

What's wrong with leadership theory?

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Leadership theory is out of step with today's knowledge driven world where power has shifted from the top down force of personality and the quest for dominance to the power of innovation and widely dispersed knowledge. In the new context, leadership is directed up as much as down. Traditional theories of leadership are limited by their narrow focus on the relationship between managers and subordinates. What it means to show leadership upwards or to peers is either not explained or discounted as 'informal' leadership. In this article, I want to develop a sharper distinction between management and leadership along functional lines as a basis for moving away from associating leadership with being a type of person or of occupying a position of authority. This is a necessary step to make sense of how leadership can be shown to peers or upwards to superiors. For this purpose, I will build upon John Kotter's (1990) distinction between leadership and management. I will also discuss thought leadership, a type of leadership which ideally illustrates what it means to show leadership irrespective of position, personality or authority.

Our entrenched conception of leadership is really about heroic leadership – being a visionary cheerleader. Because we admire heroes, it is easy to overlook the inconvenient fact that some leaders are effective without being either visionary or very inspiring. There must be a place for leading by example and other forms of quiet leadership, Badaracco (2002). Everyone wants to acknowledge that there can be unheroic leadership but as long as we have the image of the hero in mind, it is like saying you can be a top movie star without being especially good looking or sexy. True, but the exception proves the rule. As I see it, what is being trumpeted as a general theory of leadership is really only a special case applicable mainly to organizations struggling through major change.

Adding to the confusion, there are novel conceptions proliferating: what Lewin and Regine (2000) have aptly called paradoxical leadership – leading by not leading. On this view, leaders facilitate, coach and empower others to find their own direction. So-called 'level 5' leaders as described by Jim Collins in his recent book *Good to Great* (2001), seem to operate in this facilitative manner. Traditionally we have regarded leadership as providing direction, hence the aptness of calling these novel ideas paradoxical. To develop a general theory of leadership, I believe we need to start over at a fresh place altogether, moving away completely from heroic leadership and hierarchy to the context of thought leadership.

Thought Leadership

Why is this an appropriate place to start? Because we are now in a knowledge driven economy – the third major change of context in the last 40 or so years, each of which has yielded a different understanding of leadership. The first context, the relatively stable period up to the early 1970's was one of incremental productivity improvements. In this context, leadership theory attempted to explain how we could improve productivity and it addressed the question of whether the manager should pay more attention to structure or people. The *aim* of leadership was to improve performance; the *means* was some form of employee motivation and direction. From the mid 70's through roughly the late 80's, the competitive pressures brought upon the West by Far Eastern companies forced Western businesses to undergo traumatic

upheavals to survive. The resulting state of crisis, as in war, called for inspirational, visionary (heroic) leadership to save the day. In this context, the *aim* of leadership was to produce organizational change, the *means* was to direct and motivate employees with an inspirational vision of a better future.

Today’s business context

What is different about today’s increasingly knowledge driven context? And what sort of leadership theory does it suggest?

Knowledge driven organizations are those that compete primarily on the basis of rapid innovation where everyone needs to be initiating new directions, much as in guerrilla warfare. Such leadership is directed up and sideways from innovative knowledge workers. Senior executives are facilitators or investment brokers deciding which ideas to back. Think of any market powered by rapid innovation – software, telecommunications or consumer electronics. Front line knowledge creation (innovation) is the primary source of competitive advantage in such industries. If you accept that leadership generates new directions and that such direction emerges through front line innovation, then leadership in this context must be at least as much bottom up as top down. Gary Hamel (2002) calls on innovators to “lead the revolution” but he does not develop a theory of bottom up, thought leadership to go with his call to arms. While it is not yet common to call this leadership, it is the growing recognition that something is wrong with the entrenched view of leadership that has given rise to so-called paradoxical leadership – the idea that the senior executive is more of a facilitator than a direction provider. This would be a healthy shift in perspective except that we perversely persist in calling what senior executives are doing in this context leadership. Traditionally, we would call ideas fed up the line as suggestion box material for the real leaders to decide upon. But this portrayal of what is happening presupposes that leadership is necessarily top down, something you can only display if you are in a so called “leadership position”. If we are to develop a radically new understanding of leadership, however, we must begin by suspending our traditional picture of what it means to lead.

