The leadership shadow

Erik de Haan and **Andy Copeland** throw some light on the darker personality traits that can derail today's leaders

Never before has leadership come under more criticism and distrust than in this second decade of the 21st century. After the disillusioning behaviour and practices of democratically elected top political leaders throughout the Nineties; after the major catastrophes in the financial services sector in the first decade of the 21st century; and alongside the string of management and leadership debacles in practically every walk of public and private corporate life, there has been an ever-growing consensus that it is time to reassess leadership. To reassess what it is and what it should aim for in terms of a contribution to industry, organisations and for both individual employees and society at large.

If you are working as a senior executive and are actively engaged in managing and leading an organisation today, your experience of top leadership probably suggests that the 21st-century

References

1 E. de Haan, and A. Kasozi, *The Leadership Shadow – How to Recognise and Avoid Derailment, Hubris and Overdrive* (Kogan Page, August 2014).

2 J.A Morris, C.M Brotheridge, and J.C Urbanski, (2005). Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations,* 58, 1323-1350.

3 J.C Rost, (1991). *Leadership for the twenty-first century.* Westport (CT): Praeger.

world is not a place for equivocating wimps. As an executive you are expected to be decisive. The problems you face are presented to you as needing deliberate, quick and intelligent action. You have been trained and repeatedly encouraged to be 'tough' and to prevail in the face of challenge and adversity. Everywhere you go, you face situations that require physical and psychological resilience in order to navigate the complex and contradictory challenges as well as the massive workloads.

But what has created the tremendous demands you face? Why are you and many others so severely stretched? What is it about the context within which you work that has created the experiences you and others face? Why do you have to adapt to this?

At a macro level, the world in which today's senior executives work is more diverse and calls for much greater jumps of attention than some 30 years ago. High performance now requires more than ever that you have to be able to solve problems quickly, to be skilful and succinct in written and verbal communication and to have a specialist expertise in at least some of the key functions of the organisation that you are overlooking.

However, today high performance also means that you have to be able to do this 24/7 with people you have never met, taking greater responsibility for your actions, taking into account new and different risks and hazards and using a multiplicity of technologies to stay connected, in touch and available. In other words, it is not the case that demands have changed. It is the scope and content of work that is completely different.

Organisations have also changed. All in all, organisations have become more complex while becoming more transparent; they have become more interconnected while becoming more technology driven and they have become more democratic while becoming more accountable. It is clearly time for a different kind of leader, a leader who can remain connected, relational and open to scrutiny from all directions (see also Brown, 2014, who performs the same analysis in the domain of political leadership).

In *The Leadership Shadow*[1], we address the common experience that, in this challenging century, and in the midst of a hectic career, managers and leaders may go into overdrive. In this situation, the positive manifestations of 'tough focus' become overcooked and adopt unhelpful and ultimately unproductive patterns of reticence, stubbornness, or frenetic activity.

Instead of being open to possibility and ambiguity and willing to engage in continuous and creative conversations with themselves and others, these executives instead become seriously unhelpful, obstinate, resentful, inarticulate or intense. They become a caricature of themselves. They go into overdrive. This experience has an immediate negative effect on the quality of their work and relationships. For instance, such an overdrive may be accompanied by perceptual and cognitive biases. It may lead to increased stress and burnout. In the extreme, it may result in a decrease in physiological and psychological resilience. Ultimately, overshooting may lead to a negative spiral that can cause physiological and psychological illness, derailment or collapse.

What is leadership and what is it for?

Leadership is one of the most widely researched activities in the business literature, while arguably remaining one of the most obscure. This is possibly because leadership is so core to our functioning as human beings that it has become very hard to take a detached look and conceptualise.

Present-day leadership in organisations is an equally fundamental concern for all that take part in business life: 'Who holds leadership?', 'How do they carry their leadership?', and 'How can I influence leadership?' being some of the core questions that are being asked on a daily basis.

Despite the many thousands of books and articles about leadership (in 2005, there were almost 400,000 articles and books on leadership at that time and this number grows exponentially[2]), it is extremely difficult to find a definition that is rigorous and able to capture the essence of leadership.

