

Zaleznik and Kotter on Leadership

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While acknowledging that Abraham Zaleznik was not alone in his attack on management, I want to take a more detailed look at his characterization of management because his tone is so aggressively dismissive, so categorical. Also, his way of differentiating leadership and management so totally typifies most of what has been said since about the question of how they differ. Zaleznik clearly aims at Taylor's conception of management as the prime target of his scorn. I want to look at two sources of Zaleznik's commentary on management. There was his early, famous article published in 1977 in the Harvard Business Review: *Managers and leaders: Are they different?* Then there was his later book, *The Managerial Mystique* published 12 years later in 1989 where he essentially elaborates on the earlier article, though his hard stance does not appear to have altered.

In *The Managerial Mystique*, Zaleznik says that "what Taylor proposed through his system of management lies at the core of how modern managers are supposed to think and act. The principle is rationality. The aim is efficiency." Most importantly, Zaleznik believed that managers and leaders differ in terms of their personalities. (He clearly focuses on the person at the head of a group, which only leaves the question of style or personality to address in order to understand what differentiates leadership from non-leadership – a dead end as I have argued.) Taking his lead from Taylor, Zaleznik describes managers as being cold efficiency machines who "adopt impersonal, if not passive, attitudes towards goals." Further, "Managers see themselves as conservators and regulators of an existing order of affairs." He tells us that "managers' tactics appear flexible: on the one hand they negotiate and bargain; on the other, they use rewards, punishments, and other forms of coercion." So, managers are only apparently flexible and they are coercive, even manipulative in Zaleznik's eyes. In his 1977 article Zaleznik makes exactly the same claim, stating that: "...one often hears subordinates characterize managers as inscrutable, detached and manipulative." Zaleznik doesn't tell us where he "often hears" these comments. Perhaps he spent a lot of time wandering around 1970's auto assembly plants where he must surely have run into the ghost of Frederick Taylor!

Zaleznik would have us believe that, while managers seek activity with people, they "maintain a low level of emotional involvement in those relationships." They also apparently "lack empathy". Zaleznik expands on the emotional theme in *The Managerial Mystique* by telling us that managers "operate within a narrow range of emotions. This emotional blandness when combined with the preoccupation on process, leads to the impression that managers are inscrutable, detached and even manipulative. So, he repeated his judgement about managers being detached and manipulative virtually word for word in his 1989 book, 12 years after his better known 1977 article was published in the Harvard Business Review.

It is not clear what evidence Zaleznik has for these damning charges. He seems to be doing nothing more than extrapolating from Fredrick Taylor's conception of management without ever asking himself whether management as a function is committed to Taylor's characterization of it. Starting with Taylor's worship of machine-like efficiency, Zaleznik has tarred all managers for all time with the same brush.

Zaleznik believes that leaders are creative and interested in substance while managers are only interested in process – how things are done, not what. For Zaleznik, "leaders, who are more concerned with ideas, relate in more intuitive and

empathetic ways.” I agree that leaders are more interested in ideas than how they get implemented, but there is no basis whatsoever for calling leaders more empathetic than managers. Zaleznik is not satisfied with stating that managers focus on how things get done, he is determined to maintain that they do so in the most mechanical way conceivable which, of course, is not compatible with empathy. In fairness, the personality distinctions that Zaleznik draws have been around a lot longer than he has been writing, in one form or another. Early theories of leadership distinguished between being task or structure orientated versus being concerned for people. There is also theory X and theory Y – the idea that people need to be controlled versus the view that they are responsible and can be trusted. Zaleznik is not alone in aligning leadership with concern for people and theory Y while management is seen as focused on the task or structure and tending to be theory X by virtue of thinking that people need to be controlled. There is also the common intuition that we manage things but lead people, as if people are not to be managed. Recall the comments I made at the beginning of this chapter about sports management where players on sports teams are surely managed in a sense that does not imply mechanistic or bureaucratic control.

Underlying all of this talk is the clear assumption that both leaders and managers aim to achieve the same things, get work done (within-group dynamics) and that it is only their approach, style or personalities that differentiate them. Hence, leaders have personalities that incline them to relate sensitively to people while managers are coldly task orientated types.

The problem is that there is no real basis for this personality distinction. It is not good enough to say that managers were controlling from the time of Taylor until the Japanese invasion showed them up. Even if this is historically accurate, there is nothing in this alleged fact that commits management to being characterized in such negative terms. The simple way around Zaleznik’s condemnation of management is to define it functionally, in terms of what purpose it serves, not in terms of how it actually achieves its purpose. This leaves the *means* of managing completely open.

The problem is not Zaleznik’s fault. It is not simply the Japanese invasion either. The older root of our present confusion between leadership and management is the fact that there was no need to differentiate them earlier in the twentieth century. Early researchers used the terms interchangeably when they noted that some leaders/managers focused more on structure while others focused more on people. What the Japanese invasion highlighted was the need to do something radically different and this was the beginning of a felt need to find a way of differentiating between leadership and management. But, this cataclysmic period led us to over react and worship leadership while condemning management. Today, thanks to ever increasing complexity, greater specialization is needed. We now recognize that organizations have two very different fundamental tasks that are equally important:

- To execute today’s business in line with agreed goals.
- To create the future, to reinvent themselves, to adapt to new demands.

