than attempting to destroy it.

Finally, **Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno** looks at the paradoxes implicit in the concept of authentic leadership and the challenges this poses for leadership educators. She suggests that the quest for 'authenticity' places unrealistic demands on leaders and misses the point that in order to *be authentic*, leaders must recognise that at times they will behave *in-authentically*. Developing authentic leadership, she argues, is a journey rather than a destination.

### What do you think?

It is our hope that these ten articles will provide useful food for thought and discussion in your own leadership thinking and practice. Needless to say, we look forward to hearing your thoughts, and we hope this is just the beginning of a further and fruitful understanding of leadership paradoxes. Of course, one of the implications of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that the more we study a subject the less precise our knowledge of it becomes. But maybe this is a case where we need less knowledge, and more understanding.

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## About the Centre for Leadership Studies

To find out more about CLS's education, research and engagement activities please visit [www.exeter.ac.uk/leadership](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/leadership). You will also find two forthcoming events that may be of interest in the 'Invitations and Notices' section at the end of this edition.

## Acknowledgements

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# The first paradox of leadership is – leadership!

Morgen Witzel



## Keywords

leadership, paradox, followers, management, authority, free will

## Introduction

Leadership is something that nearly everyone needs but hardly anyone wants. We welcome the *idea* of leadership, but we tend to resent the authority that leaders have over us. We place strong boundaries on that authority, and deny leaders the right to control many of our actions. We support our leaders only so long as they do what we want them to do, and when they begin to take action that is against our wishes – even when it is in our best interests – we turn against them. Leaders must live, every day, with the paradox that although leadership is an essential feature of organisational life – we could even say, an essential feature of civilisation – most people resent the authority that leaders represent. Once that resentment reaches a certain level they will, passively or even actively, begin to work against their leaders. The expulsion of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi from power is only the most recent high-profile case.

In this article I want to explore briefly this resentment and antagonism towards leadership, and then look at three attempts to resolve the paradox by three different authors. These are Laozi (or Lao Tzu), the ancient Chinese sage and author of the *Daodejing*; the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his book *Of the Social Contract*; and the American scholar John Kotter in perhaps his best-known work *A Force for Change*. I have picked these three because they represent very different times and places and cultures, and show that awareness of this paradox – we could call it *the paradox of need and rejection* – has been alive and well for a very long time.

## The last degradation of a free and moral agent

Most of us are, or have at some time been, employees of an organisation. When we are at work, we accept what our leaders tell us to do, more or less willingly. But would we allow our bosses to tell us what to do outside of the workplace? Would we allow them to come into our homes and tell us what to eat, or what television programmes to watch? The answer in most cases is, probably not. Certainly when our political leaders try to do exactly that, telling us to eat healthy foods or take more exercise or recycle our plastics, the response from many people is to raise two fingers to the politicians and carry on doing what they want.

As the Wikileaks and Edward Snowden affairs have shown, there is widespread sympathy with those who defy authority – even though the results in both cases could compromise national security and, in theory, lead to the deaths of other people at some point in the future. The leakers presumably knew this, but acted anyway. Why? Because there is a growing fear in many quarters that governments are becoming too powerful and have too much control over them. A poll in 2012 showed that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the state has too much power.<sup>1</sup>

America is an interesting case in point. The American colonies declared independence in 1776, but not until 1787 did the American states grudgingly agree to have a president (Milkis and Nelson 2008). The first president, George Washington, faced a series of rebellions against presidential authority. The most serious of these was the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791, ostensibly about taxes but in fact a protest against the imposition of a leader by those who believed that leadership was not necessary (Boyd 1985). These rebellions were part of a philosophical view very prevalent in American society that leadership was neither necessary nor desirable. Thomas Jefferson – who, ironically, became president himself some years later – declared that subjugating one's own ideas and action to those of a leader was 'the last degradation of a free and moral agent' (Jefferson 1789). The men who drafted the American constitution were very much aware of this view, and took great care to ensure that the other branches of government, the legislature and the judiciary, could exercise control over the presidency and limit its actions. Even those in favour of leadership were worried about its consequences.

Why are the words and actions of Rupert Murdoch and his organisation under such intense scrutiny? Because there is a fear that he may be on the verge of becoming 'too powerful'. There is a rising belief in both the media and popular culture that the balance of power between followers and leaders is tipping too far towards the latter. 'People should not be afraid of their governments', says a character in the film *V for Vendetta* 'governments should be afraid of their people.' And of course, this does not just apply to governments.

Why did the laity at the Church of England General Synod refuse to vote in favour of women bishops, even though the clergy – their leaders – had asked them to do so? Because they believed that they, not the clergy, know what is right and what the true values of the Church should be. Organisation scholar Chris Argyris has described what he calls 'defensive routines', actions which members of an organisation take to slow down or derail changes with which they do not agree. Very often, says Argyris, this is because members believe that

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/general\\_politics/june\\_2013/63\\_view\\_too\\_powerful\\_government\\_as\\_bigger\\_than\\_reat\\_than\\_weaker\\_one](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/june_2013/63_view_too_powerful_government_as_bigger_than_reat_than_weaker_one)

their leaders do not know what is best; the members themselves are the true custodians of the organisation's values and must act to protect the organisation itself (Argyris 1957).

It could be argued that this rejection of leadership is a Western phenomenon, and that other cultures embrace leadership more willingly. Geert Hofstede's work on culture shows that East Asian cultures have a higher 'power distance' score than those of Britain or the US, indicating that people are more willing to accept that there is an inequality of power distribution within society (Hofstede 1980). This is sometimes interpreted as meaning that people are more accepting of or have a great need for strong leadership. A brief scan of the history of China will show that this is not so. From the White Lotus Society in the eighteenth century to the Taipings in the nineteenth and the Communist Party in the twentieth, China has never lacked movements which sought to control, dominate or even destroy existing systems of leadership. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong urged the Red Guards to resist their leaders and defy authority (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006). Another paradox: a leader urging his followers to reject leadership!

It could also be argued that we sceptical modern people are more resistant to leadership and that in an earlier more deferential age people accepted their leaders unquestioningly. I very much doubt whether that age ever existed. Let us take just one example, the Christian church. Today it is commonly assumed that until modern times people were humble and full of piety, churches were full every Sunday and vicars were respected authority figures. But the correspondence of vicars in the eighteenth century is full of complaints about empty churches, with attendance on Sundays often no more than one or two people despite repeated warnings that failure to attend church could lead to eternal damnation. And these vicars had it easy compared to the clergy of southern Germany in the fifteenth century, who were driven out of their parishes entirely by people angry over perceived abuses in the church (Scribner 1987). One could ride for hundreds of miles across Bavaria and not see a single tenanted church. Rejection of leadership is not a new phenomenon.

### **Laissez-faire leadership**

The *Daodejing* (or *Tao Teh Ching* - literally, The Book of the Way and Virtue), ascribed to the sixth-century BC Chinese sage Laozi, is one of the classics of Chinese philosophy and remains widely read and admired. Unlike his more authoritarian contemporaries, Confucius and Han Fei, Laozi argued that strong leadership was bad for people and bad for society. Authoritarian leadership was, for Laozi, an artificial construct, one that ran contrary to the natural order of things. More pragmatically, it was also not a very effective way of getting things done. People disliked being told what to do by their leaders; they wanted to be free, to act according to their own wishes and to take responsibility for their actions.

*The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware.*

*Next comes one whom they love and praise.*

*Next comes one whom they fear.*

*Next comes one whom they despise and defy.*

(Wu 1990)

Laozi tried to deal with the paradox of need and rejection by introducing the principle of *wu-wei*, or 'non-action'. This was later translated by French Jesuit scholars as *laissez-faire*, and is now a core principle in modern economic thought. *Wu-wei* should not be confused with 'inaction' or doing nothing at all. Another



translation might be 'non-intervention'. According to Laozi, the ruler should trust the people to know what is right and act accordingly. He also invokes the principle of *dao*, what we might call natural law. Leave things alone, do not interfere, and the right result will occur naturally.

*The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words.  
When his task is accomplished and things have been completed,  
All the people say: 'We ourselves have achieved it!'*

(Wu 1990)

This is not a million miles from John Adair's definition of leadership as 'getting things done through other people, willingly' (Adair 1989). The extra dimension is that leadership in Laozi's scheme has such a light touch that people do not even notice its existence. And, it follows, we cannot fear or resent or fight back against something whose existence we do not notice. Leaders have experimented with this form of leadership more recently, perhaps the most famous example being Ricardo Semler at Semco, who devolved nearly all of his leadership responsibilities to his employees (Semler 1993).

Laozi's response to the paradox of need and rejection, then, is for the leader to withdraw into the background. Rather than 'actively' leading people through authority and control, he or she merely creates the conditions necessary for other people to take action, then stands back and waits for the grand plan to evolve.

## **The social contract**

There are similarities between the basic views of Laozi and the eighteenth-century French philosopher of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He is perhaps most famous for his statement that 'man is born free, but lives everywhere in chains' (Rousseau 1998). Freedom for Rousseau is consistent with the idea of natural law; authority is an artificial construct which is imposed on us, more often than not against our will.

But Rousseau also questions whether the forcible imposition of authority is in fact 'real'. In *The Social Contract*, first published in 1762, Rousseau rejects as illegitimate any authority which we do not accept willingly, but at times he also appears to question whether such authority really exists. Do tyrants truly govern by force, or is it all smoke and mirrors? Do we accept the authority of force only because we have not woken up and realised we can shake off those chains at will? A similar point was made by Manfred Kets de Vries in his excellent book *Lessons on Leadership by Terror*, where he describes the illusions that tyrants must create in order to maintain power; if they knew how truly weak such leaders were, the people would rise up and overthrow them at once (Kets de Vries 2004).

The only real authority, says Rousseau, is that which derives from ourselves. Merely by acting as individuals, though, we cannot exercise authority effectively. Therefore we voluntarily join forces, surrendering part of our rights as individuals in exchange for the benefits that the community provides us. The agreements that bind us together are what he terms the 'social contract':

*The heart of the social contract may be stated simply. Each of us places his person and authority under the supreme direction of the general will, and the group receives each individual as an indivisible part of the whole.*

(Rousseau 1998)

In Rousseau's thinking, the leader becomes a kind of executive agent, guided by the general will. Instead of the leader imposing himself/herself on the organisation, it is the other way around. The question of how broad the general will is, or should be, is one that needs to be addressed. During the recent rash of press stories about tax avoidance by large corporations, Google executive Eric Schmidt argued that he and his colleagues were following the will of shareholders, who desired that the company should pay as little tax as possible. But in Rousseau's order of things, the will of all stakeholders, not just one group, should be obeyed, remembering that each is an indivisible part of the whole.

Where Laozi pushes leaders into the background, Rousseau draws them into the system and makes them part of it, equal to their followers in status and equally subordinate to the general will. Authority now rests with the followers and not the leaders.

### **A force for change**

John Kotter's *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management* takes a different approach. Kotter switches the focus back to the leader and what he or she does, but argues for a fundamental redefinition of the tasks of the leader and even of what leadership is (Kotter 1990). Famously, Kotter separates leadership from management. Leadership is about creating vision, creating 'human networks' to achieve the vision, inspiring people to work towards making the vision real, and creating change. Management is about planning, monitoring and control.

Kotter began his research rather where this article began, with an awareness that there was a great deal of resistance to change which leaders could not overcome (Moore and Klein 2013). His response – and as readers of Kotter will know, I am simplifying greatly here – is to shift the focus of leadership towards human relations, towards motivating and inspiring people so as to overcome the barriers to change. Leaders are no longer responsible for authority and control; apart from moral authority, Kotter's leaders do not seem to have much authority at all. They do not sublimate themselves to the general will in the way that Rousseau advises, but there is a strong sense that they are working in partnership with followers.

Meanwhile, all the negative aspects – the nasty yucky stuff that causes dissension and resentment, like control and authority – are the province of managers. There is a strong sense that in a perfect Kotter-esque organisation, should such a thing exist, people would love their leaders but hate their managers. In effect, then, Kotter does a sleight of hand. He takes away the things that people don't like about leadership from the role of the leader, and leaves only the positive motivational and inspirational side.

### **Living with the paradox**

All three writers offer us interesting solutions. Laozi suggests that leaders should as far as possible let the natural law take its course and that the best leadership is as little leadership as possible. Rousseau argues that leaders should be internalised, brought into the organisation and subjected to the general will so that there is no difference between them and followers, with leaders becoming merely executives. Kotter goes in the other direction, seemingly believing that it is the executive function that is the cause of dissent. He separates this out from the role of leadership and urges leaders to concentrate on motivation and relationship building.

All three perspectives have their weaknesses. Laozi's *laissez-faire* leaders are unlikely to be able to step up quickly and take charge in a crisis, the time when leadership is often most necessary. This is a point made by Han Fei in his critique of Laozi (Witzel 2012). Rousseau's ideas are the cornerstone of modern Western democracy, but they have been unable to stop leaders from shaking off the general will and imposing themselves on the rest of us. We should never forget that 2013 is the eightieth anniversary of the democratic election of Adolf Hitler as leader of Germany. As my colleague Nigel Linacre reminds me, the notion of the general will has been employed very usefully by dictators claiming to embody that will. And Kotter's well-meaning distinction between leaders and managers has turned into something of a nightmare, with leaders refusing to take control or authority even when it is required of them; I have referred to this elsewhere as 'a lethal cocktail of ignorance and incompetence' (Witzel 2013).

### How should we deal with the paradox of leadership?

But are we perhaps expecting too much when we turn to these authorities? A paradox is not a puzzle to be solved or a problem to be got around. A paradox just *is*; it is an essential component of being. The original Daoist paradox of light and darkness showed these not as opposing forces, but as two halves of the same whole. Maybe that is how we need to see the need for leadership along with the dislike or rejection of it. We dislike unpleasant or bad-tasting medicine even though we know it will make us feel better. We dislike surrendering control to others, but in our heart of hearts we know this is necessary.

Rather than trying to find a way around the paradox, we should simply accept it and then use the knowledge of the paradox to become better leaders. Each of the three authors who have been my primary focus here offers us a key mindset to think about. Kotter suggests that good leadership depends fundamentally on the ability to build relationships, for without these it is impossible to communicate vision and inspire others. From Rousseau we can conclude that all leaders work in partnership with their followers, and therefore negotiation and bargaining skills will be crucial to effectiveness. And from Laozi we can take the simple principle that sometimes less is more. Leaders do not have to be active all the time. Sometimes it is best to surrender control, step back and let others take over.

But whatever we draw from these authorities and others, one conclusion is clear: the paradox of need and rejection is here to stay.

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# The Leader's Conundrum:

## Exploring leadership paradox in organisation change

John Lawler and Jeff Gold



### Keywords

Leadership, distributed leadership, leaders, change, the leader's conundrum, paradox, tension



### Introduction

Do those appointed as leaders in their organisations really understand how leadership is working in their organisations? In this article we want to argue that this is less likely than might be assumed. We suggest that those appointed to formal positions of leadership<sup>2</sup> face a leader's conundrum<sup>3</sup> every day of their lives.

The conundrum for leaders is that whilst they may be charged with the duty of leading organisations, leadership is not entirely within their "control". We propose that this presents something of a difficulty for leaders, especially during times of significant change. Our image is that at any time leaders seek to develop clarity about what is happening in their organisations, but most of the time the best they can do is gain a partial view of what is mostly an unclear fog. So the leader's conundrum is formed through the belief about their views and the presence of the fog.



<sup>2</sup> In this article, we assume such leaders can be of any gender, race, colour, ability and sexual orientation.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary at [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conundrum](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conundrum), a definition of the word conundrum is a question or problem having only a conjectural answer

Of course, many leaders will deny the presence of this fog and claim understanding through the representations that appear on their screens. However, the first step to a possible solution is to recognise the conundrum and that failure to recognise and embrace it will produce tensions, especially if change is needed.

In this article what we want to do is:

1. Explain more about the leader's conundrum, its nature, formation and presence
2. Consider how the conundrum becomes evident during a project of change.
3. Provide some possibilities for how leaders can embrace the conundrum to reconcile the inherent contradictions of their positions.

### **The leader's conundrum, its nature, formation and presence**

For much of the last century and into the present, there has been a search for the Holy Grail of leadership – its meaning, its precise practice and how it can benefit organisations and society as a whole: in short, what it looks like and how to do it. There is confusion about whether we have found it; a quick search on Google for leadership models for example, reveals 129, 000, 000 hits in 0.21 seconds. We do not intend to trawl through these and if you want a picture of a leadership model, just click the Images link on Google for the same search and stand back for colourful results.

For the most part, the models fall into the classic view that leaders and leadership are one and the same phenomenon, and the manifestation of this is seen in the *individuals* who are appointed to the position of leader. Such people are said to have certain traits, or can be trained to adopt particular styles, behaviours or competences... and they have 'followers'. The latter have always been there, but positioned passively, to have something done to them, by more powerful beings, the leaders. During the 1980s, in the face of emerging global pressures and changing technologies, attention switched to a search for individuals who had transformational qualities such as charisma and who could generate commitment and motivation, to empower others by providing both vision and sense of direction (Bryman, 1992). More recently, qualities such as emotional intelligence, ethical behaviour, integrity and authenticity (Goleman et al 2002; Ciulla 1998; George 2003; Lawler and Ashman 2012) have been added to the list of competencies specified as desirable for leaders of organisations to possess. It is noticeable, however, that the basic formula of individual leader + follower remained the basic unit of leadership. Moreover, it remains an open question as to whether this seeming return to the valuing of traits in a leader by the inclusion of emotions, values and moods makes any attempt to develop leadership practically impossible. (For a good coverage of the story of leadership, try Bolden et al, 2011).

What is striking about such views is that taken together, for us, they produce a fundamental paradox, which is this: The greater the focus on leaders coupled with the specification of a development agenda that underpins each approach through best practice guides and the like, the greater is the distortion of leadership practice that takes place. One manifestation of this is a desire for appointed leaders to regain control of situations which they or other leaders appear to have lost control of. And this further intensifies the search for that mix of qualities that specify leadership for those appointed to these roles. It can feel like going round and round in circles. For example, a very recent and rigorous assessment of the evidence for

transformational leaders and organisation performance found so many problems with the basic understanding of the idea of charismatic transformation leadership, its measure and use, that this suggested abandoning the approach and starting again (Knippenberg et al, 2013).