Rost's analysis of a vast array of leadership studies from the early 1900s onwards has lost nothing of its accuracy and relevance[3]. Rost shows convincingly that the 20th century has seen very little usable theory on leadership; in fact, truly encompassing, interdisciplinary studies only started in the 1980s. Until the Eighties, leadership studies were mostly limited to 'school leadership', 'military leadership', 'business leadership', without recognising an overarching profession or discipline. Rost concludes that, to this day, there are three fundamental and intractable problems that prevent further development of leadership theory and models:

1. Most of the literature emphasises peripheral issues such as traits, skills and outcomes, without coming to grips with what leadership is and what leadership is for. Also, the existing literature focused on the content of leadership rather than the much more important process of leadership

or the understanding of leadership as a dynamic relationship between stakeholders.

2. Neither leadership scholars nor practitioners had been able to define leadership with precision, accuracy and conciseness. As a result, there is an astounding variety of views and opinion without any criteria to compare them and separate the wheat from the chaff. Most writers and practitioners do not even see this as a problem. More than half of books, studies and articles on leadership do not bother to define their topic.

3. Following on from the lack of clarity and definition, there was no integrated domain or profession of leadership.

Rost himself analyses 587 original publications from 1900 to 1989 in detail and summarises all leadership definitions in the minority of 221 publications that contain a definition of their subject. If we look at the most prevalent definitions both in literature and in practice, then we can distinguish the following influential ways of describing leadership, whether explicitly or implicitly:

1. Leadership = influencing others to willingly do what you want them to, ie leading as influencing;

2. Leadership = a certain form of excellence, ie usually a list of attributes such as honesty, ability to delegate, ability to inspire, confidence, commitment, humour, positive attitude, intuition, even humility;

3. Leadership = whoever is the person who occupies the leadership role, ie everybody is suitable to be a leader, or indeed nobody.

The last definition is particularly problematic. It unintentionally leads to the assumption of formal leadership of a team or organisation as being inevitably a scarce resource that deserves a better pay, and hence something we all need to compete for. Because of the fact that for many people, both leaders and followers, the 'leader' is just the person who is there, the person who happens to officially or unofficially occupy the leadership position, we see a lot of jostling for that role and a lot of usurpation in that role. Moreover, a leadership role will be better paid and carries more influence and power (more 'discretion' to choose your own action), which further fuels competition around these roles.

However, when one defines leadership – even if implicitly – by 'being there' and taking up the role, this will condone abusive behaviour. In our view, this implicit definition is a major factor in the disturbing statistic that so many, really more than half of the leaders in organisations are

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failing in the eyes of their direct reports[4]. Typical management behaviours associated with defining leadership as 'taking up the leadership role' are:

- *Claiming the space,* by speaking out at meetings even when not having much to say, having views on every imaginable topic, taking up time and waffling for longer than is necessary;
- *Claiming the successes,* ascribing initiating or helpful contributions in a successful enterprise to oneself, and conversely blaming other people, predecessors or other parts of the business if there are failures;
- *Actively building* a reputation, including marketing self, brushing up positive characteristics and masking negative traits[5];
- *Building a network of supporters and followers,* up to the point of favouritism and nepotism, in order to have some sort of a 'power base'.

Apart from these visible consequences of this particular conception of leadership, there are likely to be internal and invisible consequences as well. First, the leader may begin to believe in his or her claims and successes, may begin to believe in his reputation and thus may be primed more towards an authoritative, successful, capable self-image. Moreover, building up one's reputation often goes together with building up a matching identity internally, which sets a chain of internal mechanisms in operation that split the personality.

Within him or herself, the leader is under pressure to bring to the foreground more 'positive', 'leaderlike' characteristics of the self and to cast aside the more 'negative', 'denigrated' or 'followerlike' characteristics of self. Petriglieri and Stein have shown how defensive mechanisms such as projection and projective identification may play an important role in building up and maintaining leaders' identities and how as a consequence such

4 R.B Kaiser, and R. Hogan, (2007). The dark side of discretion: Leader personality and organisational decline. In R. Hooijberg, J. Hunt, J. Antonakis, and K. Boal (Eds.), *Being there even when you are not: Leading through strategy, systems and structures. Monographs in leadership and management* (Vol. 4, pp.177-197). London: Elsevier Science.

