

Can you follow a dead leader?*

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Without believing in ghosts, you can follow a dead leader. Martin Luther King is long dead but people still follow his lead when they promote human rights. They may not achieve his oratorical brilliance, but they are inspired to act by his courage, his willingness to take personal risks to challenge the status quo. Aspiring leaders wishing to champion any cause, not just human rights, can be inspired to act, and their courage can be fortified, by reading about the lives of dead leaders. Military and business leaders still find inspiration in the heroics of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan and other leadership icons of the distant past.

This odd point about dead leaders has significant implications for the old truism that you can't be a leader without followers. Followership is in the spotlight today for its potential to show that leadership is not a one-way impact on people. On this view, followers have an active part to play in shaping the leader's impact on them. Proponents of this idea claim that leadership is a dynamic, two-way relationship between leaders and followers, not something that one does to the other.

But, if you can follow dead leaders, no such mutual influence is possible. Here, leadership is clearly a one-way impact. Actually, we don't need to rely on this inconvenient fact to halt the followership bandwagon. Even in Martin Luther King's day, the real target of his leadership efforts, his protest marches, was the U.S. and state governments. In particular, he demonstrated against segregation on buses in Montgomery, Alabama, thereby attempting to show leadership to three levels of government. His leadership achieved a measure of success when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such segregation unconstitutional.

Gandhi and Nelson Mandela provide similar examples. Their leadership targets were also their respective governments. Gandhi sought to influence the British government to end their rule over India while Mandela aimed to end white rule in South Africa.

The fascinating lesson of these examples is that none of these three leaders managed his respective government at the time (although Mandela did much later). King, for example, was not even a member of any level of government and hence could not manage the implementation of his vision through those with the power to do so. The bottom line here is that King showed leadership to people in government with whom he had no working relationship. While his leadership could not have succeeded without people following his vision, many followers did not even know him personally, let alone work with him.

King's leadership was from the sidelines. He was an outsider relative to the governmental bodies he sought to lead. Hence, leadership cannot be conceptualized so that it depends on an active role for followers or a working relationship between leaders and followers.

There are lots of similar examples in business. Microsoft is a great follower of its competitors. It followed Apple when it switched from DOS to Windows with its graphical user interface and Netscape when it introduced its web browser, Internet Explorer. Also, everyone leads by example, sometimes even without knowing it. Consider an employee with excellent work habits who switches employers and continues working as normal. Soon, others start working in a similar way. The new employee does not manage anyone, never intended to influence people and was not

aware of having any impact on them. Surely, the truth is that a great deal of leadership occurs by example in just this way. In our efforts to understand leadership, why should we restrict our attention to the intentional influence attempts of people in charge of teams?

There are yet other examples where followership, as normally conceived, does not apply. Consider bottom-up leadership, where front-line knowledge workers champion new ideas to their bosses. Peter is a technical geek with poor interpersonal skills and zero emotional intelligence who verbally abuses his boss in trying to sell a new product idea but who can demonstrate its value, aided by some strong customer endorsements. Peter lacks the skills to manage anyone and the relationship with his boss is not the typical one of leader – follower. Peter is invited to present his ideas to the Board but, lacking people management skills, he is not invited to play a part in implementing the new product. In this example, Peter's bottom-up leadership came to an end once the Board bought his idea; hence his leadership had nothing to do with either implementation or with managing a team of people. His leadership was a one-way impact on the Board, his followers in this case.

Leadership and management reborn

These examples not only shed light on the old truism that leadership entails followership, they also help us carve out a completely new concept of leadership. Because leadership can come from outside organizations or bottom-up where the leader does not manage implementation or followers, then our definition of leadership must be restricted to promoting new directions. Everything to do with getting things done through people must be recast as a management undertaking. For this to be a viable claim, we need to reinvent management as a facilitative, inspiring and supportive function rather than seeing it as a controlling, mechanistic one. Management was tossed in the rubbish bin in the 1980s when a scapegoat was needed to blame for the West's lack of competitiveness in the face of the Japanese business onslaught. It is time to bring it back from the dead. A parallel twist was leadership getting the good guy role of showing consideration for people, theory Y and being transformational while management was consigned to the bad guy part of initiating structure, theory X and being transactional.

But if we stick to a strictly functional differentiation between the two – leadership to promote new directions and management to execute them, we can leave completely open the means of moving people. Now we can say that an inspiring leader moves people to change direction while an inspiring manager moves them to get to the destination by the surest route. Management reinvented is thus transformational, empowering and facilitative. Effective managers are as uplifting to work for as the best sports coaches.

Moving beyond group boundaries

Why should we be interested in such rather odd instances of leadership? Surely we should focus on team leadership in large organizations where there is in fact a working relationship between leaders and followers. The problem with this angle is that it creates a very distorted picture of leadership. It is in this supposedly paradigm, but actually narrow, case where leadership and management are the most difficult to separate. In our postmodern world, group boundaries and our respect for authority are fast disappearing. The competitive pressure for faster innovation and continuous process improvement demands leadership from all employees. But dispersed leadership that is simply an extension of the conventional jumble of leadership and management elements does not capture thought leadership – the bottom-up

promotion of new ideas. Dispersed leadership, as conventionally conceived, implies taking charge of colleagues informally to get things done – a confusing mixture of management and leadership elements.

Leadership in a postmodern world can come from outside one's immediate group, bottom-up or outside the organization altogether. There are no enduring authorities; hence anyone with a better idea and the courage to promote it can show leadership. Such leadership is an occasional act, not a role to be monopolized. It is also more democratic if only because no one has a monopoly on good ideas.

Leadership is not a relationship

Leadership that can come from outsiders is clearly not based on a working relationship with followers. The old truism that leadership implies followers still holds, however, but only because leadership is a *relational* concept, like eating and drinking – you can't eat or drink without eating or drinking *something*. *Impact* is also a relational concept in that it implies a relationship between one object and at least one other. But notice that eating, drinking and impact are relational concepts that do not imply personal or working relationships between people. Leadership is a relational concept in this logical sense. It is only situationally an actual working relationship between people. Hence, if we want a generalizable concept of leadership, we cannot make any reference in our definition to working relationships with followers. The whole followership bandwagon rests on confusion over the meaning of relational.

Conversely, management does depend on relationships. An effective manager cannot get anything done without building productive relationships with people. The modern manager is more of a coach than a controlling drone. Emotional intelligence is also more important for managers, simply because they have serious levels of responsibility for people and power over them.

Conclusion

The effort expended to upgrade the role of followers in organizations is consistent with the ongoing evolution of empowerment. Ownership for getting things done and for devising new directions needs to be more widely shared, not limited to the few at the top. But we need a clearer understanding of leadership and management to fully understand the contribution of employees in non-managerial positions.

* The arguments in this article are based on my book *Burn! 7 Leadership Myths in Ashes*, to be published in March 2006.