One way of explaining how knowledge work calls for a new theory of leadership is to look at the relationship between leadership and power. Older theories of leadership are biologically primitive. They focus on what it takes to get to the top of an organizational hierarchy – an ambition we share with all primates and much of the rest of the animal kingdom. Most primitively, the power of such leaders is based on brute strength. The strongest individual (mostly male) dominates all others in the group through the force of physical threat. Modern leadership theories still focus on what it takes to dominate a group but the relevant power has shifted from brute strength to the force of personality. Hence why such leaders are necessarily seen as visionary and inspirational. But this is scarcely less primitive than the type of leadership common amongst other primates. The aim is still dominance.

The power of thought leadership differs from brute strength and the force of personality as shown in the table below:

Power of strength/personality	Power of knowledge creation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring trait of individuals • Aimed at dominance, status • Concentrated among the few • Hierarchical, only top down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleeting, momentary <i>act</i> • Focused on content, egalitarian • Widely dispersed • Non hierarchical, multi-directional

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The above table shows why traditional leadership theories have always focused on static *characteristics of persons* – because such power is a relatively enduring trait and a defining feature of the make-up of those individuals. Being a leader means having what it takes to achieve group dominance – commanding influencing skills are central. Conversely, the ability to come up with an innovative idea cannot be monopolized by any small set of individuals or even maintained for more than a moment by any one person. Often the idea itself carries the day, especially if its value can be demonstrated. Here, inspirational influencing skills may be useful but they are no longer central, no longer part of the very meaning of leadership.

For example, it is easier to champion a product innovation than to win the allegiance of an entire organization to a new way of working because you do not need to appeal to people's fundamental values or emotions. The value of small scale product or process innovations can often be demonstrated easily and they are often very local. Hence, leadership in this domain is small scale, temporary and not necessarily based on larger than life influencing skills. The meaning of such leadership can therefore be restricted to the initiation of change. Thought leadership does not have to be defined in terms of the influencing skills it takes to dominate the entire organisation.

The rapidly shifting nature of thought leadership, the ability to question the status quo, suggests that we should no longer talk about LEADERS at all because, as in leading a golf tournament, leaderSHIP can shift rapidly from one person to another. Leadership in the world of rapid innovation is just as ephemeral and fickle as leading in any sporting contest. Shifting to the power of knowledge is akin to the transition to guerrilla warfare. The modern General can no longer direct operations from a central point. Front line individuals and teams must find their own direction. Business in this third context is very much like guerrilla warfare and its leadership must also be increasingly a front line, but non-enduring, non-hierarchical activity. Because thought leadership is non-hierarchical, it can be directed upwards as well as down. Traditional leadership theory is limited by its exclusive focus on group domination, hence top down leadership.

Leadership domains

Traditional leadership theories take as their paradigmatic domain the running of large organizations, large scale organizational change, the world of politics and warfare. It is in these domains that heroic leadership is undeniably often required. The realm of technological innovation or thought leadership is not so dramatic. It is more incremental and not hierarchical. Being so widespread, thought leadership cannot be monopolized by a few heroes. The claim that I am making is that a different theory of leadership emerges when we look closely at how thought leadership works. My view is that developing such a different understanding of leadership gives us a general theory that can better account for leadership in both domains. It helps us to see what is wrong with traditional conceptions. The point is not that heroic leadership never occurs or is unimportant. The claim is that basing our general understanding of leadership on the model of the hero striding the large stage gives us a distorted view of what leadership really means. As I see it, thought leadership sheds light on all leadership just as guerrilla warfare has revolutionized our understanding of military leadership and for very similar reasons.

The origin of the drive to lead

To varying degrees all humans seek to balance two opposing drives:

- to be accepted by a group.
- to individuate or differentiate themselves.

Traditional leaders strive to differentiate themselves through group domination, while people with a less commanding presence pursue intellectual or artistic excellence. People who revel in creative activity are generally less interested in, or temperamentally suited to, group domination.

Those who excessively push self differentiation are branded deviants while too much emphasis on group acceptance is a recipe for conformity. Leaders share with deviants the willingness to risk group rejection but their innovations are sufficiently aligned with group needs to influence the group to adopt them. Leaders aiming for group dominance without relying on force make a special effort to get the group on board with their proposed changes. But thought leaders might simply be interested in an innovation for its own sake or out of curiosity. In this case, influencing the group to change direction could be a side effect not an intended result. In short, a general theory of leadership, one that covers both intentional and unintentional influence, can only say that leadership initiates group change. The *method* of winning support must be left out of the statement of what it means to show leadership. It is therefore only a special case of leadership where explicit, intentional persuasion rather than mere example is needed to get prospective followers on board.