This is the new reality driving us to differentiate between leadership and management. Describing this basis in terms of differing organizational *purposes*, *functions* or ends, leads naturally to a functional approach to defining leadership and management. Warren Bennis and John Kotter were among the first writers to talk about leaders and managers having different purposes or functions. What is really amazing about their work is that it first saw the light of day over 25 years ago yet we are still stuck with conceptions of leadership and management that are contaminated with personality elements. We still have not adopted a fully functional differentiation.

John Kotter's functional conception of leadership and management

It is not clear how much influence Zaleznik had on John Kotter but Kotter's attempt to develop a functional differentiation between leadership and management tars the latter with some of the same brush. Kotter did most of his writing on leadership in the 1980's so he may well also have been caught up in the same search for a scapegoat to blame for the poor showing of U.S. industry against the Japanese. Here is Kotter's way of differentiating leadership and management: "...leadership and management differ in terms of their primary function. The first can produce useful change, the second can create orderly results which keeps something working efficiently." By talking of function, Kotter has made a useful step forward. But surprisingly he does not make anything of the fact that purpose carries no implications regarding the particular means of achieving that purpose. Kotter sees leaders as needing to be inspiring while it is sufficient for managers to be organized, efficient controllers.

So, like Zaleznik, Kotter believes that leaders have more inspiring personalities than managers. There is a superficial logic to Kotter's need to bring this personality aspect into his conception of leadership and management. His reasoning seems to be that leaders need to be inspiring to move people to accept major change. Conversely, keeping things ticking over on a business-as-usual basis only requires good organizational skills. Kotter says that "Since change is the function of leadership, being able to generate highly energized behavior is important." This is not true for management in Kotter's world: "For some of the same reasons that control is so central to management, highly motivated or inspired behavior is almost irrelevant."

This is odd because Kotter characterizes the management function as one of "coping with complexity." Management does a lot more than just monitor an efficiently running machine. Management needs to motivate people to overcome often serious barriers to implementation which is why execution is often very difficult. This is especially true in managing complex projects like making a major motion picture or putting the first man on the moon.

So why does Kotter not see that managers also need to inspire people? Because, it seems to me, he has not fully developed a functional differentiation between leadership and management. He still falls back on the idea that leaders and managers are engaged in much the same task and that it is fundamentally their style or personality that differentiates them. This is very close to the personality basis that Zaleznik uses for his conceptualization. There is a hint to this effect when Kotter tells us that "People who think of management as being only the implementation part of leadership ignore the fact that leadership has its own implementation processes."

For Kotter, leaders not only initiate change, they also manage its implementation. But this way of looking at things consigns managers to a very narrow role of simply keeping existing operations ticking over. The problem with Kotter's distinction is that he creates a confusing overlap between the two functions. Leaders may need to be inspiring but they also need some of the manager's organizational skills and results orientation if they are to manage the implementation of major change. It is as if effective leaders have to be good at both leading and managing while managers are nothing more than robotic supervisors or overseers in Kotter's scheme of things, much as they were conceived by Frederick Taylor and Zaleznik.

As I see it, Kotter has made a good start at differentiating leadership and management along functional lines but he has drawn the boundary in the wrong place. In my view, managers own the entire territory of getting things done. This

includes implementing major change, managing large scale projects like putting the first man on the moon, making a modern movie as well as keeping everyday operations ticking over. So why does Kotter draw his boundary around mere ongoing operational work, a supervisory role? Because I think he has implicitly accepted Zaleznik's view that leaders are inherently inspiring and managers are not, hence managers cannot do anything other than keep things ticking over. They cannot get things done where people need inspiring because managers are not by nature inspiring – or so Kotter seems to be saying.

In my view, a fully functional distinction between leadership and management must leave open the means of achieving their respective functions. This entails that leaders can be either inspiring or quietly logical and factual. Conversely, managers can use exactly the same range of influencing skills. It is only their purpose – to make the best use of all resources, to create the most value that differentiates them from leaders. We can see this point most clearly by showing how managers can be just as transformational as leaders thereby undermining the widespread idea that only leaders are transformational while managers can only be “transactional”.

Transformational leadership

It seems to me that the vast literature on transformational leadership makes the same mistakes as those made by Kotter and Zaleznik. Kotter does not appear to like the transformational terminology as he does not use it, but he is in the same camp as those who see leaders as inspiring or transformational while viewing managers as transactional. Kotter and Zaleznik say that managers use only rewards and punishments to move people. When Kotter discusses managerial motivation, he claims that “One way that management achieves control is by “motivating” people to comply with the plan. This is often done with economic incentives...sometimes management tries to achieve this more informally through group norms and pressures. But the end or goal is the same: control.” So, for Kotter, managers are *transactional* – they engage in economic transactions with subordinates in exchange for their performance. Note that there is no reference to praise, recognition or other emotional ways of connecting with employees – much as we saw with Zaleznik. Kotter's portrayal of management conveys the same impression as did Zaleznik's of a distant, mechanical and emotionless relationship. This, for me, confirms that Kotter has one foot in the future and one in the past.