## Implications

So where do we go from here? Even if we keep the idea of leaders as individual agents, there is growing evidence to indicate that the focus on a single individual as leader only serves to represent one of a number of patterns in a mix of leadership configurations where individuals are variably contrasted against pairs, groups, teams and collectives (Thorpe et al 2011). Further, based on this mix, it becomes possible to consider how influence can be exerted in daily practice not only within a single organisation or place but also spread across several, both physically or virtually. In all such work, 'hybrid' leadership is occurring, whether for good or ill, and it is these kinds of leadership that create the paradox. It also induces a conundrum for appointed leaders and the fog, especially where the points of practice are dispersed geographically and virtually. Leaders are puzzled when they find there are barriers to their leadership. They face the conundrum of being leaders who are expected to be in control, but who see that leadership is manifest as being beyond the control of any one individual.

Anyone can appreciate the working of such hybrids, but this requires stepping into the fog, and as you do so, paradoxically, a little bit of clarity is possible. Try the following, which relates to Diagram 1 below:

1. Place a sheet of A4 paper on a table, landscaped.
2. Place yourself as matchstick person in the centre of the page – this is where you are in your work practice situation
3. Find at least one other person who depends on your work to do theirs; you try to influence their performance, but they depend on you. (Only one other person needs to be identified – there are likely to be others that you influence). Draw that person to the right of you, with an arrow to show the flow of influence
4. Now repeat the process to the left of you, but identifying one other person on whom you depend to do your work, thus influencing you. Draw an arrow to show this flow of influence. (Of course, there may be others on whom you depend).
5. You have now identified a sequential view of leadership based on influence and dependence. It may be working well or not, but that is for you to judge.
6. Now, find a person who depends on you but you also depend on them. Draw this person below you with arrows going in both directions. There is a shared leadership practice here, and it is based on interdependence because it could not be completed without recognition of the mutuality and the need for collaboration. Again, you might have several such relationships, and the quality of the collaboration may vary between them.
7. Finally, we can repeat the interdependence idea, but with more than one other person. This is between at least three people, but there could easily be more who are all interdependent with each other. This can be your team or department. Draw this above you, but with dual-headed arrows going in all directions. Crucially, everyone you involve has a part of the practice and exerts influence on others but in return has to respond to the influence of others. It becomes a collective practice.

As you consider these dependencies, you might also consider how far you feel the practices are contributing to the organisation's purpose and direction. One of the key factors in understanding the working of influence is to consider how far there is common purpose and interest seeking effective accomplishment or alignment. In addition, your view only goes as far as you can see, but in a fog, you know that these relationships are being repeated throughout. It becomes possible to imagine a wide range of dependencies with some connections between each, and with varying amounts of alignment. Use your imagination to consider this:

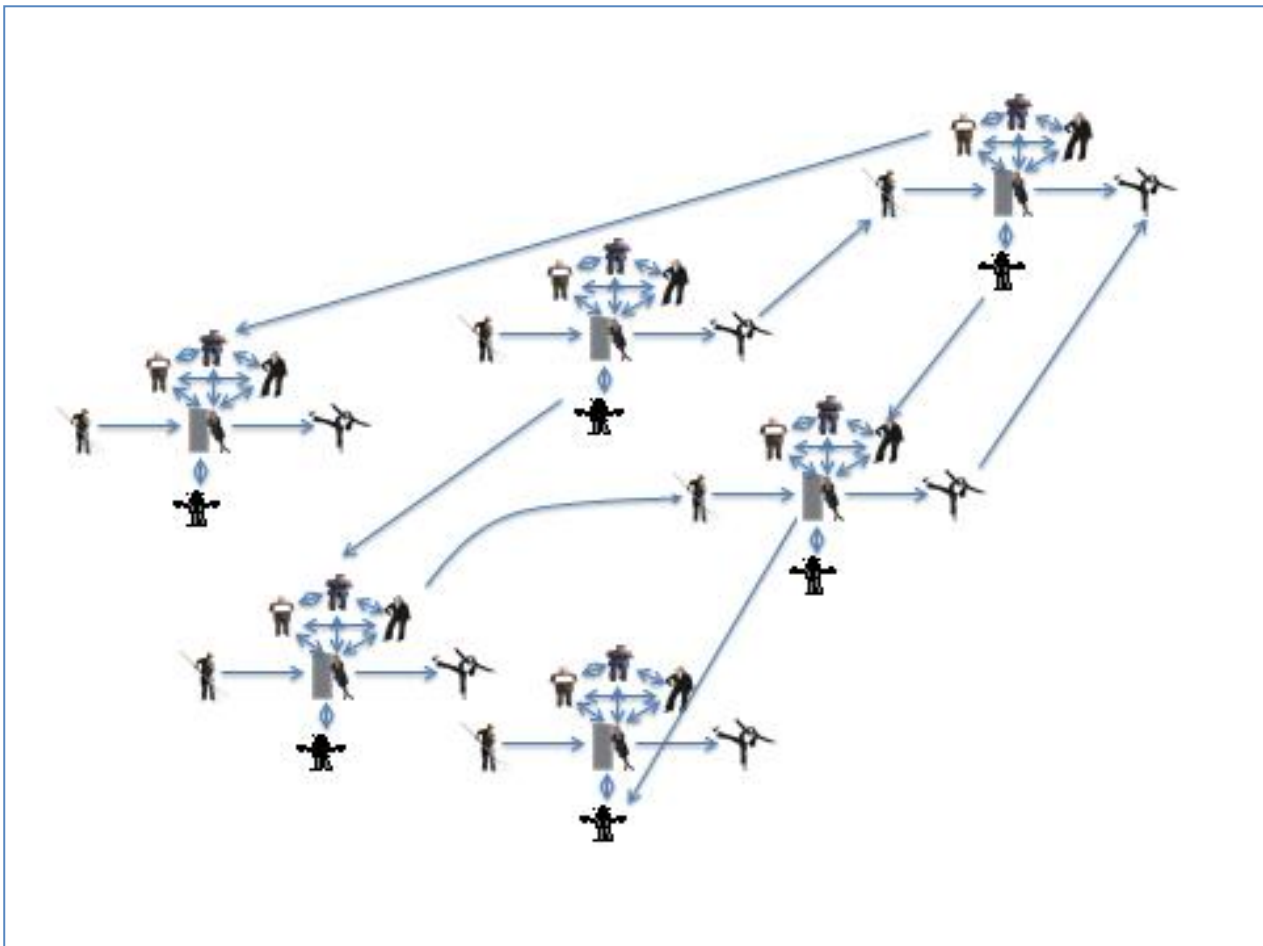


Diagram 1: Tracing influential interdependent leadership practice units

Test yourself. Do you really know how aligned each of these leadership practice units are? What is your evidence for such knowledge, what is the quality of this evidence, and how valid is the knowledge?

Much of our understanding for these leadership practices – and notice that we now refer to leadership as influential dependencies – comes from the work completed in educational contexts in the US (Spillane et al, 2004)<sup>4</sup>.

If you have imagined the wide range of dependencies in your own organisation, you may have also understood the various processes that are working well and those that are working less well. You might also

<sup>4</sup> See Spillane, J.P., Halverson, R. and Diamond, J.B. (2004) Towards a theory of leadership practice: a distributed perspective **Journal of Curriculum Studies**, 36, 3–34. . You can learn more about the studies at <http://www.distributedleadership.org/DLS/Home.html>. While these studies were completed in the US, we suggest the findings can be found in all organizations.



understand why culture and history can influence what is happening. However, here is the conundrum again: If you cannot see the relationships or you are at a distance from the practices, how can you, maybe as an accountable leadership, exert the influence to bring alignment? To help you answer this, we will firstly give you some of our findings from a study we completed in a large organisation during a period of change. We will then provide some possible practices that you can try out to clear some of the fog.

### **Some research findings: The leader's conundrum during a project of change.**

We studied a large multi-national company at a time when there had been a radical change of senior managers, coinciding with a public declaration to become a 'new organisation'. However evidence from the quarterly monitoring of employee views revealed a gap between expectations of the 'new organisation' and the experience of individuals within it! These were feelings of alienation and divorce, leading to cynicism about future success, all of which matched expectations from past change efforts. We were able to find out more by organising two workshops with twenty-four participants from different parts of the UK. One of the interesting features of our workshop process was that it allowed those attending to understand the sources of influence where they worked.

Our findings revealed some key themes that suggested degrees of misalignment hidden from the senior managers in the fog, hence providing them with a conundrum.

Firstly, we found evidence of both trust and distrust in leaders at all levels. Key features in relation to trust were highlighted:

- Trust was a two-way process, but the practice led to diverse results – positive where there is high trust but negative where distrust occurs
- Where participants could believe their leaders and have confidence that they could act, they could also say that trust was present
- Distrust, unease and scepticism were strong where the words of leaders were not matched by their deeds.

Secondly, the way that change was being enacted within the parameters of the 'new organisation' meant that staff paid close attention to the words and actions of their leaders. While participants were broadly positive about the new strategy and wanted it to work, in nearly all the cases, there were doubts, scepticism or simply lack of evidence that anything different was happening. In such situations, staff used the 'track record' of past changes as a guide to expectations.

Thirdly, participants pointed to the length of time the process took to get new ideas accepted. This included several layers of decision-making, each one increasing the potential of risk aversion so that people remained followers (copy-cats) rather than becoming leaders. The culture reinforced cost reduction and short-termism, and this affected how decisions were being made. There was little sign of investing for growth, and participants identified the 'comfort zone' of their managers and 'scape-goating' as key causes of the failure to make progress.

Fourthly, and paradoxically again, the level of distrust did not extend to the most senior manager, the CEO. Indeed, he was treated with a significant degree of reverence, seen as being able to '*define the new*

*organisation*', to have the passion to inspire staff to *'kiss the badge'* and to continue the *'courageous'* journey (All comments from workshop participants). There was clear evidence of a significant amount of trust present in the CEO, even though some participants had not met him. Thus *'I hope you exist though I've not seen you'* was followed by a further act of faith, as it were, in the exhortation for the CEO to *'find the believers and spread the message'* and that he should *'be visible and be seen'*. The heroic expectations placed on the CEO were reinforced by the view that *he* was in control and the strategy and direction were defined by *him*, and that the senior managers *did not play* an active part in this.

In contrast with the expectations for the CEO, there seemed to be a *'business as usual'* approach to organisational life and the change. The *'How'* of implementation was, from this research, being hindered by the history of the organisation in terms of the way it conducted its business. The organisation's history pointed to low levels of *'self-confidence'* and *'self-belief'* among managers, with decisions rarely being made quickly and nearly always subject to change. Viewed as *'bureaucratic, slow and stifling'*, *'lacking in direction'*, with managers and leaders *'out of the same mould'*, the organisation was seen to have *'no champions of change'*, with a history of treating staff *'as children'* and so consequently, they *'behaved like children'*.

Given the limitations on our view from within the fog – 24 out of over 10,000 staff is hardly clarity - we could at least discern some vague shapes. Those in formal leader positions were seen as followers rather than shapers, promotion was on the basis of having served their time, and there was a general *'lack of trust'* within the organisation. The organisation's history suggested a pattern of slow responses to changes in the market, along with a perception that *'self-interest would prevail'*, and this constrained development. Despite reverence for the CEO and a desire for him to set the vision, there was a general lack of clarity regarding strategic direction through *'filtering'*, becoming *'stuck'* or being *'blocked'*. Quite a conundrum for the leader. What do *you* suggest?

### **Possibilities for clearing some of the fog**

How can leaders embrace the conundrum to reconcile the inherent contradictions of their positions? There are no quick fixes for appointed leaders, but the first move has to be to accept and embrace the leader's conundrum and to recognise that they cannot know it all, even if others expect them to.

One starting point is nicely captured by a well known quotation from the Ludwig Wittgenstein:

*"A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."*

Go back to our first image of the leader in the fog. How does the leader form the picture....and how does it hold him captive? In our view, one of the most fearful difficulties for appointed leaders is how they come to rely on pictures, and on a language about the business which has been filtered and cleaned for their consumption. This is not surprising since, (and this depends on the size and spread of the organisation as well as on the outsiders who watch the business) it is the job of support staff such as finance, HR and others to ensure that messy and dirty pictures do not reach the top. We had first hand experience of this effect when we presented our findings to the senior managers of the organisation in which we carried out our fieldwork.

Our next image comes again from education, and is based on story that appeared in the Guardian on 9 April 2002 (The story is still there at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2002/apr/09/localgovernment.education>).

It reported the progress of Birmingham Education Authority and its 'inspirational' leader Tim Brighouse. In typical 'heroic' style, Tim is praised for his leadership. However, and this is interesting, he denies this focus, and prefers instead to point to the collective effort. 'We have been very, very focused' and 'We set out always to improve...' What is also important is how he dealt with the conundrum he faced by moving into the fog. Read the story:

- How many thank you notes did he send?
- How much leadership was inspiration and how much was hard work?

Whether a myth or real, what comes through to us is that, as an appointed leader, Tim was not held captive by a fixed and cleaned-up picture of life in the schools. He cleared the fog by getting out of his office, listening to others, attending to details and explaining what would happen – words and deeds synchronised. No wonder he said it was 99% hard work, but this is the energy that others need to see so they can do it too.

### **Some shapes emerging from the fog**

What are we to make of stories such as these and results from the research that we noted earlier? We take several points from these:

Firstly, we need to recognise the paradoxical nature of leadership – and the conundrum this presents for leaders. Whilst people are appointed to leader roles, leadership can be seen as a 'full contact sport' that necessarily involves engagement with others who themselves individually and collectively exert influence.

Secondly, we need to recognise the complexity and uniqueness of our own organisational contexts, within which influence is exerted.

Thirdly, we need to continue to be critical of much (the majority?) of leadership literature, which is individually focused, largely heroic and often lacking in any robust evidence.

Fourthly, we need to be aware that there are ways of to deal with the leader's conundrum through analysing our own individual and collective strengths, preferences and histories, whilst accepting that there are no universal prescriptions for how to do this.

Finally, we need to welcome the developing literature regarding the fog of distributed leadership as a potentially significant contribution to our understanding, and to encourage its further development.

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# Dancing with three paradoxes: the 'Where', 'When' and 'Will' of leadership

## Nigel Linacre



*When you lead a group are you within the group or beyond it? Is your focus on being present or realising the future? And without knowing this, can you create a feeling of faith? Leaders must be able to dance with all three paradoxes: "Within-Beyond", "Now-When" and "Blind-Faith". Each paradox expresses a truth, each cannot stand on its own, and each must be reconciled with the other.*

### Keywords

the conscious competence model, present-moment awareness, future bias, interconnectedness

## The "Within and Beyond the Team" Paradox

A small winged creature flew past me and settled on the side of the old stone wall. I would not have seen it there had I not noticed it land, for its wings appeared to carry an image of the aged wall itself, and it merged onto the wall seamlessly. Whether it was a butterfly or a moth of some kind was not clear. And only by looking closely could I confirm that it was indeed still there. A fresh eye would see a wholly united wall, but at least a part of this wall could fly. This creature would be able to leave the wall and return to it. It had qualities that were not in the rest of the wall, and yet it could perfectly meld.



A fly on the wall? (Photo: John Bebbington FRPS)

Is the leader in the group or outside it, on the wall or off the wall? In this case the butterfly – we'll give it the benefit of the doubt – can be in the group (melded on the wall) and outside the group (in the air) as and when it chooses. It looks like it matches the group in terms of social identity when it is at rest, but when it flies into the air it does something the wall can't do - it goes beyond. Leaders may know something the group does not: they may understand a truth that the group may not yet understand, for example the need to adapt to upcoming changes. So the leader shares qualities with the rest of the team plus qualities that are currently unavailable to the team.

When you think of a group you lead, in what respect are you part of the group and in what sense are you beyond it: does your answer vary with time? Turning your attention to groups you aren't in, in what sense does it feel like the leader is within the group, and when beyond?

Of course, within organisations leaders typically lead one group and are also part of another. A group of leaders will typically have its own leader, who may in turn be part of another group, say a board, and each of these groups may demand loyalty. Of course, with the higher group they sit within, they can simply merge, until and unless they want to make a play to become the next leader, at which point they may start to spread their wings. This continuing dilemma – when to remain at rest and when to fly – is intrinsic to leadership.

### **“Now and When” Paradox**

Leaders must operate within the present and be able to move beyond it. Driving along the motorway late at night I was in autopilot thinking about my destination, and how it would be when I met my son off the train, when I was yanked back into the present. There was debris on the road. Immediately my full attention was on the series of hazards and my body was ensuring my little car avoided getting ensnared. Having successfully navigated the bits and pieces, I didn't stop. My attention returned to the goal of meeting my son; and my heart rate returned to something approaching normal.



What do you imagine when you look beyond the here and now?

Sometimes I may be more deeply present, but that wasn't one of them, until the debris caught me. At that point, I was super-present, and everything was moving in slow motion. In truth, I like to spend a lot of time in my imagination, and it's a fun place to be. I even spend time in other people's imagination; say when I watch a compelling film. If the former is an act of leadership, the second is an act of followership. Either way, imagination is important.

Leaders also spend time in their imagination, focusing on what does not yet exist, but which may come to exist given time. Look around you and most of what you see was first imagined: this article, the journal, AMED, the chair you are sitting on, the clothes you are wearing. In large part, we are living out what was first imagined: first the image, then the reality. Leaders create.

However, when leaders have this *future bias*, the current reality sometimes trips them up: the current reality creates an unforeseen and perhaps unimagined challenge. In the example above, it was the debris in the road, jerking me back to the present moment. Other leaders lean so much towards the current reality that they take their eye off the vision. Some of us look at the current unaccomplished reality, say to ourselves it hasn't happened, and get frustrated and then shrug. Neglect the future and you aren't going to lead anyone anywhere; but ignore the present and it will trip you up. If the leader's left eye is on the present, the right eye is on the future.