Preconceptions blocking the differentiation of leadership and management

However much we might agree that there is a separate type of leadership called thought leadership that is much needed in our knowledge driven age, it is not obvious how top down leadership might have the same characteristics as thought leadership. To make this clear, we need a viable distinction between leadership and management but we are blocked in this endeavour by at least four fundamental preconceptions about the nature of leadership. Basically, we need to offload most of what is normally called leadership onto management for the simple reason that those who lead upwards are leading people they do not manage. Either we settle for the oddity of having two distinct types of leadership or we strive to develop a unified theory appropriate for both top down and bottom up leadership.

The four preconceptions are as follows: Leadership...

1. is a role, a position in an organizational hierarchy.
2. is a way of enabling groups to achieve shared goals.
3. is a decision making function.
4. is about managing people.

1. Leadership as position

Groups naturally form themselves into hierarchies. We like to have a single figure at the top of our pecking orders to look up to. While we may not be able to rid ourselves of this hardwiring, we can shift our perception of those at the top and refer to them as executives instead of as leaders. When we regard leadership as a role or position, the boundary between leadership and management is, at best, fuzzy. They both seem to have the same function – to improve employee performance. They just have different methods or styles. The leader is allegedly inspirational while the manager is more methodical, mechanical or transactional. This distinguishing feature is hardly momentous as it reduces to a mere style difference. The two styles are not a revolutionary innovation from the very old ideas of initiating structure versus showing

consideration or being people focused versus task focused. The manager is seen as task orientated while the leader is people orientated. Adding the idea of transformation or inspiration just puts the leader on steroids. The old ideas of task versus people focus are still the foundation for this distinction and it is little more than a style difference, hardly a worthwhile basis for distinguishing between leadership and management. We can avoid this confusion by saying that only management is a role and only management is interested in motivating employee performance. Leadership, on this view, is about initiating change, not managing performance. This makes leadership an occasional activity, not a position, role or responsibility.

2. Leadership as enabling the achievement of group goals

The required shift in mindset to counter this preconception is to regard *management*, not leadership, as the function that helps a group achieve its goals. Leadership can be limited to initiating new goals. One of the most popular conceptions of leadership today is the one offered by Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* (2002). They make it quite clear that their whole theory is based on the idea that leadership is about a *journey* that the leader takes people on. But getting people to a destination, the implementation of a new direction, can be regarded strictly as a management function. Leadership initiates or champions change, new directions or new goals. Leadership sells you a ticket for a journey on a bus. The manager drives the bus to the destination. All performance motivation is therefore a managerial action and responsibility. Management can be transformational or inspiring – it only differs by virtue of its function. Transformational managers motivate employees to work harder when implementing a specific goal. Leadership is simply a matter of challenging the status quo in either word or deed. Leadership stops when the group buys the idea for change. This move is essential to make sense of the idea that upwards leadership focuses on getting top management to adopt an unconventional idea. It is then a separate phase to implement that idea by management. Hence the journey that is central to leadership for Kouzes and Posner is actually a managerial undertaking.

In an organization that competes on the basis of rapid innovation, the CEO should be what Jim Collins (2001) has called a “level 5 leader”. But level 5 leaders could be seen as managers because they *facilitate* decision making in others by asking probing questions designed to draw ideas for new strategic directions out of others rather than champion their own ideas. In highly innovative organizations this sort of management-as-facilitation is valuable because a great deal of the leadership will be bottom up, shown by non-managers championing new ideas, much as advocated by Gary Hamel in his book *Leading the Revolution* (2000). Such bottom up leadership is completely separate from achieving goals or implementing decisions. It stops, as does all thought leadership, when the group buys the new idea (the bus ticket). When top management decides to implement the idea, then it is a management function to manage the change. This is a description of how leadership can be bottom-up and divorced from the implementation phase needed to achieve a group goal. But such leadership can be top down as well. But even in this case, when CEOs show leadership by initiating or championing a new idea, they switch hats from leadership to management when they move from selling the bus ticket to driving the bus to its destination. This way of cutting the cake is, however, compatible with the possibility that a CEO might have to do a bit of re-selling during the destination, throwing in an occasional injection of leadership if and when someone on board questions the merits of the journey.