But the same is true for all the literature on transformational leadership. This whole approach is a dead end because it forces us to say that leaders are inspirational *by definition*. You can't be a leader unless you can be inspirational. And managers cannot be inspirational, again by definition. This is surely wrong. We have seen in our discussion of thought leadership that it is possible to sell an idea on the basis of facts and logic without being emotionally inspirational. Leading quietly is surely possible in many situations. You can lead by example. What could be quieter than that? In the medical field, there is a now a premium on what they call “evidence based” practice where anyone advocating change must provide hard, factual evidence. Such appeals may or may not be emotionally inspiring. Certainly it helps in some situations to be inspiring, such as when you need to move people to give up cherished ways of doing things or when what you are proposing entails significant risks and uncertainty. But this can only be our paradigm case of leadership if we are committed to seeing leadership as inescapably heroic and as the person in charge of a group.

The Transformational Manager

According to transformational leadership theory, both leaders and managers are engaged in the same task of getting the best out of people, they just have different influencing styles (personalities).

But it can be shown that leaders and managers need to be transformational or, in other words, highly inspirational, *only* in certain circumstances, namely, when their followers or subordinates are *resistant* to behaving in the desired manner. Resistance can be due to any of many reasons: fear, ignorance, disbelief in the direction advocated, distrust of the leader, dislike of the leader, having a better idea of their own, etc.

Leadership	Promote major changes in direction	1. Transformational leader	2. Simply point out new direction
		3. Transformational manager	4. Monitor, communicate coordinate
Management	Improve or maintain productivity, implement change	High	Low

Employee resistance & task difficulty

In Box 1, leaders are striving to sell the need for major culture change, so it helps to be transformational because there is generally strong resistance to such change. They need to overcome this resistance by being extraordinarily convincing in their presentation of the rationale for change. This means being inspiring, charismatic, visionary or highly enthusiastic in order to win people's hearts and minds. This is the paradigm case of leadership for all those who wrote about leadership beginning in the 1980's when, following the traumas of the Japanese business invasion, major change was needed to save the day.

In Box 2, followers are complete opportunists, so ready to jump on the latest bandwagon, that the leader merely has to point to an exciting new idea and stand aside. This is often true of thought leadership where at least some prospective followers are quick to spot and adopt new technology. Recall Carlos, the developer of new spam blocking software whose followers needed no persuading to jump on the bandwagon he created. No transformational influencing skills are required in this instance. Here, leadership reduces to simply indicating that a new direction might yield a great leap in competitive advantage. Some leaders, many thought leaders in fact, might find it quite impossible to transform anyone and, in this situation, they do not need to. This is like being a security guard in a burning office building and saying "This way!" to the panicking office workers – they will not need much persuading to

follow. Granted we admire the leader more who has to be exceptionally inspiring in order to overcome massive resistance. But this says more about us than it does about the nature of leadership. In other words, a great deal of leadership is not at all heroic, either because the change advocated is not earth shattering or because the audience is completely ready for the new idea when it comes along.

In Box 3, let's say a team has been falling behind schedule on its production targets. This box captures the situation of our example where Mary needed to re-motivate her team. Here the manager recognizes that the work is hard, the task is complex and not very exciting. She also sees that her team is not especially inspired. To motivate a higher level of performance, she makes her team see how special they will be if they can beat the odds and make their deadline. The way the manager explains the importance of the deadline and how much she values their contribution is quite transformational or inspiring. This manager needs to be transformational because she wants to motivate an unusual level of effort from her team to achieve a set target. But, because no new direction is advocated, the manager is not showing any leadership. She is simply getting the job done as expected and using her influencing skills to get the most out of all of the resources at her disposal. Still, she is such an inspiring motivator, that she must be regarded as transformational. Very complex projects like putting a man on the moon for the first time are also in this box. It does not just contain routine operational work.

In Box 4, the manager's team is already highly motivated and focused on achieving or exceeding its targets. Here, the manager does not need to be transformational because the team is already motivated enough. Perhaps they just enjoy exceeding targets or maybe they are in line for a big bonus. In any case, the manager's task is just one of coordination to ensure that all members of the team are pulling in the same direction.

The moral of this story is that *employee resistance*, the *complexity of the task* and the *magnitude of change* that is advocated determine whether managers and leaders need to be transformational. It is not a matter of the leader having a transformational personality while the manager is a mere automaton. Both need to be transformational to overcome resistance – one to move people to change direction and the other to get them there efficiently. This is the inescapable conclusion of defining leadership and management strictly and exclusively in functional terms.