The first two paradoxes – being within the team and leading beyond it, being present and addressing the future – are of course closely related. Leaders are closely involved in working with the team in the present and also thinking about probable futures.

## Blind-Faith

Have you ever gone into a room and then realised that you no longer remember why you entered the it? Sometimes I may wander into the kitchen and then realise I don't know why I'm there. Bizarre as it may sound, we are always remembering and forgetting. At the meta-level, many of us don't seem to have much idea of what our lives are about. And yet, seeing not, we persist.

When asked to raise a hand if you know you will wake up tomorrow morning, some workshop participants raise their hand. I then ask: "*How do you know the future?*" After a little discussion, they concede they *don't* know the future. Rather, they, just have a feeling of certainty that they will indeed wake up. Followers often assume that their leaders do know where they and we are going. While they may recognise that they themselves don't know, they hope their leaders do. In truth, leaders don't know where they are going. Of course, they may or may not know that they don't know where they are going. But the team continue to imagine that the leaders do know where they are going.

You may know the *conscious-competence* model<sup>5</sup>, starting where we don't know that we are incompetent, and progressing to *conscious-incompetence*, where we realise we are incompetent, and then progressing to conscious competence, where we can do it but we have to think about it, and finally arriving at unconscious competence, where we can do it without thinking about it, like walking.

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<sup>5</sup> The "Conscious Competence" model, also known as the "Four Stages of Competence" and the "Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill", was developed by Noel Burch in the 1970's while working at Gordon Training International.

We can offer an adaptation of the Conscious Competence model here, which we might call a Conscious Knowing model, in which we progress from: *not-knowing--we-don't-know*, to *knowing-we-don't-know*: we regard this as progress!<sup>6</sup> In today's unpredictable world, followers may *not-know-we-don't-know* while the leader may *know-we-don't-know*. However, telling the team we don't know may be a little unnerving. Incidentally, the two remaining levels in the "*Conscious-Knowing*" model must be: *knowing-that-we-know* through to *not-knowing-that-we-know*, an uncluttered form of being. As soon as we say "I know", we have interposed the thought of knowing between subject and object.

So what's the paradox? Somehow or other – and from this place of not knowing – the leader must fill the team with a feeling of faith: it can be done, and they can do it. The leader may feel it necessary to believe in the team, for they may often not believe in themselves. Many leaders go further than the future conditional and say "*we will do it*", and such words may themselves make a difference to the outcome. What do you do with your team? Do you share a vision and tell them that it will be? The unknowing leader offers us a future in which we have faith, and reality follows, or not. Some leaders have the courage to say that we may succeed or fail - to look Kipling's twin impostors<sup>7</sup> in the eye and continue anyway.

For some of us, it feels necessary to believe there is always a way forward, even if it is merely a *least-awkward-way-forward*. The future, whatever it may hold, somehow emerges from the present.

## Interconnectedness

These three paradoxes, being within the team and leading beyond it, being present and addressing the future, not knowing and yet believing, make up the Where, When and Will of leadership. Leaders are more likely to be with their team when they are present; and in their imagination, and hence in the future, when they are on their own. They are more likely to convey a belief in the future to their team when they have both connected with their team in the present and addressed the collective potential future.

There are no hard and fast rules here. Leaders have to navigate these conflicting pulls in the moment and beyond; being aware that they are there, that they are intrinsic, may provide you with more choices the next time you come upon them. Meanwhile, it is possible to practise present-moment awareness, including self-awareness and awareness of others, and become more accepting of self and others. As well as practising 'being here', we can practise imagining future possibilities, become more comfortable in the uncreated future too, and sense our unrealised collective potential. Where, when and whether you will, remains your choice.

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<http://www.somersetmothgroup.org.uk/portal/p/Picture/r/view/s/Large+Ranunculus+%28polymixis+flavicincta%29>

## About the author

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<sup>6</sup> A participant on one of our three-part programmes said, "*A month ago I thought I was OK, now I realise I am not*", and then asked "*Is this progress?*" According to the Conscious Competence model, yes!

<sup>7</sup> "*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster, And treat those two impostors just the same*", from Kipling's poem 'If', 1895.



# Should you be guided by your moral compass?

*Or is it bad for your career?*

## Jennifer Board



### Keywords

moral courage, moral compass, leadership paradox

### Introduction

The first time I really thought about Moral Courage as a leadership capability, I was attending the 2011 Leadership Conference of a large financial institution, listening to a particularly engaging presentation by the late Rush Kidder. I had thought about the concept often enough through my twenty-two years of working in the investment banking and insurance industries in London, New York, Singapore and Hong Kong. There were plenty of times when I had seen people make the expedient choice at the expense of the ethical choice; the political decision at the expense of the brave decision; and give the disingenuous answer at the expense of the truth. However, I had never looked into the background of this behaviour, nor considered the psychology behind it. Listening to Rush, I decided that the topic needed some research in order to make sense of some of the behaviour I've witnessed during my career.

### Definition of Moral Courage

In Rush's book 'Moral Courage' (Kidder, 2005), he quotes a comment of John Wayne's: "courage is being scared to death – and saddling up anyway". This recognises that real courage is a conscious decision based upon an appreciation and acceptance of the risks in play, and not merely reckless behaviour.

One of the models in this book illustrates the three elements of moral courage as depicted in this diagram:



Diagram 1: Rush's three elements of moral courage



Rush describes these elements as: a commitment to moral **Principles**, an awareness of the **Danger** involved in supporting those principles, and a willing **Endurance** of that danger. At the centre of these intersecting domains is **Moral Courage**.

Can this moral courage be taught or encouraged and developed in individuals, as well as in organisations?

Rush believed that it could be learned by:

- *Discourse and Discussion* – where the language of rational enquiry clarifies the idea of moral courage and renders it explicable and relevant.
- *Modeling and Mentoring* – where role models demonstrate moral courage in action and chart pathways of human endeavour which others can follow.
- *Practice and Persistence* – where learners can discipline themselves through direct, incremental skill building that increases their ability to apply moral courage.

Rush also provides us with his **Moral Courage Checklist – Avoiding the Inhibitors** as follows:

8. **Overconfident Cultures**, which cut off discussion, tolerate unethical acts, refuse to hear new ideas.
9. **Compromises**, engendered by a desire to be liked, win promotion/election, duck tough but rightful demands.
10. **Foolhardiness**, forging ahead without a proper risk assessment.
11. **Timidity**, urging flight from situations demanding bold forwardness, cowardly unwillingness to endure the discomfort often required by moral courage.
12. **Raw Courage**, ignoring the principled heart of moral courage, substituting a misplaced sense of honour or mere physical bravery.
13. **Tepid Ethics**, lacking sufficient intensity and breadth to rise above the merely dutiful and tolerant.
14. **Over-reflection**, leading to rationalising the way out of a first instinct expression of moral courage.
15. **Bystander Apathy**, which dilutes personal responsibility in the presence of others, excusing lack of courage because it is not being shown by others.
16. **Groupthink**, huddling around and defending a bad collective decision that no one alone would have countenanced.
17. **Normalised Deviancy**, redefining some wrong behaviours as acceptable rather than taking a potentially unpopular stand against them.
18. **Altruism**, challenging moral courage when expressed in excess (manipulative) or when misapplied (meddling).
19. **Cultural Differences**, persuading ourselves that boundaries of moral concern need not extend to radically different people

Although I can think of examples of most of these inhibitors of moral courage, which I have experienced throughout my career, the one which I think is the most toxic is what I call the 'Emperor's New Clothes' syndrome. This is a combination of overconfident cultures, compromises, tepid ethics and bystander apathy. In this kind of culture, where people feel unable to confront reality, managers bully employees and no-one reports it because there is a belief that nothing will change. Moreover, executives manipulate compensation and benefit programmes to advantage themselves and expect this to go unchallenged, and CEOs claim they want to be given candid feedback when they actually want their views reinforced.

In Rielle Miller's paper 'Moral Courage: Definition and Development' (2005), Miller sets out that she also believes that moral courage can be taught and habituated. She supports her argument by referencing both Plato's and Aristotle's views that education is central to moral development. She also argues that to habituate courage, we must practise using courage.

She quotes William Kilpatrick 'Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong' on the importance of moral stories in helping children learn virtues. Here is another call for role models and the importance they play in myths and legends, e.g. *the Hero's Journey*, where the central character goes on an arduous journey, braves danger and many hardships, triumphs in the end and serves the good of society.

## Heroes and Whistleblowers

### Heroes or villains?

So where are all the heroes in the corporate world?

There are not many who immediately spring to mind. There are, however, a number of characters who present themselves as moral players, professing a fashionable belief in values they publish but never live; leaders pretending to be morally courageous whilst propping up a very different corporate culture.

Several real life examples come to mind. One senior executive sent out coffee mugs and T shirts with examples of the business's values printed on them to remind employees of how they had to work together as a team, whilst actively encouraging dysfunctional behaviour within his own executive team. Another senior executive reluctantly investigated a serious breach of the compensation guidelines only once it was pointed out in writing and could no longer safely be ignored. And yet another senior executive known for his high moral principles pursued divisive tactics to consolidate his own political position.

This, disingenuous behaviour in many respects was far worse than that of leaders who openly admitted they were driven by greed, such as an investment banker CEO who often displayed more integrity than that witnessed in the professed moral players. Although the outright 'greed is good' approach is ultimately damaging to the culture and the success of an organisation, at least it is not hypocrisy which warps and confounds the organisational climate and undermines employee engagement. In the companies where the professed values are never actually operationalised, employees are aware of the double standards. However, "People are our greatest asset" always looks good in the annual report.

Culture and values are driven by the leadership of the business – the two are indivisible. If we are not effective role models for the type of behaviour we want to encourage, no-one will believe what we say, they will watch we do and take their lead from there.

### 'Whistleblowers'

What about "whistleblowers"? Aren't they meant to be morally courageous, or could they just be troublemakers? It very much depends on their motives. Some have good cause to alert the public to dangers, both physical and moral, and through this indeed they serve the good of society. However, how do we know their whistleblowing is authentic and not just the action of a disenchanted employee seeking revenge?

The willingness to confront a situation for the sake of what is right, independent of the cost, is not an easy thing to do. In her article 'Moral Courage in the Workplace', Catherine Capozzi points out the benefits of improving or transforming corporate culture, creating a more equitable workplace and helping better society. However, she also points out that showing this type of moral courage may cause isolation from colleagues and attract unwanted attention from your own company who may try to discredit your reputation (Capozzi, 2013). Some CEOs may feel that displaying moral courage may get in the way of generating profits. Thus, displaying moral courage in the workplace may come at a high cost – both professional and personal.

However, brave and ethical whistleblowers may take heart from a quote of Winston Churchill's "You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, some time in your life." (Petrie). Churchill himself is a great example of a leader who was absorbed from his early years with a moral vision for his life (Hayward, 1998). He braved great unpopularity in the years before the Second World War, as he was one of the few political leaders who refused to appease Adolf Hitler. John Keegan wrote of him "It is the moral rather than the intellectual content of his judgment that dominates".

Leadership, therefore, requires a certain amount of intellect, but character is key. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) writes of people admired for their courage and includes the example of Ignaz Semmelweis, the Hungarian physician who braved mockery by insisting that the lives of mothers could be saved if obstetricians washed their hands. Csikszentmihalyi's view is that "Of all the virtues we can learn no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life..."

### **The psychology of courage**

A leading American psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut, found that courage entails a commitment to "the nuclear self" which contains the individual's most enduring values and most deeply anchored goals. When he asked the question what prompts the heroic individual to "move forward, despite intimidation from within and without" along his "lonely road", he found that it was a compulsion to "shape the pattern of his life...in accordance with the design of his nuclear self". (Kidder, 2005)

In short, the heroic individual seeks alignment between outward behaviour and inner principles/values. The individual achieves balance and a sense of inner peace when their ideals and personality have become one. This reminds me of the state of 'Flow' described by Csikszentmihalyi (2008) - the balance between the challenges facing an individual and the skills at his (or her) disposal to be able to respond to these challenges.

I believe it is also possible to be in flow when we are free to behave in a manner which is in alignment with our personal values. It is about being the best version we can become of our own selves.

The opposite of this, of course, is the path of least resistance taken by those unwilling or unable to stand out from the crowd; to dare to be different; to make the unpopular decision for the right reason; to risk the next promotion/pay rise/bonus. The world is full of examples of individuals on both sides of the divide. Martin Luther King, Oskar Schindler, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks stood on one side; on the other side stood some News of the World journalists, a number of Barclays bankers, certain Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust nurses, corrupt politicians and discredited policemen. It would appear that the people on one side of the divide either have different values from those on the other, or that they have found the strength not to succumb to the dark side.

According to Frankl (2006), "The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you."

## The Leadership Paradox

There are certainly many perplexing questions which arise when considering moral courage. Proponents of it are sometimes guilty of where they will be moral and where they will not. John F Kennedy displayed great moral courage in supporting the African American fight for equality in the southern states of the USA, but questionable morality in his alleged extra marital affairs. His moral compass seemed to be an inconsistent one – a "flawed hero"?

Paradox examples also include the "courageous villain" currently illustrated through the glamorisation of pirates in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" film franchise. To refer back to the view that stories help children learn virtues, what are we teaching our children through the medium of these movies? Another similar example is the thieves' code of honour and the adulation of the Kray twins in the east end of London in the 1950s and 60s. What kind of heroes and role models were they to the children and the adults of that time and place? James D Wallace says that these types of examples demonstrate that courage can be used for unvirtuous acts as well as virtuous (Miller, 2005).

Rush Kidder wrote (2005) that although moral courage is an essential characteristic of leadership, paradoxically, it is something which should rarely be necessary to deploy. If there is a call for this strength to be frequently utilised, then this would be a sign of an unhealthy culture. However, my view is that, if it is part of a structured organisational change programme designed to improve a corporate climate which has been ailing, then this actually would be a good sign during the period of change. This 'period of change' may not be brief, as I believe that any meaningful change usually takes a considerable time to embed.

Yet another paradox is that sometimes an individual may need to be pragmatic in order to change an organisation from the inside i.e. the need to first survive to then succeed by not challenging some acts which appear unethical. However, this is a risky strategy, as the siren call from the dark side, with the promise of an easier corporate and personal life, can be compelling and attractive. Implementing this type of organisational change alone is next to impossible.

I have seen agents of change brought in to organisations who have then foundered and sunk below the weight of bystander apathy and the lack of executive will to deal with the behavioural issues which are infecting the corporate climate. In the end, the parachuting in of these individuals can be just so much window dressing – often for the sake of political purposes or appearances. Without real commitment to make tough decisions and support these new organs in the corporate body, they are attacked and destroyed by the existing antibodies which want to preserve the status quo. The situation then ends up worse than before, as people have seen those who tried to change the culture become marginalised or damaged by it. This, therefore, perpetuates the view that it is dangerous to stick your head above the parapet.

## Conclusion

In using a moral compass, what seems most important is that first an individual needs to know his or her own values, otherwise it is not possible to defend them. The actions to defend them are then courageous as this is knowingly done. It took me some years to understand and appreciate the values which drove me but, once found, I realised they truly were valuable as they defined who I am. Choices became clearer. Building self awareness is an important step in the journey of personal development.

The development of corporate values is often completely misunderstood by CEOs, some of whom decide themselves what these values will be and then tell the employees what theirs should be. Little wonder that there is negligible buy-in from the employee population. The imposed values are then, of course, published on the company's website, where they are ignored by all, including the CEO. This is yet another example of something which looks good on the annual report but has no meaning or traction within an organisation.

There is a real potency in the use of heroes and role models in stories to underpin and emphasise the need for a moral purpose and ethical behaviour. This has been written about by many authors and as Daniel Goleman says "To communicate ... (is) creating an experience, to engage their (employees) emotional gut and that's an emotional craft" (Cashman, 2008) Using stories to bring a leader's values to life will build a deeper emotional connection with the people they lead as long as these stories are real, and fit the context and the moment (Goffee & Jones, 2006). It shows the leader as being authentic and revealing part of their inner self. These days, there are a number of executive programmes which emphasise the need for storytelling to develop senior leaders as compelling communicators, to use not only their mind but also their body and voice as a means to engage employees e.g. RADA in Business (RADA).

Inappropriate behaviour needs to be tackled or risks undermining any progress made towards the encouraging of moral courage within an organisation. Some companies embrace the concept readily enough but struggle with implementing the necessary actions, particularly when it involves the behaviour of a high performing revenue generator. However, what is rarely evaluated is the destructive influence on the revenue-generating ability of the colleagues and team members of that high performer. Double standards are toxic to a healthy working environment.

Despite my cynicism about the lack of heroes and moral courage in the corporate world, I do believe that this kind of courage is an essential characteristic of good leadership. It shines out of authentic leaders; employees know it when they see it. I have also enjoyed the experience of working with, and for, some impressive leaders who put the good of the enterprise before their own bonus and career and were determined to do the right thing rather than to do things right.

One example which comes to mind is of a CEO terminating the appointment of a recently promoted executive for inappropriate behaviour which others would have swept under the carpet. Another concerns a senior executive who was sent in to investigate and restructure a troublesome overseas business, and root out the bad deals and bad dealmakers, which he did regardless of the obstacles and political fallout that he encountered.

That kind of courageous leader is truly worth following and supporting, as employees feel they are engaged in a worthwhile cause and everyone has skin in the game. It is amazing how energising and liberating it is to work in such an environment; one in which people achieve more than expected and feel a real sense of



making a valuable contribution to the whole. As the French writer Anais Nin said, "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage" (Cashman, 2008)

In the end, is the espousal of moral courage a lost cause? Is it just too hard to implement no matter how much we may want to model this behaviour? Is the personal cost too high? Is it a virtue which can only be deployed by those who have few financial responsibilities i.e. with nothing to lose? Are there insufficient role models to inspire us? What choices should we make when faced with choosing between right and wrong, or indeed between right and right (one value versus another)? (Kidder, 2005)

### Doing the right thing

I have been asked if moral courage becomes more important the more senior an individual is.