By looking closely at leadership outside of the managerial function, as in thought leadership, we can see that it has nothing to do with implementation. As an example,

suppose a team of colleagues are in a meeting. No one formally reports to anyone else in the room. They are debating whether to change the bonus system for sales people. A vocal team member is advocating a new system and most of the others seem to be going along with the idea. But then another team member cites compelling evidence to show why the current system is preferable and the group is persuaded. Hence the dissenting group member has shown leadership to the group but the outcome is to preserve the status quo – hence no action is taken, no group goal is pursued, no journey is launched. This shows that launching a journey is not a necessary condition for leadership to be shown. Clearly, thought leadership will on occasion launch a massive journey as in, for example, a new idea for a supersonic passenger plane. The point is that leadership is an impact on a group that causes them to change their thinking, values, beliefs or attitudes. Implementation is both a separate phase and a separate function executed by the same or different persons.

3. Leadership as decision making

If both leaders and managers make decisions about what directions to pursue or how to pursue them, we are again left with a quandary over how they differ. It will not be an easy move to accept, but we could say that only managers make decisions while leaders stick to informal influence to persuade people to adopt their ideas. Of course, leaders have to decide which ideas to back but the traditional conception of leadership revolves around the making of *group* decisions, not of personal ones. Much of the leadership style literature was about when to make a unilateral decision for a group and when to make group decisions participatively. So leadership was seen as a role or position with the responsibility for making major directional, group decisions. If we challenge this preconception and say that only managers make decisions then we are claiming that even widely admired, stereotypical leaders such as Jack Welch are actually wearing managerial hats when they make momentous decisions even when they are quite revolutionary. On this view, CEOs might show leadership to their senior management teams to persuade them to adopt a new direction, but as soon as they are on board, a management decision is often made in which case no leadership is shown to the rest of the organization. A revolutionary idea like being first or second in a market could, however, show leadership to other organizations, but the bulk of the leading CEOs organization has experienced the making of a management decision. They have not been shown leadership.

This view might be hard to swallow when talking about CEOs, especially those of Jack Welch's stature, but it is the only way to make sense of thought leadership or any form of informal or bottom up leadership. In such cases, leadership can only be informal influence. When a non-managerial thought leader influences upwards, decisions for the organization are made by followers at the top of the hierarchy, those in the organization with the power to make them, not by the thought leaders themselves. So here is a case where leadership is not a matter of making organizational decisions. Hence the making of such decisions cannot be an essential feature of leadership. Having the power to make organization-wide decisions implies being a manager. So whenever a senior executive makes a decision to pursue a new direction, that executive is wearing a managerial hat, not showing leadership. This idea is likely to be accepted only if we can set aside the idea that being in charge of a group is what it means to be a leader.

4. Leadership as managing people

The vast literature on leadership styles talks of how best to manage people, how to move them to work hard, together to achieve joint goals. This idea, of course, is based on the first preconception, that leadership is a role. But, again, thought leaders

do not necessarily manage people and, even if they do, leading upwards is not about managing your superiors, it is about influencing them to buy your idea. So, we can conceive of leadership as restricted to influencing people to accept a new idea independently of whether those people report to the leader or not. Thought leaders can be iconoclasts, eccentrics and have poor relationship skills, hence not even be capable of managing people. But if they can demonstrate the value of their ideas, the organization could still be moved to buy their ideas. If thought leadership is not about managing people, we are not constrained to say that top down leadership is either. Managing people is a management responsibility. Managers do not have to be mechanical or narrowly controlling. This is to confuse ends and means. Defining management in terms of its function or end, that is to implement directions in such a way as to obtain the best return for the investment of all resources encompasses all aspects of getting the best out of people. The means of doing so are left open and can range from being controlling to being as empowering as required by the situation.

What is leadership?

Consider these diverse examples of leadership:

- Top down vision of a better future presented in an inspirational manner – essential when advocating a shift in values, how the game is played.
- Top down advocacy in a high tech company of the need to develop a specific new product or market – not a fundamental change in values, people do not need to be inspired as the business case is fairly obvious.
- Bottom up demonstration of a new line of products in an innovative company like 3M takes the company into new markets. No vision is involved; the new product champions are technical specialists who are not personally inspiring.
- A customer service representative in a firm with poor customer service influences the organization to improve customer service simply by setting a compelling example – again no vision or inspirational communications.

The first example is conventional leadership, but the other three are not. The second one is still top down but neither vision nor inspiration is involved. The last two examples are bottom up and are neither visionary nor communicated in an inspirational manner.