5 G. Petriglieri and M. Stein, (2012). The unwanted self: projective identification in leaders' identity work. *Organisation studies* 33.9, 1217-1235.

6 D.Campbell, (1956). *Leadership and its effects upon the group.* Columbus: Ohio State University.

leaders may contribute to 'ongoing conflict and a toxic culture' in organisations.

A new-found definition of leadership

When we started to think about leadership as the function that helps a team to perform better and increase its output or impact, we began to see leadership impact as the function that is devoted to enhancing an organisation's effectiveness. We discovered through Rost that the American sociologist Campbell had already suggested a similar definition in 1956[6]. This definition states that it is the team that needs to be competitive, not the leader. The leader just helps it to compete better. The immediate implication of this

definition is that leadership does not reside with a leader but that anyone inside or outside an organisation can contribute to this function.

Also, it immediately follows that leadership is an immeasurably complex function: 'effectiveness' can be measured on a plethora of dimensions for most organisations and similarly 'organisation' and 'enhancing' can be understood in a vast variety of ways. For us, leadership stretches all the way from the ordinary, predictable and repetitive 'management' of an organisation to what might be extremely rare interventions that call into question the very existence of an organisation or even its marketplace. **TJ**

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Some other important consequences of this simple definition of leadership

1. Leadership is the same as followership and leadership is also the same as management.

2. Leadership is always intimately linked with power.

3. Leadership is entirely context- and situation-specific.

4. Leadership is a social construct dealing with other social constructs, ie a meaning-making activity.

5. Leadership is, in essence, distributed not concentrated and dialogical not transformational.

6. Leadership is relational not individual.

The most important aspect of effectiveness in leadership is now easy to guess. The output of an organisation is a result of the combined work of all members of that organisation, who work together as a team. Therefore, the greatest effectiveness for any leader comes from facilitating and aggregating the widest potential of meaning making, direction and feedback. According to de Haan and Kasozi, it is essential for a leader to learn how to make their mark without hindering others to occupy themselves fully with the job of leadership as well.

Even when approached with a helpful definition and with sound understanding, leadership comes with inevitable anxieties, doubts and projections. As a leader, you feel the tension of taking responsibility, as well as the uncertainty and unpredictability of outcome. You feel self-doubt or, instead, overconfidence. You will succumb to the vicious cycle of 'impotence' versus 'omnipotence' that many leaders feel on a daily basis.

To step into role of leader and serve your team

requires you to 'step up to the plate', to face up to and deal with these and other similar anxieties. Even then, as you try to face your demons and anxieties, you can be certain that your vulnerabilities and pathologies will re-emerge whenever you have the audacity to 'lead', ie to express yourself on the performance and effectiveness of your own organisation.

Your unique drivers and competences are your key assets that drive the creative dynamic of your leadership practice, and de Haan and Kasozi recognise that these personal talents can settle into patterns. They note that those patterns can be productive and problematic, and most often both at the same time. The very same patterns that lead to opportunity and success will, of necessity, lead to shame and failure as well. Their experience of the reality of working in complex organisations made up of diverse human beings in a dynamic external environment, suggests that your unique core qualities and personality patterns matter. The ever-present challenge executives face lies in the ability to work with those patterns and cycles simultaneously and in a dynamic way, while also living the challenges and changing the patterns, and thus embracing uncertainty and realising possibility.

In part two, we'll look at the 11 leadership overdrive patterns identified by de Haan and Kasozi, from the slightly neurotic to the full-blown deranged, and reveal practical suggestions to keep you on track.

For more, see *The Leadership Shadow – How to Recognise and Avoid Derailment, Hubris and Overdrive* by Erik de Haan and Anthony Kasozi (Kogan Page, August 2014).