Although, as I have said, I do believe it is a key leadership skill, I have witnessed it being displayed by an employee who had no senior responsibilities at all.

*One November afternoon, a female executive was asked to have a meeting with her boss in his car on his way to a meeting as there was no other time in his diary. She was told she would then be brought back to the office so, foolishly, she did not take her coat or handbag with her.*

*As the CEO was being dropped off, he abruptly told his chauffeur to drop the woman at a tube station as he needed the car again straightaway. It was cold, had just started to rain heavily and was getting dark.*

*The chauffeur and the female executive sat silently for a moment, and then the chauffeur turned the car around and drove her back to her office.*

*The chauffeur was brave because he certainly knew he would be heavily criticised by the CEO for not being there to collect him.*

*The female executive was me.*

*Although I volunteered to grab a passing black cab if the chauffeur would lend me the money, he insisted on driving me all the way back to the office and right into the underground garage so I would not get wet.*

So where does this leave us in weighing up the pros and cons of encouraging Moral Courage in ourselves and others? Should we fit in to the crowd of bystanders or show the courage of our convictions? Should we always pay attention when our personal moral compass points to True North? What choice will we make? Which direction will we take? A quote from Aristotle, more usually attributed to Churchill, points the way:

*'Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees the others.'*

I believe that we need to be effective positive role models - i.e. 'Watch my feet, not my lips'. People watch leaders and they copy them for good or for ill. Corporate values should underpin and drive corporate culture, not as handed down by a narcissistic leader but as truly developed by, and bought into by, employees. There is no need for these values to be emblazoned on T shirts if they are embedded into all the facets of an organisation and demonstrably lived. There should be consequences for those whose behaviour is inconsistent with these values, no matter how senior they are or how much revenue they generate. Otherwise, it is all fluff and no substance. Following the sea change of the 2008 banking crisis, it seems that more and more people are prepared to criticise behaviour which is perceived as immoral, even if it is legal. Examples of this perceived immoral if legal practice include large corporates which avoid paying corporation tax through complex offshore legal structures, excessive bonuses for CEOs whose companies do not perform

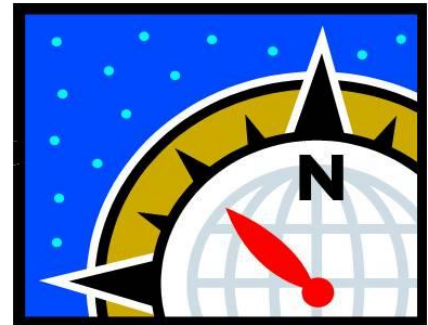
as promised, expensive termination payments for BBC executives without clear justification, retailers using cheap overseas locations to make clothing for the UK market without ensuring adequate working conditions for the foreign workers who are not covered by our Health and Safety legislation.

In the past, people mostly would have only concerned themselves if the behaviour was illegal. These days, companies have to consider their reputational risk far more than before, as the taxpayer, shareholder and consumer have shown themselves ready to wield the power they always had but seldom used.

### What is *your* True North?

Have you discovered your own moral compass that guides you? As Bill George asks (George and Sims, 2007):

*“Do you know what your life and your leadership are all about, and when you are being true to yourself?”*



The journey is not an easy one, and can often be lonely. I have found myself conflicted from time to time, and have had to make difficult choices and short term compromises for long term gains. I am grateful to all my past colleagues who travelled the road along with me, and kept the faith when the going got tough.

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# Do people truly understand heroic leadership?

## Seven paradoxes that spotlight myths and misunderstandings

**Scott Allison**



### Abstract

*In this article, I present seven counterintuitive research findings about heroes and heroic leadership. These findings focus on the power of fiction, the challenge of defining heroism and leadership, the origins of heroism, the biological basis of heroism, the need for heroes, the invisibility of heroes, and the role of death in producing heroes. A greater understanding of heroic leadership can assist in the identification and development of heroic leaders in organisations.*

### Keywords:

Heroes, leadership, paradox heroic leadership, archetypes, death positivity.

### Introduction

Great leadership can be counterintuitive. Yes, there are certain truisms about effective leadership that resonate with common sense. For example, we know that great leaders have vision, they communicate well, they show charisma, they demonstrate ethics, and they transform those whom they lead. But there are some secrets to heroic leadership that defy our common intuition. I believe that an increased awareness of these hidden aspects of great leadership can enhance our ability to identify and create heroic leadership in our organisations and in society as a whole.

Discovering paradoxes was the last thing on my mind when I first began conducting research on heroism five years ago. At that time, I asked 450 people, ranging in age from 18 to 72, to write down the names of their heroes and heroic leaders. These data became the basis of [a book on the psychology of heroism](#). After detecting several patterns in the data, seven paradoxes of heroism leapt out at me. They've proven to be delightful surprises that can inform the way we practise leadership and promote pro-social behaviour in our communities.

So without further ado, here are the seven paradoxes of heroism and heroic leadership:

### Paradox 1: The truest heroes are fictional heroes

In our studies of people's perceptions of heroic leaders, one of our research participants revealed an important insight: "The only real heroes are fictional heroes," he said. Inspired by this comment, [we published a study](#) in which we asked people to rate the goodness (or badness) of heroes and villains. Some of the heroes and villains rated were fictional, whereas others were real-life heroes and villains. Our results showed that fictional heroes and villains are rated as more extremely good or bad than their real-world counterparts.



Superman – a "true" fictional hero.  
(photo by James Vaughan)

What do we take away from this finding? Fictional heroes are indeed "truer" heroes. We suspect that the creators of fiction draw from classic prototypes of good and evil when constructing their characters. While elements of these prototypes can surely be found in real-world heroes and villains, fictional prototypes are more cleanly drawn with their essential features accentuated. No wonder we are drawn to the heightened prototypical qualities that fictional characters embody. We should keep this in mind when we consider whom we choose as role models for leadership.

### Paradox 2: We all agree what a hero is, but we disagree who heroes are.

Our research has shown that most people agree that heroic leaders are exceptionally moral, competent, or both. We're all on the same page when defining a hero, but we all tend to generate different specific examples of heroes. It is very common for people who agree about the definition of heroes to have vehement disagreements about whether a person fits the criteria for heroism.



Meryl Streep: Heroic leader or mere celebrity?  
(photo by Andreas Tai)

A telling example occurred when a trusted colleague of ours loved our definition of heroes, agreed with our philosophy that "[heroism is in the eye of the beholder](#)", but then fervently questioned our decision to include actress Meryl Streep as an example of a heroine in our book on heroes. It didn't matter that we pointed to the fact that some of our survey respondents listed Streep as their hero. What was most important to our colleague was that Streep simply didn't appear on her own personal list of hero exemplars.

The important take-home message here is that we should embrace differences in perceptions of heroism without quibbling about strict definitional standards. Meryl Streep may not be your hero, but let's celebrate – and put to use -- the fine attributes that have made Streep a tremendous success. Streep is known for her exceptional talent, her work ethic, her versatility, and her fine sense of teamwork. Surely these qualities are ones we should honour and embrace in our organisations.



### Paradox 3: The most abundant heroes are also the most invisible.

An important type of hero is called the [Transparent Hero](#), who does his or her heroic work behind the scenes, outside the public spotlight. Transparent heroes include teachers, coaches, mentors, healthcare workers, law enforcement personnel, firefighters, and our military personnel. Although these heroes are found in abundance, they largely go unnoticed and are our most unsung heroic leaders.

Every group, society, and organisation has these hidden heroes who make the magic happen but who also go unrecognised. We owe it to these unsung heroes to honour and acknowledge their positive contributions as much as possible.



Firefighter at work: one of a host of unsung heroic leaders.  
(U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Barry Riley)

### Paradox 4: The worst of human nature brings out the best of human nature.

Human-caused catastrophes such as the holocaust, the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the London bombings on 7/7, and the recent Boston marathon bombings were all fertile soil from which great acts of heroism blossomed. Villainy always begets heroism. This paradox probably needs little explanation. When tragedy strikes, heroes step forward to protect us from further harm.

We are indeed fortunate that during such dark times stories of such heroism abound. We can find examples of this type of heroism in our own organisations, albeit on a much smaller level. When there are setbacks, leadership is needed to steer the organisational ship back to safety and prosperity. Let's recognise the heroic leaders who step up and make a difference when stumbling blocks occasionally and inevitably darken our communities.

### Paradox 5: We don't choose our heroes; they choose us.

There is considerable research evidence supporting the idea of inherited capacities that interact with experience to produce the ways that people think and construct their worlds. Carl Jung, an early psychologist, called these capacities *archetypes*. [Archetypes prepare us for seeing and identifying heroes and leaders](#). Our minds may be equipped with images of the looks, traits, and behaviour of heroes. The conclusion: Our leaders and heroes may choose us as much as we choose them.



Have our brains equipped us to see heroes?  
(photo by \_DJ\_)

What can we learn from the concept of an archetype? We can learn to trust our instincts about good leadership and heroism when we see it. It's ingrained in us at a deep level. However, having said that, we must be careful not to be misled by our instincts. Appearances can be deceiving. A tall, confident person with an authoritative bearing can fool us into believing he is a leader, cautions author Malcolm Gladwell in his best-selling book, *Blink*.



As observers, we must focus on *behaviour*, not appearance. Good leadership is about leading, not about mere facade.

### **Paradox 6: We love to build up our heroes and we also love to destroy them.**

People love to build up heroes because they offer hope to all of us. Our research shows that we are captivated by dramatic tales of underdogs who heroically prevail against the odds. But the reverse is also true: People also appear to crave the undoing of heroes. [Our studies show](#) that our greatest heroes cannot get away with anything less than near-perfect moral behaviour. For this reason, many heroes are bound to fall from grace. We seem to believe in, and relish, a perverse law of heroic gravity: What goes up must come down.

The take-home lesson here is to become aware of extreme thinking that casts leaders into polarising roles of hero or villain. Our human foibles steer us toward black-and-white thinking that resists the reality of nuance in our social environment. Our worst leaders may not be as bad as they seem, and our best leaders may not be as good. We are called to use our best reasoning and critical thinking skills to avoid extreme labels. Let's reserve the words 'hero' and 'villain' for individuals who truly exemplify the best and worst of human nature.



Lance Armstrong, fallen hero.  
(photo by Jan Jacob Mekes)

### **Paradox 7: We love heroes the most when they're gone.**

The results of many studies we've conducted point to a rather morbid conclusion: As much as we love our heroes when they are around, we love them even more when they're dead. We call this phenomenon [the death positivity bias](#) (Sigelman, 2009). This bias is seen in the factors that determine the perceived greatness of leaders. Research has shown that getting assassinated truly helps a leader gain stature as a great legend. The greatest of our heroes often must die to achieve their greatness.



Dead heroic leaders are judged as more heroic than living ones.  
(photo by Nick Parfjonov)

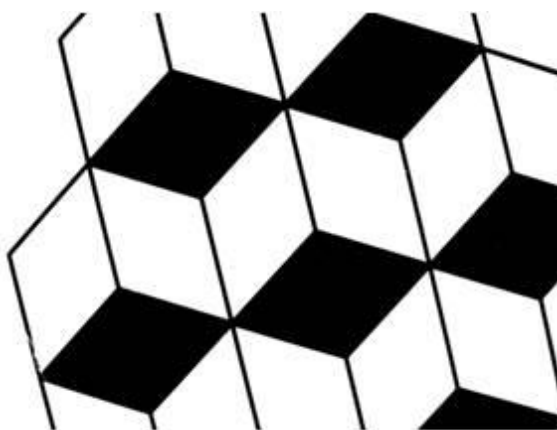
The lesson to be learned here is to identify and appreciate great leadership and heroism while it is currently happening rather than waiting to recognise that greatness after it has passed. Stay in the moment, and appreciate present-day effective leadership. Be sure to acknowledge it and express gratitude for it while it is reaping benefits in the present. Human beings have the breathtaking ability to remain locked in the past or fearful of the future. Let's be sure to take inventory of present-day heroic leadership.

## Final thoughts: the prevalence of 'intuitive heroism'

In my research on heroism and leadership, I've been surprised at times about the ways in which people choose and maintain their heroes. I've presented these surprises to you in the form of seven paradoxes. Maybe these paradoxes don't strike you as surprising at all, but to me they reveal an unexpected psychological richness about leadership and heroism.

What accounts for these seven paradoxes? For me, as a social scientist, the concept of heroic leadership has proven to be slippery, mysterious, and surprising. To understand the paradoxes, I would like to introduce the term *intuitive heroism* to refer to people's naïve beliefs about the way heroism operates. Intuitive heroism is similar to common visual or optical illusions: Our most cherished beliefs about what is happening can be wrong, and we can easily be oblivious about this wrongness as well as blind to the reasons why.

Naïve beliefs about leadership and heroism may lead us to underestimate the idiosyncratic nature of people's choices of heroes. Intuitive heroism can make us oblivious to many things: The power of fictional heroes; the opaqueness of the definition of heroes; the causes of heroism; the innate capacities that drive our selection of heroes; our drive to create and to destroy heroes; the invisibility of our most abundant heroes; and the impact of death in catapulting someone toward heroic status.



We are often oblivious to the reasons why we misperceive reality.  
(photo by Steve Snodgrass)

It is the misleading nature of intuitive heroism that has inspired my colleagues and me to undertake a more scientific approach toward understanding heroes and heroic leadership. The ultimate goal is, of course, to encourage more heroic action and to develop more effective leadership. Unlocking these and other hidden aspects of heroic leadership should assist in the attainment of this goal.

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# The death and re-birth of “The Hero Leader”

## Jefferson Cann



*The Heroic stereotype as perpetuated by the media as a dominant leadership archetype is not the true hero – it is the “Spurious Hero”. The “True Hero”, as portrayed in our great myths, is one who has subsumed their self-referencing ego into an experientially-based understanding of the greater good within a higher reality. Current social and technological dynamics mean that the credibility of the Spurious Hero is set to diminish. As human consciousness develops in the coming decades, the Spurious Hero will be replaced by the True Hero.*

### Keywords

Hero, leadership, hero's journey, spurious hero, heroic leadership, conscious leadership

### The Hero

Walk down any street in the centre of any major city in the world and look at the film posters on the advertising hoards. Whether from Hollywood, Bollywood or Anywood, a huge proportion of them will show the figure of “The Hero”, usually a man<sup>8</sup>, usually carrying a gun, in situations of varying desperation. Jostling them are the even more extreme versions of the fantasy comic-book or historical hero.

This is not surprising, for as Joseph Campbell (1968) pointed out in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the story of “The Hero's Journey” is fundamental to human existence. It is the archetype of the leader for our civilisation, as it seems to have been for those civilisations that preceded us. In its best expression, this archetype gives rise to the release of human potential.

Christopher Vogler's (2007) analysis of Hollywood films outlines the 12 stages of the journey

1. Ordinary World - The hero's normal world before the story begins
2. Call to Adventure - The hero is presented with a problem, challenge or adventure
3. Refusal of the Call - The hero refuses the challenge or journey, usually because he's scared
4. Meeting with the Mentor - The hero meets a mentor to gain advice or training for the adventure
5. Crossing the First Threshold - The hero crosses leaves the ordinary world and goes into the special world

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<sup>8</sup> This archetype is traditionally male ... and the desire to emulate it for good or ill seems to afflict men more than women! So although the principles discussed herein are relevant to women too, especially in male-dominated environments such as business and politics, I will use the masculine pronoun throughout for the sake of consistency.

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies - The hero faces tests, meets allies, confronts enemies and learns the rules of the Special World.
7. Approach - The hero has hit setbacks during tests and may need to try a new idea
8. Ordeal - The biggest life or death crisis
9. Reward - The hero has survived death, overcomes his fear and now earns the reward
10. The Road Back - The hero must return to the Ordinary World.
11. Resurrection Hero - another test where the hero faces death – he has to use everything he's learned
12. Return with Elixir - The hero returns from the journey with the “elixir”, and uses it to help everyone in the Ordinary World

Stages 1 to 4 and 11 to 12 occur in what is called the “ordinary world” – the social reality of the Hero. Stages 5 to 10 take place in the “special world” - a world of magic or another dimension in myths and art, and the individual subconscious in psychology.

As well as the age-old expression in all forms of storytelling, The Hero’s Journey has recently been the basis of many psychotherapeutic, leadership development and coaching models, the purpose of which is expressed by Dilts and Gilligan (2009) quoting Martha Graham:

*“There is a vitality, a life-force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not yours to determine how good it is, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep the channel open.”*

In any form, the purpose or end-point of the journey is for The Hero to move from a state in which his purpose is to serve himself and the needs of his individual ego, to a state in which he understands his purpose to be to serve the greater good/broader community – from a “lower” to a “higher” level of consciousness. Great teachers of the major traditions exemplify this<sup>9</sup>, as well as current cultural heroes such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Aung San Suu Kyi.

## **The Hero in Everyday Experience**

In whatever scenario, The Hero, of course, is the one who will save us. The Hero is stronger, braver, more knowledgeable, more proficient, more ethical, more self-sacrificing - more of whatever it is we need – than we ordinary folk. These qualities are aspects of the “elixir” that The Hero has discovered through the trials of his journey, unique to him and firmly grounded through hard-won experience.

Unfortunately, the most common expressions of The Hero fail to achieve this ideal. For reasons of individual psychology and social conditioning too numerous to go into here, the mantle of The Hero is assumed without the proving forge of The Journey, with more or less damaging consequences. So strong is the paradigm of The Hero in our psyche that, under pressure, we attempt to copy the qualities and behaviours of The Hero without the underpinning of the experience of our individual, inner journey.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the life of Noah, Moses, the Prophet Mohammed, the Buddhist Bodhisattva.

This means that, however well we may emulate those qualities, they are expressed through the lower, ego-focused consciousness and end up serving the individual rather than the common good. The result may be termed the “spurious Hero”.