The only common element in these examples is the generation of a new direction. How do they differ? The aims are broadly the same, but the *means* of moving people differentiates them, ranging from vision through a rational presentation of a business case to merely setting an example. What this suggests is that, when defining leadership and management, we should stop at indicating their relative functions. Instead of talking about leadership style, we can refer instead to influencing style, a separate process, which has nothing to do with the essential meaning of leadership.

Defining leadership and management functionally

- Leadership serves the function of generating and promoting new directions.
- Management serves the function of executing existing directions efficiently.

If we say that leadership serves the *function* of initiating new directions, we are close to the views of John Kotter who developed the clearest functional distinction between leadership and management (1990). For Kotter, leadership generates major organizational change while management serves the function of keeping the business ticking over in the meantime. He recognized that there are two

organizational functions, but the one associated with leadership can be any change in direction, however small. It does not have to be large scale culture change – once we move from the context of traumatic change to one of continuous improvement and ongoing innovation.

In Kotter's theory, leaders are inspiring visionaries (transformational) while managers are transactional – they get employees to work efficiently by using controlling processes. Now this takes us into the *means* of moving people. But differentiating leadership from management on the basis of function focuses on *aims* or *purposes*. If the aims of leadership and management are constant, surely the *means* can vary – something Kotter does not allow. For Kotter, the manager uses planning, economic incentives and similar processes to control people. Managers are, by definition, never inspiring or empowering in Kotter's world. What is most fascinating about Kotter's work on the distinction between leadership and management is that he devoted so much thinking to this way of conceptualizing leadership but his views are still a muddle of a functional and personality perspective. He, of all people, should have seen that defining leadership and management functionally, that is in terms of their ends, does not logically entail any particular means. But he failed to stick to the functional perspective consistently enough hence claiming that managers are controlling while leaders are inspiring. In fact there is no logical reason why all leaders must be inspiring and, conversely, why some managers can never be so. Managers need to be inspiring when managing in very complex, conflict-ridden situations with employees that must be highly empowered to be motivated. If we stick to a functional perspective consistently then we must say that managers are still managing, not leading so long as they are implementing or executing tasks as opposed to championing change. But Kotter developed his views in the 1980's at the height of the Far East competitive crisis and, like most leadership scholars at the time, the ability to inspire major change was the recipe to save the world.

When the Japanese invasion took hold, Western business needed a scapegoat – managers were fingered for this role and attacked as being controlling, mechanistic bureaucrats. Hence the well known statement that businesses were over managed and under led. The damage done by this move is still being felt today – everyone wants to be a leader; no one wants to be a manager. But this whole outlook confuses ends and means. Why cannot managers use motivational approaches rather than controlling, transactional means to move people? Because this blurs the conception of transformational leadership where the inspirational means of motivating people was part of what it meant to be a leader. But leadership only needs to be inspiring when major culture change is required and when the aim is to dominate a group. Being inspirational is only one means of influencing people and not at all central in thought leadership. Similarly, it is time to rebuild our understanding of management as one not tied to any specific means of moving people. Hence managers can be just as inspiring as leaders. Only their function separates them.

What makes the separation of means and ends so much easier now is precisely the development of leadership theory within the context of a knowledge driven business world. Thought leadership is the ephemeral, fast shifting and widely dispersed ability to generate and champion new ideas. Because the goal of such leadership is not group domination, there is no need to have a larger than life personality. Hence, leadership, whether top down or bottom up and regardless of influencing style is always the same thing: championing new directions. This is a general theory of leadership covering all types of leadership. As in guerrilla warfare, leadership in a fast changing, continuously improving business is often small scale and local and may be based on small scale influencing techniques such as example or a clear business case without a vision, inspiring or otherwise. The changes such leadership

initiates do not require an inspirational appeal to people's fundamental values or emotions. Conversely, sometimes managers need to be inspiring to motivate employees who are doing important but boring or tiring jobs.

New roles for senior executives

Senior executives can provide broad strategic leadership. They might also show *process* leadership to improve how the organization functions. But their equally important role is to cultivate bottom up leadership. *Initiating* a change of culture in this direction certainly calls for top down leadership, but maintaining it once it is in place requires senior executives to wear a managerial hat. Management is fundamentally a facilitative activity aimed at generating maximum productivity. That may have entailed assembly line efficiency and stiflingly tight control 50 years ago, but managing knowledge workers calls for much more empowerment, coaching and career development. The aims of management are the same as they always have been. Only the means of achieving the best use of people has changed. There is no question that performance needs to be monitored quantitatively, but management is about maintaining whatever culture yields the most profitable outcomes. In a knowledge driven world, where business operates along the lines of guerrilla warfare, everyone needs to be championing new initiatives. The role of management is to maintain a delicate organizational ecology that fosters leadership at all levels. This cannot be achieved with a bureaucratically controlling *style* of management. Nor does maintaining such a culture require leadership except for those occasions when it is threatening to break apart and must be rebuilt.

Leadership *does* therefore generate new directions as we always thought, but it emerges wherever opportunities are spotted, not just from managerial ranks. The attempt to shift our conception of leadership from one of providing direction to one involving coaching, empowerment and facilitation is simply a red herring, a failure to recognize that a lot of what executives do today is simply not leadership, now that the ability to provide leadership is not identical to what it takes to dominate a hierarchy. Senior executives should be called executives, not leaders. As executives they will show some leadership occasionally but much of the time they will be wearing a managerial hat. The fundamental meaning of 'executive' is to have the authority to make certain decisions. This role may or may not entail showing leadership depending on the needs of the organization at particular times.

What does it take to be a leader?

To answer this question, we need to distinguish between what it takes to dominate a group from what is required to exhibit thought leadership. The former depends on having a drive for power and the ability to make an emotional impact on large numbers of people. This calls for charisma or inspirational influencing skills. To show leadership in the world of fast paced innovation, it is necessary to be either personally creative *or* quick to recognize opportunities in the creative work of others. Such leadership is also similar to creativity in that both depend on a willingness to challenge the status quo, a curiosity about how things work and a willingness to risk group rejection – a spirit of adventure in short. A further similarity between thought leadership and creativity is the reliance on natural dispositions, abilities or attitudes acquired early in life. This means that leadership, like creativity, can only be fostered, not developed the way that management or influencing skills can be learned.

Influencing skills are situational requirements, not part of the meaning of leadership. Those who can make inspired appeals to large groups may be more successful in moving greater numbers of people than those who, less heroically, can only present

a dry business case or lead by example. Anyone who succeeds in leading an organization to change direction will need some influencing skills but they are not part of the definition of leadership. Keep in mind that leadership in this domain is often easier than is the case for traditional leadership where you need to get an entire organization behind you in situations where fundamental values are in conflict. Product or service innovation does not generally clash with entrenched human values and there is often a large subgroup of opportunists that need little in the way of persuasion to jump on the bandwagon once they see a good idea emerge. Accordingly, leading them can sometimes amount to no more than pointing in the right direction. No vision or inspirational personality is required.

Example – applying the 80-20 rule

Suppose you are in charge of new product development and one of your bright, young product developers, call her Cathy, convinces you that a major product line will soon be obsolete and that she has a good idea for a replacement. She shows upward leadership to convince you, at which point her leadership stops and you strive to lead your immediate boss, the CEO and other senior stakeholders. It takes you 6 months to get all the key players on board. Once the decision is made to back the new product line, you are asked to manage its implementation. During the 6 month selling phase, your contribution was 80% leadership and 20% management. The latter consisted in arranging prototype demos, lining up customers to give their views, etc. Once you swing into implementation, however, the percentages reverse. Now you are in 80% management mode and at most 20% leadership mode. Leadership only comes into play at all if, during implementation, problems arise that cause some stakeholders to question the wisdom of the move and you need to re-sell the idea. So, in getting from idea to outcome, you switch hats from leadership to management. But someone else may have taken care of the implementation phase. We don't need to label the whole process leadership just because the same person (you) took care of both the initiation and the implementation.

Brief sketch of a general theory of leadership

Across all situations, both top down and bottom up, leadership initiates or champions new directions. Leadership is an act by an individual that moves a group, a one-way *impact* that influences the group to change its beliefs, attitudes, values and take action as appropriate. The fact that leadership is a one-way impact does not preclude leadership shifting rapidly and frequently between team members. To say that leadership merely initiates change sounds like leaders achieve nothing, but this is to regard leaders as persons rather than to focus on the leadership function. Of course, individual leaders achieve momentous tasks. It is just that they switch hats from leadership to management when they move from initiating and promoting new ideas to implementation or they delegate the implementation to others with stronger managerial skills. Unlike influencing style, leadership itself is not situational. It is always a matter of championing new ideas or just doing something new thereby leading by example. Only the means, how you influence, varies situationally.