Haslam, in his analysis of the social psychology of leadership (Haslam et al 2011), gives a good example of how the remaining ego results in the undermining of the spurious Hero’s purpose, and cites this as the reason for the truth of the assertion that in politics “all political lives ... end in failure ...”. Haslam also points out how the difference in leadership purpose, or consciousness, underlies the distinction between “effective” and “good” leadership:

*“Leadership is effective when it is successful in mobilizing followers and wielding the group as a powerful social force; but it is only good if the mobilization of that social force helps achieve laudable and desirable social outcomes (Burns & Sorensen, 2006; Conger 1998)”.*

“Tyrants”, whether on the world stage or in the meeting room, serve only their self interest (however much they may attempt to delude themselves that they serve a higher purpose, e.g. from Hitler’s *lebensraum* for the super race to the middle manager’s “Don’t question me - I know I’m right”). Thus, the remaining ego of the spurious Hero causes the degeneration of The Hero into the master, the monster or the tyrant.

## The Hero in Business

Our leadership development work over the past decade through Extraordinary Leadership Limited ([www.xleadership.com](http://www.xleadership.com)) with senior individuals, teams and organisations has shown us that, in business, this spurious Hero continues to command the meeting room despite the many works of leadership analysis available. Examples of such analyses include Jim Collins’ (2001) distinction between the “Level 4” leader with “professional will” and the “Level 5” leader with their “paradoxical blend of professional will and personal humility”, and Goleman et al’s (2003) study showing that “Visionary” and “Coaching” leadership are the most positive styles – even though the perils of a “Hero Culture” are widely recognised. As our clients say when asked: “The problem with a “Hero Culture”, or “Hero” Boss, is that the hero needs an emergency to fix, and if there isn’t one available for him to prove his worth to himself and everyone else, he’ll make one up!” Yet, despite this understanding, CEOs continue to model the spurious Hero, young and middle managers feel that they have to replicate it and so the limiting, short-term, individualistic, competitive, ego/fear-driven culture persists.

### Forces perpetuating spurious hero role models

Robert Sutton (2010) calls this, graphically, “asshole management” in his book “The No Asshole Rule”. In hierarchical organisations where dependency and fear are generated, the behaviours of those at the top of the hierarchy are replicated by those below. As Richard Barrett points out (2006):

*“An organisation cannot operate at a higher level of consciousness than the personal consciousness of the leadership group ... In general, most organisations operate with a “default” culture because it arises unconsciously ... the culture is simply recognised as “the way things are done around here”.”*



In politics, The Hero - also known as “the strong” leader – is well established. In the UK, much commentary has been made over the past decades about the shift to a “presidential”, personality-based style of political leadership, indicating that the impact of mass media is undermining even those systems designed to hold the Spurious Hero in check as issues are simplified and personalised. Elsewhere, particularly in more paternalistic/hierarchical societies that operate a more feudal system of power and patronage, the paradigm of the all-powerful “Emperor/saviour” is more obviously alive and well and is exploited by the Spurious Hero. The recent history of many African states, such as Zimbabwe, and North Korea are clear examples of how the self-serving purpose of the Spurious Hero leads to repression and dictatorship. Such societies show clearly how power-based hierarchies generate a “feudal” search for the “grace and favour” of those in power, an effect seen less clearly in most any corporation anywhere in the world.

And as soon as one Hero lets us down (or gets torn down) through revealing his ordinariness or through one form of scandal or another, we promote another in his place. We willfully support the delusion of heroic superiority through the cycle of adulation, dependency and rejection that the Spurious Hero paradigm generates, lacking as it does the firm foundation of developmental experience.

### **Why do we perpetuate the Spurious Hero?**

Just as leaders cannot exist without followers ... so Heroes cannot exist without those who worship them. The status of The Hero, like that of any leader, is granted, not taken. Why do we, increasingly knowingly, support this cycle? Why are we continually looking for A Hero who will help us believe our delusions are real?

Some may see it as the constant swing between the poles of the paradox of authority as described by Smith and Berg (1987) in their book *Paradoxes of Group Life* – we want strong leaders but we do not want to be told what to do! Others may see it as a social manifestation of the child-parent relationship of Transactional Analysis, the projection of deep individual/group psychologies, or a function of the need for belonging and the search for social identity (Haslam, *op.cit*). Whatever the cause, the result is the same. Lacking the means to discriminate between the spurious Hero and the essence of the true Hero returning from his journey with his “treasure”, we project our fears and insecurities, our need for dependency, on those who claim the attributes of The Hero, or on those upon whom we thrust those attributes – “Please, guide us, help us, protect us, save us, ... take responsibility, do it for us and save us the pain ...” (Gemmill, 1992).

### **Running out of Credibility**

The pace of change is increasing rapidly in all spheres (Laszlo & Dennis, 2013). From those in major cities throughout the world exposed to 24 hour news and internet access, to those in rural villages whose lives have been transformed through the mobile phone and micro-investment programmes, the increasing complexity of our world becomes ever more obvious and harder to ignore. Unavoidable exposure to other viewpoints and cultures is dissolving cultural certainties and driving those who wish to maintain them to increasingly desperate measures.

We are living in an increasingly "VUCA" (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world (Johansen, 2007), surrounded by "Wicked" (insolvably complex) problems (Camilus, 2008). It is no longer possible to believe that one person has the answers. The cult of the Hero is cracking. Witness European politicians

trying to assure everyone that they have answers to the current economic issues at the same time as they were discussing sanctioning one of their member states to steal 10% of its citizens' bank accounts. Note the rejection of authoritarian governments in the Arab spring, and more recently in Turkey and Brazil. Across the globe, people are increasingly holding their leaders to account due to the widespread distribution of information via the Internet and other digital media. It is less and less possible to hide aspects of yourself or information about yourself, or to create spurious reasons for political action or repression.

### Things fall apart...

Old certainties dissolve, and the institutions, systems, loyalties and frames of reference built on them creak and collapse. Expectations and credible references change. The generation entering social adulthood, "Generation Y", is less interested than previous generations in material things and more interested in meaningful work experience and things they feel good about .... Their reference groups are their peers rather than loyalty to organisations." <sup>10</sup>

Within this increasingly transparent world, the old-style heroic leader cuts an increasingly forlorn and pathetic figure. In the past, the more our belief systems came under pressure, the more we cleaved to the saving Hero, and history is full of examples of the damage wrought by this willful self delusion on the part of various populations. But now, under the glare of our increasingly global consciousness as a species, we just cannot believe in the "great" leaders any more, nor do the institutions they would "save" for us have sufficient credibility, however much we may try to delude ourselves. In the UK, past "pillars of society" such as the banks, the police, the health service, the BBC, parliament, have fallen to scandal one by one. We know this, but hang on to the increasingly moth-eaten paradigm through lack of a trusted alternative.

### Rebirth

But that dying paradigm was never that of the true Hero. It was a specious abstraction, simplified to the point of inversion through the filter of immature egos, untested in the fire of their own journey, and therefore centered still on their own protection and power.

The basic truth of the Hero as leader today remains what it has always been - that true leaders do not "know". They have a good working hypothesis, an awareness of the changing moment and a deep connection with their purpose. They do not expect or demand loyalty or followership – these are granted by those who resonate with that purpose in a constant state of assessment and co-creation. The relationship between the true Hero leader and followers is not one of fear and dependency, of parent to child (as it is with the Spurious Hero), but one of transparent cooperation and enlightened, adult-to-adult, mutual self-interest.

Accepting that it is not possible to know The Truth – that, if anything, ignorance is the truth of the situation – and being comfortable with this, gives new strength and substance to the leadership proposition - we all know it is true. It re-sets and catalyses a new relationship between leader and follower.

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<sup>10</sup> The Sunday Times, 17th April 2013

Shakespeare's Henry V Crispin Day speech is a prime example of this<sup>11</sup>. The King does not begin his speech by trying to justify his position, or to convince his soldiers that all will be well. He meets them on the ground of *their* truth – that they are all set to die:

*"If we are marked to die, we are enough  
To do our country loss ...  
... he that hath no stomach to this fight,  
Let him depart. His passport shall be made,  
And crowns for convoy put into his purse.  
We would not die in that man's company  
That fears his fellowship to die with us."*

(The rest, as they say, is history ...)

This acknowledgement, that knowing the "truth" or the "right" answer in any given situation is not possible, undermines the old paradigm of "I'm the leader – follow me!" It means that the starting point of good leadership today is "What do you think?", "What do you see?" This immediately promotes awareness and understanding. It promotes environments based on collaboration, connection, trust and cooperation for the greater good. It undermines the old orders based on fear, greed, division and competition. The primacy of the need to explore the views and gain the input of others completely displaces the possibility of domination, of command and control/bullying leadership.

### **Differentiating between Spurious and True Hero leaders**

In fact, it is the need to demonstrate "I know" that is the clearest differentiator between the Spurious Hero leader and the true Hero leader. The true Hero, fairly grounded in his connection with self as a result of his journey, is able to see and connect with others and co-create with them a beneficial result. The Spurious Hero is constantly trying to reinforce his false sense of self that has no foundation in experience, and, focused on self rather than the common good, must dominate others to maintain this falsehood.

What replaces the fear upon which the dominance and control of the Spurious Hero leader was based? Purpose and intention, understanding and powerful, realistic, dynamic humility ...

This increased connection as the basis of leadership will promote the continual recognition and removal of self-orientated, unnecessary, diminishing fears of the socially-created personality that defines itself by separation and thereby gives rise to the fears that block growth. The need to define ourselves by "heroic acts" and by the gratitude/admiration of others will be replaced by the need to enable harmonic action within and by the group. The beginnings of this evolution are seen in the recent growth of Community Interest Companies, Social Enterprises and social entrepreneurship.

Instead of trying to impose a pre-conceived vision, leadership becomes a continual dance of action, reassessment and further action, integrating the views of those involved within the ever-changing context of the VUCA environment of which the leader's and team's actions are a dynamic element.

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<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, Henry V, Act IV Scene iii 18-67

Unlike the Heroic Leader, this new, connected leader's purpose is not to be the best, the first, the most valuable; it is not about recognition or praise or the leaving of a legacy; it is not even to be the most harmonious, the most aware and connected, or the most humble, contributing servant. These are all facets of the isolated, self-referencing ego and its constant efforts to define itself.

These fears of self-concern are dissolved in the aim of serving the harmonious development of the whole. The great selfless leaders of our time – e.g. Gandhi, Mandela – do not represent aspirational aberrations unattainable by normal folk. They provide the template of the leadership qualities that will become the norm ... Even though those who follow may not reach their levels of Heroic leadership, these figures continue to act as aspirational guides ...

... and this, of course, clarifies the new "Heroic" leader – the person who has completed their inner journey, conquered the dragon of their ego and returned to help the progress of the whole through a vibrant connection with their followers focused on the common good. The true "Hero", in fact.

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# Leader of the pack: the paradox of prototypicality

## Katie Porkess



*History, fiction and the media inform us that to be successful, leaders must represent their followers, and so represent their values and norms. Social Identity Theory tells us that in addition, effective leaders must be prototypical members of their groups, embodying the groups' beliefs and ethos. Paradoxically, this very trait allows a leader to deviate from the group's culture, with the full support of its members.*

*In this article, first I explain Social Identity Theory (SIT) which models a relationship between groups and their leaders. Second, I describe my research on group and leadership behaviour. Finally, I discuss the implications for organisations.*

### Keywords

Social Identity Theory (SIT), prototypical leaders, contextual leadership, leadership behaviour under pressure, managing change, unethical/corrupt leadership

### Social Identity Theory

A group is "a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

*Personal identity* refers to those elements of self-identity which are based on the unique characteristics, both physical and psychological, that define each individual in terms of his or her differences from other in-group members (Turner, 1999).

On the other hand, *social identity* is an individual's self-concept based upon his or her perceived membership of one or more social groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Social identity enables individuals to locate themselves in relation to other individuals and the social context. Consequently, social identification is the extent to which an individual feels that he or she belongs to a social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Where personal identity is salient, an individual will relate to others in an inter-personal manner, depending on their character traits and any personal relationship existing between the individuals. However, under certain conditions, "social identity is more salient than personal identity in self-conception and that when this is the case, behaviour is qualitatively different: it is group behaviour" (Tajfel, 1974). Therefore, there is a continuum of identification that moves from the one extreme of fully personal to the other extreme of fully social, with most falling somewhere in between.

The stronger the social identification a person has with a particular group, the more he or she perceives himself or herself to be a representative of that group, and the greater the readiness with which he or she adopts the distinctive group norms as guidelines for behaviour. While most people belong to multiple groups simultaneously, the relative degree to which they see each of these different identities as important to self (one's own identity) in a particular situation or at a given time will determine the extent to which they accept and behave according to the norms relevant to that context.

For organisations, this means that members may identify with groups based on demographic categories, professional categories, status, departments, project teams, other organisational boundaries, or even the organisation as a whole, but the strength of that identification will depend on the specifics of that situation (Williams & Dutton, 1999).

*Social Identity Theory* (Turner, 1982) develops two core ideas: firstly, that one cannot understand how people think and act in a social context by simply extrapolating from their characteristics and behaviour as individuals; and secondly, that social context is essential to the way that social identity processes influence thought and behaviour. Two fundamental processes of social identification are categorisation and depersonalisation (Tajfel, 1978).

*Categorisation* allows an individual to be classified into a group based on a variety of characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, gender and other group membership (Turner, 1987). Through self-categorisation there is an emphasis on the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and of perceived differences between the self and identified out-groups.

*Depersonalisation* occurs when an individual begins to act and think in terms of the group's perceived prototypical characteristics, such as norms, values, and beliefs. As these characteristics become internalised, prototypes serve as guidelines for how a group member should behave (Turner et al, 1994; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2008).

### Prototypicality

Any group has characteristics that make it unique and its members have an understanding of norms that range from the *prototypical* to the non-prototypical. A *prototypical member* is someone who identifies highly with the group and embodies the norms and values of the group - its perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviours. Such a person is the best exemplar of the group's characteristics.

The relative prototypicality of an individual varies with the situation: the characteristics being compared and the social categories being considered. These phenomena are relative and situation-specific, not absolute, static or constant. Therefore, prototypicality is not a fixed property of a social category, but rather is a variable feature of the social category in context (Haslam, 2004).

Group members judge and evaluate others on the basis of their perceived prototypicality. This was confirmed by research (Hains et al., 1997) which found that a group is influenced more successfully by a prototypical member, than by someone not perceived to be prototypical. Other empirical studies (Haslam & Platow, 2001) have shown that prototypical in-group members may receive unconditional endorsement of their behaviour.



## SIT, prototypes and leadership

The behaviour of leaders, as the most prototypical members, and the perceptions of their behaviour by other group members, are inextricably linked with the social identity that they share. This implies that leaders play a central role in defining the characteristics of a group and in turn are defined by the group. This is supported by the results of two studies (Haslam et al. 2001) which demonstrated that support for the leader is dependent upon the implications of a leader's behaviour for the group that he or she is supposed to represent.

Research has also found that group members' preference for leaders is not as a result of those leaders' qualities in the abstract (Platow et al., 1997). Rather, support for a leader is conditional on followers' appreciation of that leader's qualities within a particular social context and depends on the implications of the leader's relationship with the group. A leader who shows group loyalty, and so demonstrates prototypicality, earns the trust of the followers, and consequently their support. Thus, prototypical leaders may receive endorsement regardless of their behaviour.

### *Contextual group and leadership behaviour*

Research in SIT has shown that the characteristics that a leader is perceived to embody must be relevant and important to the group at that particular time. The implication is that leadership may shift among group members depending upon the situations confronted by the group, thereby making leadership contextual.

Another finding from SIT, is that group members with low or peripheral status are keenly attuned to the consequences of their behaviour within the group. This is because their behaviour determines their acceptance, and hence their future treatment and status, within the group. Therefore, they are more likely to respond to the context when deciding the attitudes and behaviours that they should express. On the other hand, high status members, such as leaders, being more confident of their positions, are more likely to follow a personal agenda and less likely to adopt group norms. Consequently, they are also more willing to deviate from the group norms.

## Costs of group identification

One tenet of SIT is that strong social identification comes with costs. An acceptable cost of group identification may be to sacrifice personal values in order to support the group. Individuals, no matter what their status, who identify strongly with a group may be prepared to modify their behaviour, as the context dictates.

Another cost of identification is modification of group characteristics. Prototypical members are valued and trusted. Because of their influence, other group members accept changes to values and norms that are introduced by prototypical members. As discussed earlier, a prototypical leader's behavioural history grants him or her a licence in future acts. Thus, leaders have a permit in their decision-making that would not be granted to other members of the group, and consequently a leader's influence may erode previously held group norms and values.

## Leadership under pressure

Pressures often create goals in the workplace that are seen as desirable but may be impossible to achieve using practices that are legitimate in that particular environment. This may force the leader to resort to

Illegal/ unethical means. And in this, such a person will be successful because he or she will be helping the group to achieve its common goals and get the desired outcomes and so will be perceived as a prototypical representative of the group. Those who oppose this behaviour will be ignored or have their wishes overruled.

In turn, this leadership behaviour influences other employees, and followers begin to participate in (and/or conceal) wrongdoing because of the leader's powerful influence over them. This can lead to corruption emerging and pervading the team or even the entire organisation (e.g., Enron; *News of the World*; The City and the LIBOR scandal). "Effective leadership can build corrupt organizations when corrupt practices go unquestioned by leaders, or their followers" (Beenen & Pinto, 2009). Indeed, other research has shown that once embedded, such behaviour is difficult to weed out (Fleming & Zyglidopoulos, 2008).

### Who is the leader?

Leaders in the workplace are usually selected either by recruitment or by promotion. Normally, such leaders are accepted by their teams. However, it may also be the case that the formal leader is not, in actual practice, the prototypical leader of the group, and so may have limited influence. And when circumstances are exceptional, an informal, but prototypical, leader may be the individual who in fact plays the most influential role, and may involve the group in engaging in a particular behaviour.

Under pressure, such as to meet unachievable deadlines, or cut costs, a member of the group, someone who is perceived to be contextually prototypical, may instigate others to meet the targets by resorting to means that run counter to the ethos of the organisation. This can mean that members adopt and develop norms that differ from those of the wider organisation that the appointed leader is expected to represent.