Leadership is not a relationship between managers and followers. Even the greatest of traditional leaders such as Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King won over followers they did not even know let alone had a relationship with. The same is true of technology gurus, like Bill Gates, for instance. Hence the increasingly popular view that leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers is simply false at worst and, at best, no more than a special case of leadership – not at all a general theory. Traditional leadership theory cannot capture the fact that leadership is often shown to strangers. Think of how much leadership is simply by example – many

people you do not know could be following your example. Moreover, if you allow upwards or sideways leadership, you have to grant that this relationship is very different from the one that managers have with subordinates. When was the last time you empowered your boss?

There is a currently popular trend to conceptualize leadership in terms of relationships, Rost (1991) but there is a confusion over the term "relationship". In one sense, it is quite true that leadership is an *impact* on followers. An impact entails at least two objects, hence "impact" is a *relational* concept. But this is not the same as having a working relationship. Leading by example is an impact on a group, the members of which can be unknown to the leader, as discussed above. Thought leadership can also be shown by eccentrics or interpersonally unskilled employees to fellow team members with whom they do not have a good relationship. Relationships do play a part in some leadership situations, but like being an inspirational speaker, having strong working relationships is a situational requirement (the means) not a necessary condition for all leadership, hence not a part of the meaning of leadership.

Relationships are a type of influencing tactic along with vision, emotional expressiveness and logical arguments. All influencing tactics are situational requirements, never a part of the meaning of leadership. For example, a western manager operating in an Arab country or Japan will need to build relationships with stakeholders as a means of influencing them. But leadership is about taking a stand and championing new ideas. How you get people on board is the means and that can shift widely from one situation to another. The focus on ends and means is a corollary of defining leadership strictly in terms of its function – its ends – a necessary step to remove the temptation to associate it with being a position or type of person.

Leadership has nothing to do with coaching or facilitating the making of decisions in others. Coaching is a tool that managers use to develop people. There is no basis for assimilating coaching to the concept of leadership unless you are wedded to the idea that leadership means occupying a position of authority (formal or otherwise) over people. Coaching, like leadership, is a function that is performed by managers for different purposes.

Finally, character or personal credibility are not essential for leadership. Occupying a position of authority, being an executive, does of course require admirable character and personal credibility as Kouzes and Posner (2003) so convincingly argue. But leadership, viewed strictly as an occasional function that is performed by anyone with a good idea for a better way, does not depend on character. This accounts for why we are prepared to accept the ideas of eccentrics, loners or disreputable people, if they can actually demonstrate the benefits of their ideas. Nor does emotional intelligence come into the picture, contrary to Goleman (1996) except again for executives or managers. Leadership is like creativity, an act that has an impact on a group. Where leaders are not personally creative, they are sufficiently attuned to new ideas to champion them early. The creativity that underpins leadership initiatives is more common in younger people with a natural dose of rebelliousness – just the opposite of emotional intelligence which Goleman has actually called maturity (1996). Granted, creative people who are also emotionally intelligent will likely have a greater range of influencing skills to draw upon, but here we are into situational requirements again, not the necessary conditions for leadership to occur.

The general theory proposed here relates well to our understanding of market leadership, simply being out in front. Such leadership is not only not a relationship with followers; these leaders positively do not want to be followed! This point undermines the idea that leadership is fundamentally a cooperative effort between

leaders and followers to achieve shared goals. Traditional leadership theory is also unrealistically rational as it makes leadership always an *intentional* activity. This idea, however, rules out leading by example which can be either intentional or unintentional.

In summary, leadership is still about power, but it is now the power of knowledge creation – a much more democratic factor – rather than the power of formal authority, physical strength or the force of personality. And the power of thought leadership is used to change how we think, not to dominate us. The key move to get to this way of regarding leadership is to pursue consistently what it means to regard leadership strictly as a function that is open to anyone to perform. Everything flows from this foundation. The idea that leadership is the initiation of change rather than its implementation is a good example of this point. Thought leadership does not necessarily lead to anything being implemented beyond a change of thinking and thought leaders often do not have the power to implement their ideas in any case. This change in perspective requires us to cast aside the old idea that leadership is about achieving group goals. Leadership initiates new goals. Management serves the function of implementing them.

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