### Studies

In the next section I report the results of two experimental studies that I conducted, in which the leader's influence in cheating/unethical behaviour at times of pressure was examined. One important new finding was that SIT principles applied even in corrupt and unethical contexts. *The studies found that whether or not a group takes the opportunity to behave corruptly depends on its leader.* These results applied equally to a wide range of participants, from students to senior business executives (Porkess, 2011).

#### Study 1 - Unethical behaviour

The results of the first study showed that there were significant differences between leader and non-leader behaviour in different conditions.

Under ordinary (control) and strong group identification conditions, leaders and their groups chose ethical options. But, at times of financial pressure, leaders preferred unethical options, thereby significantly increasing the profits their groups made (figure 1).

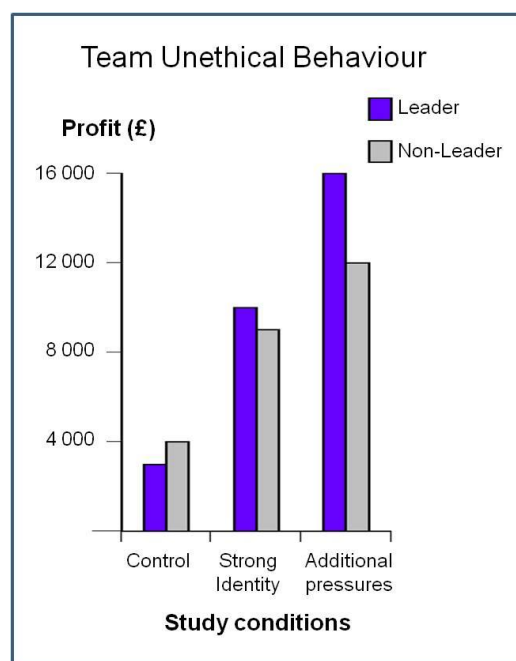


Figure 1

## Study 2 - Cheating

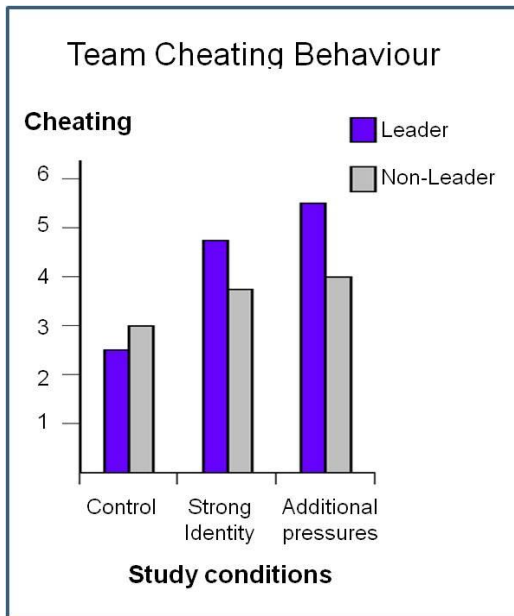


Figure 2

In another study, participants could achieve good team results in a test only by cheating. The analysis showed that when there was a strong sense of identification within the team, leaders cheated significantly more than non-leaders. As with the unethical options, additional pressure spurred the leaders to cheat even more (figure 2).

Analysis of the qualitative data from the two studies revealed that group members were willing to sacrifice their personal ethics to support their teams (e.g., 'I'll agree only because I want our team to do well') and they were willing to accept decisions of leaders that they would not have in other circumstances (e.g., 'I would not normally go with this idea')

Emergent leaders, rather than elected ones, often bypassed the formal leader and dictated unethical decision-making or cheating. Informal leaders failed to recognise that they had been leading their team in this behaviour. Or, perhaps, they did not wish to acknowledge the fact under the circumstances.

Overall, the two studies showed that under conditions of pressure, leaders (whether formal or informal) not only behaved more corruptly than non-leaders, but they also both influenced and encouraged such behaviour in their team members. Non-leaders followed leaders in their corrupt behaviour, even against their personal inclinations.

## Implications for organisations

Finally, in this section, I discuss the implications of SIT and the findings from my research findings for organisations wishing to develop their leaders, such as for their training programmes and also in selection and recruitment.

### Culture and Communication

In the workplace, making decisions and taking actions are not merely matters of applying simple calculations or processes. Much organisational (and team) action is based on incomplete information, bounded rationality and fuzzy decision-making processes. When leaders set priorities, they communicate values and beliefs throughout the follower base, be it a team, a department or the whole organisation. Therefore, their personal values, powered by the authority that has been conferred by their prototypicality, set the ethical tone of the group (e.g., *News of the World*, Enron, WorldCom, and the LIBOR Scandal).

If strong ethical leadership is demonstrated at the top of an organisation, those below will follow this prototypical example, and will grasp its importance and apply it. Additionally and most importantly, if the process of decision-making involves organisational members at various levels, thereby enhancing social identification, they become aware of the impact of their decisions and consequently, their own decision-

making and behaviour are influenced. Therefore, involvement of employees in such decisions can be influential in altering their future behaviour.

There are two other implications from SIT for businesses. The first is that a leader may follow a personal agenda that does not conform to the values of the team or even the whole organisation, and yet remain unchallenged. The second is that such a leader needs a group prepared to veer away from their norms and behave illicitly. And if these acts are corrupt or unethical ones, the business could be in serious jeopardy. In short, a corrupt leader is successful only with a corruptible group that is highly cohesive.

### **Leader influence**

While leaders need to be prototypical members of their teams so that they can exert local influence, at the same time, they need to be active in promoting the company ethics and culture. Selected leaders particularly need to ensure that both they and their teams subscribe to the same ethical norms as those required within the wider workplace.

Consequently, senior managers and executive boards need to ensure that their sub-unit leaders engage with the ethics of the organisation as these individuals will need to demonstrate to the workforce that they themselves have embraced those values. Both senior management and unit leaders also need to be aware of any local affiliations that may have developed norms that run counter to those of the organisation, and take appropriate actions to stamp out those norms and replace them with those that are acceptable to the business.

### **Change Management**

Prototypicality is not all bad news. This trait can be harnessed to change the culture of any group. A prototypical leader, someone who is trusted by other employees because of their previous history, can turn round the ethics, culture and fortunes of a team, a department or an entire organisation.

One example of this is Louis V. Gerstner, Jr. who took up the CEO position of IBM in 1993, at a time when the company had reported two consecutive years of losses in excess of \$1 billion, and had an active plan in place to dis-aggregate the company. Gerstner reversed this plan, realising that there was a vital need for a broad-based information technology integrator. This move created a common brand message for all IBM products and services around the world and is still responsible for its success. Gerstner's previous history at RJR and American Express earned him the support of IBM employees, despite a redundancy programme of 100,000 worldwide (from its inception, the company had until then maintained a practice of lifetime employment).

### **Conclusion**

Organisations are regularly faced with the decision to appoint leaders, be they members of the executive board or the supervisor of a shop-floor team. They need to ensure that individuals have the mix of competence that makes them suitable for their positions. But Social Identity principles also dictate that the appointees must have histories of behaviour that demonstrate to the teams their suitability for those roles.

This last point is essential for leaders to get the support from their teams that they need to fulfil their leadership roles effectively. But together with this, is the requirement that the new appointees have

embraced the organisational values and norms because these are the standards that they will be expected to impart to their teams.

Only when all these elements are in place will the leader lead the team successfully through times of crisis and still be true to the business values. Otherwise, the danger is that the team's loyalty to, and identification with, their leader could result in their supporting him or her, even when they are clearly acting in ways that would put the reputation of the business in jeopardy.

The paradox of leadership viewed through the Social Identity lens is that:

- on the one hand prototypicality enables an individual to attain leadership position of a group because
- that person embodies the group's norms and
- so is trusted to lead it to success.
- At the same time, the same prototypicality may allow that same person
- to deviate from the group characteristics and
- take willing followers to unwanted and inappropriate norms and values.

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# Give me the answer:

## *the paradox of dependency in management learning*

Jonathan Gosling and Peter Case



*The paradox of dependency arises when learners must become dependent in order to enhance independence. This double bind often excites demands for 'quick fixes' to reassure both students and staff that the dependent relationship can be fruitful. But this attempt to resolve rather than hold the paradox can be counterproductive. We present a*



*structured seven-stage process illustrated by reference to an established executive programme. Our account is informed by psychodynamic concepts of containment, anxiety, individuation, role and task; we conclude with recommendations for management developers more widely.*

### Keywords

Leadership, distributed leadership, leaders, change, the leader's conundrum, paradox, tension

### Introduction

This article explores a paradox that arises when the expectations of participants on management development programmes meet the temporal reality of acquiring applicable learning and insights. Whereas management professionals often enrol on programmes with an expectation that they will be offered 'quick fixes' – and programmes are marketed as capable of providing these - this mindset has to be confronted and overturned in development processes that seek to offer a more profound educational experience. The collusion between teachers and learners is seldom addressed, but it is essentially this: it suits both parties to assume that students become dependent on the lessons to be delivered by the teachers; and it is indeed true that accepting that one has something to learn is a productive way in which to start. Yet if the proposed outcome is empowered managers whose knowledge is rooted in their own experience, such dependency is counter-productive.

To illustrate this paradox we outline and explore an approach to management development used on the University of Exeter Business School's *RoundTables for Practising Managers* programme ([www.embaroundtables.org](http://www.embaroundtables.org)) which challenges the dependency culture. We argue that an experiential learning programme with these aims should *contain* this paradox, rather than resolve it one way or the for a

quick fix in too many circumstances to believe that it is always a necessary expedient (which it is sometimes). Similarly, we have been drawn into the hope that, as teachers, we can provide such a fix. We think this attitude has become a habit; a way of managing in life and at work that is often both unhelpful and unhealthy. Sure, problems need fixing. But mostly the 'fix' is in the act of fixing, and these actions have their own rhythm that is linked to the maturation of insight and the self-organising tendencies of all systems of living beings.

### **Shallow Learning Versus Deep Insight in Management Education**

Management education and learning has of course been the subject of a burgeoning literature, much of it focusing on methods, procedures, technologies, criticality of content (Grey & Mitev, 1995; Alvesson et al, 2009; Raelin, 2000) and appropriate pedagogic procedures (Reynolds, 1997), but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of dependency. In an attempt to redress the balance, we examine a development programme which explicitly embraces a *slow fix* approach to applicable management learning. The *RoundTables for Practising Managers* is a 5-day programme developed by Jonathan Gosling and Henry Mintzberg, designed to focus on the practice of managing, in contrast to the functional technical focus of most MBA curricula (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg, 2006). Participants are drawn from business schools around the world, and almost all are current students on Executive MBAs (EMBA), for which this is an accredited module. The intention is to draw largely on participants' personal experience of the practice of managing, especially current challenges in which they are directly involved, and in which they face the potential for 'moral hazard' in actions they take.

In this respect the programme explicitly distances itself from typical 'case studies' in which students imagine themselves to be facing the protagonist's dilemmas, and are invited to propose actions based on whichever analytic device is the teaching point of the case. Valuable as these might be for teaching analytic skills, they are inevitably rather shallow, being devoid of the moral and emotional culpability that characterise decisions in real managerial relations. The moral culpability for decisions includes a very broad spread of issues, from responsibilities to humanity at large, through stakeholders, shareholders, customers to the individuals that a manager interacts with as peer or manager. It is these latter, closer relations that are hardest to grapple with in the more conceptual and theoretical approaches of traditional MBA education. Yet they are almost always the issues that cause the most anxiety in practice, and which underpin much of the anomie, abstraction and loneliness into which managers are sometimes driven. On the *RoundTables* programme we maintain our focus firmly on their actual current predicaments – what managers have to deal with when returning to work on Monday morning.

### **The trouble with the paradox of dependency**

The paradox to which we allude in this article is not between theory and practice, but between participants' idealistic expectations of ready-to-hand solutions *to be supplied by tutors* and the conditions necessary for deeper learning and insight to derive from an educational process. In other words, there is a *paradox of dependency* that participants potentially confront when enrolling on a programme, particularly if it employs an experiential approach to learning.

Our contention is that the desire for a dependency-based quick fix serves three functions, deleterious to

sane and wholesome managerial practice. Firstly, it constructs 'the problem' as something objective and discrete, liable to cure or repair by the application of an appropriate tool to be supplied by tutors. Secondly, a quick fix would be a convenient way of avoiding potentially troubling reflexivity about culpability, personal inadequacy, or inherent un-fix-ability. A quick fix is a strong claim for simplicity. Thirdly, the desire for a quick fix expresses a wish to get straight to the point without circuitous or divergent processes. It is a desire for immediately convergent thinking.

Such a unitary perspective is a well recognised preference of those in power (and often replicated in teaching contexts), but denies the possibility that the processes of debate, reflection and struggle may actually have a transformative effect on the situation and on the managing subject him- or herself. It also eschews the possibility that such processes are, in fact, crucial to the 'fixing'. It is this third aspect that we will explore in the next section, describing the 5-day process of the *RoundTables for Practicing Managers* as a series of learning experiences which, while occurring in a supportive and contained teaching environment, challenges participants' assumptions of dependency and aims to nurture an authentic and independent sense of agency.

## The RoundTables Programme

### 1 Un/Familiarity.

The first day is spent working in small groups, though mostly around tables in one large flat room. At the start of the day participants are assigned to tables of (ideally) six participants on the basis of apparent diversity – nationality, the business school they come with, gender, and so forth. The agenda for the day is to compare experiences of managing: what it involves and the kinds of predicaments they find themselves in. After some introductory comments, designed to establish a sense of containment (Bion, 1961) and establishing the boundaries of time, task and territory (Lewin, 1935), participants work in groups of three, each in turn talking about the challenges he or she faces. The other two participants adopt and rotate the roles of: (a) listening for the facts of the matter, and (b) listening for the feelings expressed by the 'presenter'. The two listeners then recount what they have heard – facts and feelings, respectively; and then discuss in a more general way. This formulation of a 'primal triad' echoes the psychological experience of the (archetypal) primary family. The predominant experiences of the table groups is one of interdependency (on each other's participation) and consciousness of being a median group between the 'primal triad' and the whole group of 40 or so fellow participants, all visibly arraigned around their own tables.

The upshot of all this is that by coffee time on the first day participants are immersed in an experience of familiarity, an evocation of the family with people who are (or were a few hours earlier) entirely unfamiliar. Their stories of themselves-as-managers have become a common currency, part-objects around which they can organise collective work. This is reinforced in the subsequent session, a lecture by Henry Mintzberg on the nature of managerial work, in which idealised notions of managing as 'controlling, planning, coordinating' (Fayol, 1916) are debunked in the light of empirical studies. This almost always produces some confusion: in failing to express a normative account of what management *should* be like, it may be that Mintzberg unsettles expectations about authority figures.

The juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar is sustained throughout the rest of the day. In the



afternoon participants re-group on the basis of the declared nature of their managerial challenges: for example, those struggling with difficult team dynamics; pricing and positioning products or services; sustaining operations; personal career and life decisions; governance and accountability issues; and so forth. This feels more like work: the task is to construct a 3-D sculptural collage that expresses the import of each member's managerial challenge and the common features amongst them. Importantly, the material for this activity is reminiscent of play-school: pipe-cleaners, coloured paper, stickers, straws and glue. It is an activity that invites play. Thus we evoke one of the first organisational experiences – outside the family – that people have. A critique of later education is evident here: playfulness is systematically excluded from the classroom as one progresses through school to university.



Image: Individual and shared managerial challenges emerging through creating a 3D sculptural collage (Photo: Alex Meyboom)

## 2 Individuation and the Crowd.

The second day opens in plenary, everyone sitting in a single circle. The family groups of yesterday are dissolved, and each speaks as a solitary individual – but may experience themselves as lost within the crowd, a circle invoking expectations of uniformity (Tourquet, 1975). We often hear complaints that the small groups were more effective, that there is still work to do there, that we have been irresponsible in so quickly destroying the beginnings of work. We also hear expressions of awe at the size of the group, some excitement perhaps at the potential held within it.

This is a fraught process, and a difficult day for many. A key activity is a series of 'observation exercises', in which participants select a partner with whom to spend ten minutes silently observing the



environment around them, a further ten minutes silently writing up their observations, and then 20 minutes comparing notes. For most people this evinces extraordinary surprise at how differently two can look at the same scene and see such different things. The exercise is repeated, this time with attention to what is going on in one's inner musings as well as in the 'outside' world. The same writing and comparing follows. This consolidates the realisation that, despite appearances, each person inhabits a world of his or her own.

The process of individuation described above is not the explicit purpose of practising observational skills. These have a technical utility in the next day's activities, and might be considered a generic competence for those managers working slowly enough to take time to watch what's going on.

In the following two sections, corresponding to the next day and a half, we consider experiences of participating in collective work. In the first our focus is more on the structural constructs of role and task; in the second (section 4) we approach the same issue of collective work from the perspective of personal drive and expressiveness.

### **3 Task and Role.**

On the third day of the programme, participants go in small groups of three or four to visit local organisations, with the aim of finding out 'how managing is done'. They are counselled to use the listening and observation skills they have practised, and whatever conceptual models they find useful. They are specifically advised to consider differentiating the roles they each take in pursuit of the common aim – some to observe, others to ask questions, and another to listen out for feelings, and so forth. This very simple task definition and role differentiation is almost without exception a deeply satisfying experience for practising managers normally pulled in many directions, with contested responsibilities and incessant interruptions. For many it is also deeply reflective as they recognise aspects of their own managerial experience lived out in the people they are observing and interviewing.

### **4 Expression and Structure.**

Each of the 'visit' groups presents their findings in a rather structured process on the morning of day four. The structure is as follows: The presenting group makes its pitch for 15 minutes to one other 'audit' group, observed by two or three other groups. The 'audit' group asks questions and probes for further insights into 'how managing gets done', and then the observing groups talk amongst themselves about what they have heard, while the presenters and auditors listen. Participants thus experience a highly structured, time-limited and role-disciplined process in marked contrast to the ample time and relatively flexible schedules of the first part of the week. In these constraints, they have to concentrate their views into a very few points, selected examples and carefully chosen speculations.

### **5 Saving/Savouring.**

A second important aspect of slowness is evinced through the structure of the presentations described above. Although the field visits lasted little over half a day, mostly in sectors that the participants know very little about, many find it hard to resist slipping into a prescriptive mode, for example, suggesting what the managers they have observed could do better. It is as if they can really only conceive of one reason for being there: to save their benighted hosts from ignorance or incapacity. And very often this is

precisely what is asked of them as MBA students – to prescribe solutions. In this structure the audit group is the first check on this, asking questions rather than joining in prescribing. But more significantly, the observing groups, who have as much time to ponder the presentation as the presenters had to present it, cannot really be drawn into this dynamic of salvation, as they are so far removed from that visit and its representation. Rather, they are explicitly invited to savour the presentation and its 'audit'.

## 6 Frankly Speaking.

Lawrence (1994) distinguished 'the politics of revelation' from 'the politics of salvation'. The former describe relations of power characterised by the giving and receiving of insight into a problematic situation. This nicely describes the aims of the next event, 'Friendly Consulting'. Drawing on methods developed at the Grubb Institute (Reed, 1976; Armstrong, 1995) and redesigned specifically for the RoundTables, (though applied more widely by the present authors) this is a structured process for small groups (of four to six members) to focus on the managerial challenges of each participant. In a series of 45-minute sessions, each participant takes a turn to present her or his challenge, as described above, speaking directly to one other person, the session chairperson. The other two or three people in the room observe the presentation (drawn onto a flip-chart at the same time as it is described) and the chairperson's questioning for a strict 15 minutes. Observers may then frame questions for the presenter, but asked through the chairperson, who poses them – or some of them – to the presenter. This apparently contrived procedure turns out to be very powerful because the presenter hears the questions being formulated and asked, and may be aware of his or her immediate responses, but does not have to actually answer the questions until they are formally posed by the chairperson a moment later. This procedural slowing down of the question/response cycle opens a quite surprising space for thoughtfulness. In the next stage the observers and chairperson sit in a circle to discuss the case as presented. The presenter sits on the edge of the circle, facing outwards – thus having no eye contact, and no participation in the discussion. In these circumstances the discussants usually feel able to speculate about the presenter's predicament in a rather direct and frank manner. For the presenter this is often a cathartic experience; to have one's stuckness, failings and limitations sympathetically recognised along with capacities and successes is an affirmation of the reality of one's experience of oneself. It is an experience of being 'held' and appreciated in a moral order that comprehends shortcomings, but is nonetheless founded on care for the other's flourishing. This matches rather well the classical definition of friendship as a social and political quality in which such mutual well-wishing is expressed in frank speech (French et al, 2009).

These so-called Friendly Consulting sessions are where convergence occurs in relation to the managerial challenges that participants are facing. Four days after the initial desire for a quick fix, they are at last offered a brief, 45 minutes on their own challenge. Almost all find it hugely satisfying – often described in term such as "I heard stuff I already know, but didn't allow myself to realise".

## 7 Communityship.

If the slow fix is the converse of a quick fix, communityship (Mintzberg, 2009) is the obverse of leadership. The possibility of someone taking a lead is rooted in community, yet the virtues of communityship are seldom trumpeted, valorised or systematically developed. The Slow Fix, however, attempts to acknowledge the potency of individuals in the context of the shared work of the programme community. The final lecture of the programme in 2010 was on communityship. It is in effect a ritual affirmation of the interdependencies of this relational learning – and an ending of the event; the group gathered in plenary, no longer a crowd.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to show how a paradox may be turned to productive ends by virtue of being 'held' rather than 'resolved'. We have argued that experienced adults entering a learning programme put themselves in a double-bind. They must become dependent on their teachers and the lessons (skills, concepts, practices) they are to be taught, yet the learning they seek has independent knowing and morally responsible acting at its heart. We suggest that this double bind often drives counter-productive behaviours by all involved. Students express their dependency by seeking ready solutions instead of ready learning processes, and faculty collude by teaching cognitive abstractions rather than engaging in the struggle to learn.

We have presented a particular example of how this dilemma might be met and turned to advantage, through a carefully crafted executive education course. The implication for management development tutors responding to this double-bind paradox is clear: (1) find ways to contain rather than eradicate educational dilemmas by concentrating on the primary task; and, (2) resist the desire to respond to emotions associated with that task. In this case the primary task was to learn to take managerial action in morally committed contexts. By resisting the desire to provide quick fixes, but remaining fixed on the processes of fixing, the paradox was able to be contained and turned to useable management learning.

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# Can leadership be developed on a higher degree programme?

Challenges of dealing with the gap between 'theory' and 'practice'.

**Keith Kinsella**



## Keywords

leadership development, online coaching, tacit learning, presencing, dwelling, empathetic responsiveness

## Introduction

During the decade in which I have been coaching mature students on a coached e learning MA in leadership studies, I have become more and more aware of the paradoxical nature of the task facing us. They come of course to get a higher degree. But as practising executives/professionals, they also come to improve their performance as leaders through developing the knowledge and skills required to engage in and contribute towards this essentially situated and embodied practice. While other knowledge-focused disciplines face a more straightforward task regarding practice, leadership studies must confront two particular challenges: how to understand in a fruitful way the contested nature of the leadership phenomenon itself<sup>12</sup>; and at the same time, how to go about developing the kind of contextualised and embodied knowing that enables people to perform effectively in a wide variety of situations.

In this brief article I illustrate how both the imbalance, and the lack of attention to the gap, between academic and practice-oriented approaches to these challenges, pose dilemmas for students as they learn what it takes to succeed in both scholarly and leaderly terms. I also show how it has been possible, even in the lean learning environment of an asynchronous online programme, to create a richer and more balanced educational and development environment, which has helped these students deal more perceptively with the confusions and conflicts that have arisen. Finally, through encouraging and enabling them to access, assimilate, and integrate these different kinds of knowing, I argue that developing leadership practice goes hand in hand with improvements in the quality of academic performance.

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Kelly looks at the difficulties of capturing leadership in observable and knowable forms and explores the potential of Wittgenstein's 'language-game' to offer new ways forward. See Kelly, S. 2008. *Leadership: a categorical mistake?* Human Relations 61 (6), 763-782.



## Paradoxes faced in developing leadership capability

In leadership studies, there seem to be at least two great 'divides' that cause difficulties for students and their coaches alike. The first is whether it makes more sense to regard leadership as a phenomenon that is essentially about universal qualities/behaviour, like e.g. 'integrity', possessed by individuals who are 'leaders' and so 'do' leadership; or a more complex relational, contexted, and momentary phenomenon that takes place between participants within situated practices<sup>13</sup>. The second split concerns how (in either of these understandings) you can most effectively go about developing the capability to perform, by following either the 'warehouse' model or a more 'tacit' approach. The 'warehouse' model assumes that the requisite knowledge can be built up over time *before* action through studying abstract models and tools, which then need to be 'transferred' to various performance situations. Conversely the tacit approach assumes that the capability to perform develops mostly tacitly, through experiencing and reflecting on these in a variety of specific situations. Here the knowing is understood to be of an embodied nature, becoming visible *after* action, and requiring no 'transfer' to practice situations.

Like much university education, this Masters programme privileges theory over practice aiming principally to improve the stock of knowledge *about* leaders and leadership possessed by individual students. As indicated above, the assumption is that you build improved capability through increasing cognitive knowledge about models, tools and skills. This means that students are expected from the very start to improve their leadership capabilities, primarily through the academic mode of learning. So even though they are taking the programme part time while embedded in their everyday experience of work practice, they are expected to focus on a wide range of ideas, theories, and tools which are based, in the main, on arms length observer abstractions of simplified or idealised situations. This emphasis on theory as the way forward is further strengthened when they find that their new knowing gained from studying this material is assessed through summative methods of evaluation e.g. through formal essays and exams. As Raelin points out<sup>14</sup>, for the most part this approach does not seek out or value the rich tacit practice-based knowledge that these students bring with them. Even more importantly, it downplays the essential role that the personal experiencing of these ideas in the practice environment has to play, if this new knowing is to be transformed from the understanding of simplified theoretical ideas and models into the much richer contextualised and embodied knowing expressed in effective practice.

Despite this lack, there is little organised exchange between these different learning domains, and little active interest in the academic community in closing the gap. So when mature students come back, usually after a long break from formal studies, they immediately come up against the challenge of improving something – their knowledge and practice of leadership – mainly by focusing on working with theories and tools offering simplified and de-contextualised models of practice. And this happens in an educational setting where the balance of influence in deciding what is of interest and constitutes proper and relevant knowing, is clearly

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<sup>13</sup> Reynolds and Tyler make the case for using the practice theory perspective to overcome the blind spots created by 'managerialist commonsense', in this instance in higher education. Reynolds, J. and Tyler, C. 2001 *Hinge and Bracket: Practice Theory and Sensemaking in Further and Higher Education* Paper presented at the Higher Education Close Up Conference 2, Lancaster University, 16-18 July 2001 Accessed on 12 June, 2013 at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001756.htm>

<sup>14</sup> in this paper Joe Raelin argues that we need a much greater synthesis of theory and practice if we are to prepare thoughtful practitioners. Raelin, J. 2007. *Towards an epistemology of practice*. Academy of Management Learning and Education. 6, (4), 495-519.

tilted towards the formal educational hierarchy. This is a prime example of what McGilchrist in his recent influential treatise on how the brain works<sup>15</sup>, claims that we in the Western world are being encouraged to do. He argues that we allow the 'theorising,' language-oriented left hemisphere of the brain (which he calls the 'emissary') to dominate, while leaving our 'presencing', gestalt-oriented right hemisphere (called the 'master') to play a secondary role in how we make sense of and make/find our way in our relations with the world.

Students seeking to do well in their studies are certainly encouraged to follow suit, while trying to figure out how they might also improve their practical abilities to orient and go on with others in new and challenging situations. With abstract theory and academic jargon holding sway and their own experience and knowing underappreciated, it's little wonder that these mature students often find their early experiences on the programme quite disorienting.

### **Moves towards helping students find personal integrations of theory and practice**

Uniquely on this programme each student has the services of a coach/tutor, which potentially goes some way to helping students grapple better with these confusions, getting more from the different kinds of knowing inherent in these knowledge domains. In practice there has been a range of ways in which individual coaches have responded to the challenges, from focusing mainly on the academic aspects, to helping with everyday problems arising in the workplace, with all the many variations and mixes in between. There have also been different emphases on e.g. improving knowledge, skill, performance, self identity, and so on. The rationales and practices involved in these variations are outside the scope of this article and I focus instead on my own self studies over a period of ten years. In these I have found/created an approach that has seemed to help students find and exploit the learning spaces that have helped them deal effectively with these various issues and tensions. Post-programme follow up interviews have confirmed the effectiveness of this approach both for scholarly and leaderly development. These conversations have indicated that the various spaces for dialogue have served to help students bridge the theory-practice 'gaps' they've been facing, and helped them better distil and synthesise the different kinds of learning and doing available.

In the next part I talk about six pedagogical 'moves' or responses associated with the approach which have proved effective educational aids, particularly when orchestrated dynamically in ways that are receptive to the changing needs of individual students over the two years of the programme (see Diagram 1 below).

#### **1. Level the playing field:**

To encourage students to realise the value and contribution of their own tacit knowledge in the academic setting, I've found that it is vital first of all to take steps to reduce the sense that it's only the 'university' that knows. As Foucault has clearly illustrated<sup>16</sup>, all institutional settings embody power relations where those who decide on what is 'truth' and of value in a discipline like e.g. psychology or leadership hold sway over

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<sup>15</sup> in his groundbreaking book on how the brain works, Iain McGilchrist shows how the left and right hemispheres offer different insights, values, and priorities, and argues that in the West we are in danger of allowing the left to dominate to the exclusion of everything that makes us human. See McGilchrist, I. 2010. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>16</sup> McHoul and Grace provide a lucid introduction to Foucault's main ideas on discourse, power, and the subject, and show how influential his work has been in offering alternative and insightful explanations of how society can be understood to function. See McHoul, A. and Grace, W. 1993. *A Foucault Primer: discourse, power, and the subject*. UCL Press.

those who don't. In universities it's naturally the academics/examiners who exercise such power. This is achieved through a whole range of 'exclusionary practices', like which textbooks are recommended/not recommended, which sustain the orderly nature of the discipline.

So students find great difficulty in valuing and getting appreciated the extensive and varied non-academic everyday knowing they bring with them. To address this in a way that students can't miss, I make a point of showing students very early on that, as a freelance practitioner outside the academic faculty, I 'sit alongside' them as they face up to the demands of the formal syllabus and institutional practices.

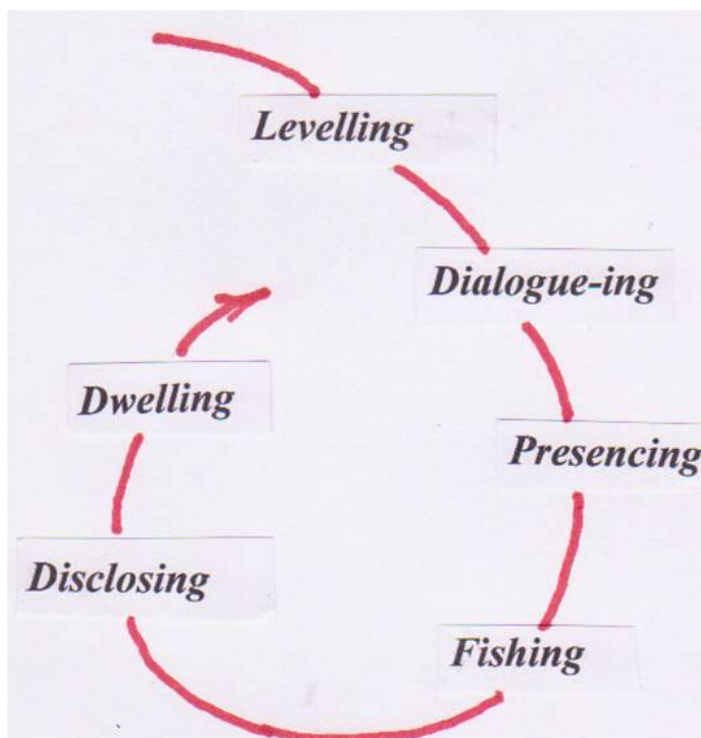
As part of this I encourage them to see academic ideas not as *the* 'truth' but as potential truths and use these as *provocations* to their experience and ideas. In similar vein, I encourage them to use their own practice-based common sense reasoning to challenge and enrich the theories and models being offered.

Further I make a point of offering a wide range of other resources which are not part of the syllabus that respond to their own emerging interests. This levelling within the influence field can take some time to take effect, especially as coaches have to square their responsibility for also 'first marking' essays with students. I personally do by pursuing a more 'formative' approach to giving feedback on both the scholarly and leaderly aspects of their development. When the penny drops, there is often a flash of recognition and sigh of relief as students realise they can use their degree studies not only to get a higher degree but also to craft a personal programme of learning to deal with their *own* work issues and development priorities.

## 2. Develop dialogically structured interactions:

As part of this initial 'levelling' work getting students to value their own knowing, I also invite them to move out of the usual one-way 'monological' style of academic communication to a more informal, inquiring, and spontaneous style of interaction with me, with the academic materials, and at work. As they gain confidence, a deeper level of two-way dialogue develops and students find it easier to move beyond closed, right/wrong types of debate into more open-ended, inquiring, and creative forms of interaction. Here, as Shotter puts it, the student and coach can discover a new 'third' kind of knowing which is local knowing from *within* the

**Diagram 1: Six pedagogical moves facilitating personal integrations of theory and practice**



relationship<sup>17</sup>. Many find this a rather exciting development as they find themselves actively inquiring into their *own* ideas and practices of leadership. As I will indicate later in this article, such dialogically structured communications bring participants right into the creative present. These help student and coach move from the 'downstream' of already static and conventional patterns of meaning, to further 'upstream' where sense making is still in flux. Here it becomes possible for students to be 'struck' or stopped in mid-thought and to experience 'fleeting moments' of insight. These 'moments' can in time lead to what Wittgenstein called new 'language-games' which inform and guide how students go on and develop their embodied knowing and leadership practice.

### 3. Focus dialogue on practice development:

Such dialogues can of course focus on different things like understanding theories/models better, learning to apply them to work problems, and so on. But in my case, as a third move towards helping students deal with the split between theory and practice, my emphasis and strong expectation in these dialogues is that they will focus on *development* and on how students can go about improving their scholarly and leaderly practices. As I studied my own practice I realised that during our online and face to face interactions I was *always* looking for development opportunities, believing that development work was vital to the learning process. I was also expecting that such experiences were potentially available whatever the student might be doing. So I found that in addition to the more tutorial type of help, I was also continually offering ideas and prompts to promote further exploration. So while I might be responding to a student's confusions about e.g. 'distributed' leadership, I would at the same time be prodding them into doing something to transform such cognitive knowing into new embodied practice. In this I recognised that I was ignoring the assumed duality between 'learning' and 'doing' and the resulting 'transfer gap'. I was instead anticipating that 'doing' and 'developing' were reciprocally intertwined activities taking place *at the same time*. I ended up calling this approach *presencing developmental possibilities*, where the word 'presencing' emphasises the need to imagine and start the developing process *now*, in the heat of the action, rather than intending or planning to do something in the future

### 4. Go 'fishing' for new sense making:

This strong developmental emphasis reinforces the notion already seeded in our dialogues, to seek new meanings in the immediate present. However, this search needs to be located somewhere other than in our existing common sense understandings, as these are already de-contextualised and 'deaf' to further useful inquiry. I found that this special kind of attention and receptivity to fresh meaning-making 'somewhere else', in both the online written logs and verbal interchanges, could be stimulated by a range of spontaneous but detailed interventions. These activities seem similar in function to what Wittgenstein called 'reminders' - to notice what already lies before us. In my practice these consist of a wide range of challenges, questions, suggestions, prompts to action, and so on, which I initially 'cast' out, peppering the student with ideas intended to stimulate inquiry and development activity. However, as online work is largely asynchronous, I only know if any of the 'baited hooks' I have cast are relevant/timely *when* I see some sign of recognition in

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<sup>17</sup> in this revised and extended edition of his 1993 book, John Shotter challenges the traditional scientific view of society and provides a rich and creative synthesis of ideas, particularly those of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, to show how by ignoring the foundational conversational background in which our lives are rooted, and the centrality of bodily responsiveness, we miss opportunities to creatively influence the socially constructed world in which we live. See Shotter, J. 2007. *Conversational Realities Revisited: life, language, body and the world*. Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.

later texts/conversations. So later, once I see evidence that a 'bite'/fleeting moment of insight has 'struck' the student, I am able to adjust these responses to help them develop and flesh out the newly emerging language-game/capability. I ended up calling this activity 'fishing', as the metaphor suggests both the lazy passive attention involved in waiting for signs of a 'bite' from the shadowy clues flitting by in the texts, as well as the much more active involvement of casting out ideas, and then, when I notice a 'bite', having to 'play' the interactions in order to help bring the idea to a greater degree of fruition<sup>18</sup>. The high level of redundancy involved in this activity, i.e. the masses of ideas offered in each interaction, was developed initially in response to the lack of the immediate feedback you get in face to face situations, but not online. Since those early days, I've realised that this approach also encourages students to widen their own ways of thinking about situations.

### 5. Seek disclosive moments 'upstream':

During these regular 'fishing' expeditions, how might we understand what happens when students appear to be 'struck' by a particular word, gesture, or phrase offered in the log interchanges or face to face? One approach is to use Bortoft's view of language as having both a 'disclosive' and 'representational' function<sup>19</sup>. The disclosive act occurs when a word is first given a meaning, as happens when we learn our native language, and so where a word or words actually *bring something into appearance*. In this sense, it's not that this something already exists and we find a word to describe it – the word/words actually bring that something into appearance for us. This disclosive function of language is captured in E.M. Forster's question 'how do I know what I think until I see what I say?'

In contrast, the 'representational' function of the word only comes into effect later with reflection on experience *after* it has been lived in this way, and where the word is now separate from the something, and can 'stand for' it. Our commonsense view of language misses this and instead imagines that language is simply a tool which is applied to what we already know (in advance of language) for the purpose of communication. This is very much what McGilchrist is pointing to when he says that it is the right hemisphere of the brain that presences the immediate world before any separation/abstraction takes place, and before the left hemisphere can use words in their representational mode to generalise and theorise - but now out of time and place. The confusion we experience when problem solving by trying to find the origins of a phenomenon by starting from the finished product, is aptly captured by the poet Rumi who writes that this is like trying to 'reach the milk by way of the cheese'<sup>20</sup>!

So the issue for us in our development dialogues is to catch this 'saying' in the act where the word creatively 'discloses' rather than 'represents'. And this is what I think the 'fishing' activity seems to do. It seems to have the effect of nudging students to look further 'upstream' within the background flow of their experience, to where they can re-experience afresh the primary disclosive or meaning making act, before positions are taken that lead to less dynamic and fluid downstream 'realities'. When students are 'struck' in this way,

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Mindell provides an introduction to a range of what she calls process oriented *metaskills* ('fishing' being one of them), that describe the subtle feeling abilities that influence how healers/teachers go about their therapeutic/educative work. See Mindell, A. 1995. *Metaskills: the spiritual art of therapy*. New Falcon Publications

<sup>19</sup> in this very readable exploration of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Henri Bortoft shows how Goethe's dynamic approach to science provides an alternative non-dualist understanding of how we find meaning, and the relationship between thought and words. See Bortoft, H. 2012. *Taking Appearances Seriously: the dynamic way of seeing in Goethe and European thought*. Floris Books.

<sup>20</sup> Shah, I. 1978. *A Perfumed Scorpion*. London, Octagon Press, p 25.



'finding/making' new meanings, their learning seems to be of a different, more engaged quality, where not only the overall framing but the meaning of individual 'facts' is transformed. Using dialogue to 'go upstream' in this way certainly seems to offer opportunities for significant learning.

## 6. Encourage a 'dwelling' approach:

From what I have said so far, the basic aim of the 'fishing' process can be seen to stimulate what Wittgenstein called 'primitive reactions', which are the prototype of new 'language-games' associated with new forms of practice. Once a new language-game like say, 'facilitating participative meetings', has been initiated, the focus of the fishing activity turns to supporting the 'fleshing out' of the knowing and embodied skills needed to perform convincingly as a participant in that form of practice. Here my attention turns more to how students can learn to be empathetically receptive and responsive in the moment to others. They do this not just as individuals but also as participants in the practices and situations in which the relationships and interactions are located. In contrast to the traditional 'warehouse' model of development mentioned earlier, here I prefer to follow 'dwelling' as the key learning process. In this approach, development is seen largely as a tacit process occurring in the background over time, where students learn the subtle *situational, relational, receptive and responsive* skills needed to apply the 'technical' knowledge they have acquired. This happens not in training of some kind *but as they go about doing the activity in practice*<sup>21</sup>. In this they in effect submit to the new values and practices required, in the very act of carrying them out. And with this kind of knowing already contextualised and embodied in what will have been done, the need to 'transfer' knowing to practice is no longer such an issue.

## Re-view

In this brief article I have outlined how it has been possible, even on an e learning programme, to create a 'culture of inquiry' which has helped mature managers studying a situated practice like leadership, to grapple successfully with the dilemmas posed by the theory/practice split. Though this learning has emerged within the narrow learning confines of an online higher degree programme, I hope I have given you a feel for how you might go about engaging with the development challenges posed by the modernist thirst for the apparent power and certainty offered by left hemisphere oriented tools and ways of meaning making that McGilchrist has identified. These abstract ideas and tools give the false impression that they can be used wherever and whenever, without any need for empathetic receptivity and responsiveness. They also fail to take account of the development of the embodied skills that enable the authentic and authoritative actions required to perform effectively in specific local situations. Through creating an ongoing dialogue about development, and by re-directing inquiry higher 'upstream' to explore what is usually invisible, students have been helped to appreciate afresh in their practice, the insights offered by the immediacy and gestalt-orientation of right hemisphere attention, as well as the power of left hemisphere modelling and analysis. My

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<sup>21</sup> Polanyi provides a fascinating non-dualist and dialogue-influenced view of how we develop *personal knowledge* of the world, not through building a store of explicit value-free knowledge but tacitly through *dwelling* in our experience of embodied action. (He refers to it as 'in-dwelling' and 'dwelling in the subsidiaries'). His famous saying 'we can know more than we can tell' points to his view that such knowing is a relationship between a focus (explicit) and its subsidiaries (tacit); and when we learn new values and behaviours, we don't do this directly in a planned and conscious way. Instead they become a tacit part of us without us being aware of this – we submit to them by the very act of creating and adopting them - and find that we know from what has already been done, with embodied action preceding the knowing. See Polanyi, M. 1983. *The Tacit Dimension*. Gloucester Mass: Peter Smith.



own experience of supporting mature students in this way over ten years also indicates that the resulting development of more responsive and effective forms of leadership practice has contributed significantly to the good academic results that have been achieved.

### **About the author**

Keith Kinsella is a freelance facilitator/coach. He has worked in change management and leadership development for over four decades. He has written on the use of the systemic approach in organisations, and was recently awarded his PhD by Bath University. He has been an online coach on the E Learning Coached MA in Leadership Studies at Exeter University since 2004.

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# Becoming an authentic leader: Reconciling the paradoxes

## Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno



*In the last decade authentic leaders have gained esteem and popularity. However, the paradoxes of authentic leaders remain largely unspoken. This short piece aims to briefly present my encounters with contrasting understandings of authentic leaders and the paradoxes that emerge from them. The article ends with some suggestions on how to reconcile the paradoxes and become an authentic leader.*

### Keywords

Authentic leaders, authenticity, the Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (ALIA), mindfulness

One year after joining the Centre for Leadership Studies (in 2006), I was trying to find my place within the leadership field. I wanted to build my research and teaching on my personal belief in authenticity. Understanding and developing authentic leaders seemed the best place to start.

### The first encounter: the Authentic Leadership Approach

In my search I discovered an academic perspective called the Authentic Leadership Approach (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Within this approach authentic leaders were originally defined as:

*“leaders who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character” (p. 4, as cited in Avolio, Gardner et al., 2004).*

At first sight I thought this was what I was looking for.

### The first paradox

I started including elements of the Authentic Leadership Approach in my undergraduate and MBA modules at Exeter University. However, a conundrum was consistently apparent. *Authenticity* was defined as knowing oneself and acting accordingly (Harter, 2002; Endrissat, Muller and Kaudela-Baum, 2007) but leaders exhibiting high levels of authenticity (i.e., being true to themselves) did not always fit with the definition of an authentic leader aforementioned. For instance, some leaders were not optimistic. Paradoxically, *some of my students needed to be inauthentic* (e.g., pretend to be optimistic) *to fit with the definition of an “authentic leader”*. My concerns about the authentic leadership approach were shared by other academics. For instance, Ladkin and Taylor (2010) noted that having positive psychological capabilities (such as confidence, hope, optimism) may be authentic for some leaders but not for others. And Shamir and Eilam, (2005) argued that authenticity per se does not necessarily need to be related to positive, ethical or moral behaviour.

The root of this paradox can be traced to its origins. The authentic leadership approach was born in the summit hosted in 2004 by the Gallup Leadership Institute, when scholars and practitioners came together to discuss the emergence and development of what they considered a new type of leader —the authentic leader (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). In fact, Avolio (2011) noted that the term authentic leader came initially from the need to differentiate between transformational leaders and pseudo-transformational leaders. This means that academics within this perspective refer to transformational authentic leaders as “authentic leaders”. They do not acknowledge that some leaders who are authentic to themselves are not transformational.

This paradox signals a trap for practicing leaders who read about the authentic leadership approach based on its original definition. Following such a quest to become an authentic leader could potentially make them feel that (a) they need to possess certain characteristics and (b) being “who they are at this point in time” is not good enough.

### **A new encounter: The Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (ALIA)**

Since 2007 I have been teaching an undergraduate module called “Leadership in Action”. Two years later I placed greater emphasis on the development of authentic leaders. In this module my aim was to develop young leaders with a sense of being on an authentic journey, characterised by (a) self-awareness, (b) self-acceptance and (c) personal development aligned with who they are and who they want to become (rather than how they *have* to become). Following from my teaching experience, and driven by a lack of appropriate textbooks in this area, in 2010 I met with an editorial company to write a book entitled “Authentic Leadership in Action”. A few months later I discovered the organisation called Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (ALIA) <http://aliainstitute.org/> based in Nova Scotia (Canada). This Institute provided intensive leadership courses in the Netherlands. I called the organiser of the ALIA Europe course and I expressed my interest in attending as a “leadership expert”.

In 2013, after being a member of their community for three years I decided to conduct some initial research on how authenticity was understood and experienced in the ALIA community. During their intensive leadership course in March 2013, I conducted interviews and mini focus groups with participants and faculty (consultants, managers, artists and authors who teach ALIA modules). Most ALIA participants have engaged with mindfulness practice for a limited period of time; however, most ALIA faculty have been practicing mindfulness for decades. Among other things mindfulness practice allows space for authentic communication with oneself. There are many definitions of mindfulness. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) note that “mindfulness is the capacity to be fully aware of all that is happening inside the self and to pay full attention to what is happening around us” (p. 112). The mindfulness practice that is used in ALIA is based in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition. For some information on this practice, go to:

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=2125> .

## The meaning of authenticity in practice

### Participants' understanding of authenticity

Authenticity was understood by ALIA participants as “*be-ing yourself*” (ALIAP2)<sup>22</sup>. It was also highlighted that congruency between the different elements of the self was important.

*“Authenticity is about acting and being the way you are. That means that all the elements and all the dimensions, the spiritual, the mental, the emotional the physical they are just all included”* (ALIAP3).

Similarly,

*“Authenticity is about being able to reconcile, your head, your heart and your hands. It is about walking the talk and being very true to yourself and being congruent. Congruency is really important”* (ALIAP7).

The answers of other participants resonated with the ones above.

### Faculty members' understanding of authenticity

*For faculty, authenticity “has something to do with true self or willingness to be yourself. Whether the action is right or wrong, authentic or not it is YOU in that moment. And then that moment changes and there is another version and it is trying to have authentic presence and it is willing to be yourself, being who you are at any given moment”* (ALIAF5).

There are two things that I want to highlight from this quote: first it signals that the self is fluid; second it suggests that even when you are not being authentic that is also part of YOU (your authentic self at that moment in time).

On a related note another faculty member noted that authenticity is “*to know when you are not being authentic*” (ALIAF6). At first sight this assertion felt redundant. Why being authentic is simply to know when you are not being authentic? Then, after some mindfulness practice, I encountered the complexities of actually actively *knowing* when you are not being authentic. To see deeply and truly when you are not being authentic requires mindful attention, acceptance and courage. One of ALIA Europe core members explains how mindfulness and courage is related to authenticity as follows:

*“authenticity is actually seeing yourself the way you are, and that is very tender, we show up ourselves, we show the way we are, or what we get scared of what we see on ourselves, we don't like what we see. So I think the next part of what is usually connected to authenticity is courage. And I think real courage comes again from sitting with yourself when you sit there and your mind would like to go somewhere else because you don't like the feeling you are having now, you don't like what you see ... I think that is the next step, courage, just stay there and see things as they are. Not to make yourself peaceful, not to make yourself better, but just to accept, oh ... I am stressed now, oh, I am unhappy now ... and that is the way it is. It's not going to go away.* (ALIAF9)

ALIA faculty did not consider that congruency was important for authenticity. As the quote below signals, if anything the attempt of being congruent would be a barrier for authenticity. The dangers of people aiming to

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<sup>22</sup> The interviewees were coded according to whether they were ALIA participants (ALIAP) or Faculty (ALIAF)

be authentic is their desire to hold onto a fixed self “because if you say ... I am just going to be myself, you know ... anything comes a bit like something to grab onto” (ALIAF7).

## The second paradox

Authenticity is about congruency but also about fluidity and acceptance (even of our own incongruence). Most people like the idea of being true to a relatively congruent and stable self. In fact, from my own reflective work as well as from my 1:1 sessions with MBA students it has become apparent that many of the internal narratives that we tell to ourselves are to keep a sense of inner stability and congruency. However, it is fluidity and temporal incongruence (i.e., lack of consistency between behaviours, thoughts and so on at two or more points in time) which can be observed through mindful practice. That is from witnessing our continuous thoughts and emotions in a practice where there is no judgement and no attachment to how things should be. The incongruent and unstable authenticity becomes only apparent when we engage in deeper quests for inner authenticity. This is because at the superficial level our rationalising mind is busy creating stories to make us feel congruent.

Let me give you an example. I was in the Psychology School of Exeter University for six years. During these years I highly identified with the social psychology group and I loved the people there. In 2006 I got a position at the Business School in the same University. Although my initial intention was to keep in touch with my colleagues from Psychology, due to different reasons (including having small children) I started socialising less and less with them. My rationalising mind obviously provided an explanation to make sense of my lack of contact with them. Keeping it simple, the main headline of my inner narrative was “I have fewer things in common with them”. Luckily, one day I felt “forced” to attend one of the parties that one of my Psychology colleagues was organising. When I was in the party the narrative that my rationalising mind had carefully orchestrated just collapsed. Being there I realised how many things I had in common with, and how much I still love, these people. For years my rationalising mind did its job of making me feel congruent with my lack of contact. Fortunately I had the opportunity to observe that it was a mere rationalisation, and that the false congruency was just a product of my mind.

## Reconciling and dealing with the paradoxes

### First paradox: Do we need to be inauthentic to become “authentic leaders”?

At the academic level this paradox can be reconciled by addressing the semantics. That is, authentic leaders will be those who possess authenticity (Kernis, 2003), meaning that they know themselves and are true to themselves (Harter, 2002). By contrast those who fit the definition of authentic leaders given by Avolio and colleagues (2004) will be renamed authentic transformational leaders. In that sense we can get clarity on what type of authentic leader we are talking about.

At the practical level, a way to reconcile this first paradox is to move away from labels and dichotomies (authentic vs. inauthentic). Authenticity is not an either or condition, but it is more accurately captured by focusing on the process of development and attending to the changing levels of authenticity (Erickson, 1995). It is more useful to envisage authenticity as a process rather than as fixed and static quality that leaders possess. In that sense it is important to have an authentic process of development.

### The second paradox: Incongruent and unstable authenticity

As previously noted, the danger of people aiming to be authentic is their desire to hold onto a congruent stable self. Congruency is a highly regarded characteristic that is often associated with authenticity. Therefore the fact that authenticity involves accepting ones' incongruence becomes an apparent conundrum. In fact this is something experienced by One Planet MBA students (OPMBA) <http://business-school.exeter.ac.uk/mbaatexeter/>. In the cohort of 2012-2013, one of the students noted that by finding and attaching herself to an "authentic self" she was paradoxically distancing herself from her true fluid authenticity. At one level we could argue that our true self is as fluid as foot prints in the sand. We can never grab it and keep hold of it as it changes and moves on with the waves.



A footprint in the sand (photo: Adarves-Yorno)

### So what now?

There are different paths that you can take to become an authentic leader. A more external path will make you focus on being seen as congruent and being aligned with your values. This is particularly well received in most organisations and you are likely to be recognised accordingly. The downside of this path is that you may attach yourself too much to a congruent self image and that may become a barrier to witnessing what is really happening. A more internal path is harder and invisible; you may need to develop a practice of self-awareness and keep yourself close to your inner self. Externally there is no guarantee that you will be "successful". In fact external recognition and success will depend on whether your true self fits within the environment you are in. The solution, to be successful, is simple - choose another environment.



If you decide to explore the second path, it is useful to think of an authentic journey of development rather than authenticity as a destination. Acknowledge at what point of the journey you start your development. If you are interested in working on deeper aspects of authenticity, find a practice that will allow you to have honest conversations with yourself (e.g., mindfulness). And finally, consider incorporating the following principles in your journey: have courage to really see, have compassion to truly accept, and have sense of humour to keep on going.

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## About the author

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