The leadership shadow

Erik de Haan and **Andy Copeland** reveal how your strongest gift can become your greatest weakness

To be charged with a leadership position is an honour and distinction. It elevates you into a position of responsibility over others and puts you in a role of crucial importance for the team. You cannot obtain leadership authority unless it is given to you (unless of course you want to take things by force or by divine decree which, however, is anathema in today's big organisations), hence a promotion is felt as one of the most genuine compliments one can aspire to in the workplace.

At the same time, being honoured and set apart as a leader always opens up a rift, between the leader and the team, between the 'meaning-maker' and the recipients of meaning or, if you wish, the 'ruler' and the 'common people'. This rift is the essence of what we call the *leadership shadow*. Leadership by nature creates a split between a gesture and a response, or between guidance and the ability to follow through.

One can study the internal manifestation of this rift as well. As a contrast between one's sunny, active, constructive or aggressive side that has the ambition to contribute, create and demonstrate something; and one's doubting, pessimistic, needy, vulnerable, cautious and concerned side, which craves for connection with oneself and others.

Generally it is very tempting to identify with your more 'sunny' side, the 'leadership' side of our interventions, certainly in public. In most cases, there is a tendency to ignore the shadow side of leadership from as early and for as long as possible. This can go on for a sustained period while you continue to 'grow' your leadership presence and 'mature' in the leadership role.

Such a stepping up and stepping into roles works very well until, as a leader, you encounter criticism or questioning of your leadership contributions, thus revealing that you have something important to learn relating to your meaning-making abilities.

The moment you do need to learn or change something is the moment you need to revert to your discarded shadow. Either by stepping aside, choosing 'followership' and allowing somebody who knows better to show the way, or by using some of those underdeveloped talents that you have yourself ignored for some time. At that point there is a conflict, between your pride and your passion, between your best intentions and your innermost shame, and between your 'up' and your 'down'. The side of us that is 'up' wants to stay up, win more leadership presence and influence, while the side that is 'down' is by now used to not getting much of a listening to.

The leadership shadow in more detail

In *The Leadership Shadow*[1], we identify 11 patterns or 'strands' of personality that emerge at different times and in many shades of intensity, from the slightly neurotic to the full-blown deranged.

These provide an overview of the possibilities of going into overdrive, with new insights for executives' circumstances and behaviours. The strands also help leaders and executive coaches identify when traits are constructive and →

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productive, and when they become problematic and counterproductive.

The personality strands identified are based on the experience that each of us has a personal leadership profile, with its own highly personal derailer behaviour. Below are just four examples of leadership patterns and how they go into overdrive:

- *The charming manipulators,* whose actions may brush up against the rules and mould them to their own design. In this leadership style, strict accountability may go out of the

window because their own accountability may be relegated to the 'shadow'. *Antisocial* patterns linked with the charming manipulator: you believe the rules are made to be broken and find it hard to be held accountable for your actions.
- *The playful encouragers,* whose influence is felt mainly indirectly. In this leadership style, full responsibility for taking for one's actions may be difficult as their responsibility may be relegated to the 'shadow'. *Passive–aggressive* patterns linked with the playful encourager: what you say is not what you really believe and you find it hard to take responsibility for your views and actions.
- *Glowing Gatsbys,* who influence from the front and bask in their successes. In this leadership style, it may be easier to criticise others but harder to look at oneself in a similar way, as humility may have been relegated to the 'shadow'. *Narcissistic* patterns linked with the glowing Gatsby: you think that you're right and everyone else is wrong and not up to their jobs.
- *Detached diplomats,* whose actions remain largely in their own world, disengaged and disconnected from those around them. In this leadership style, it may be hard to keep the organisation's issues and people into focus, as their ability to reach out may be relegated to the 'shadow'. When this pattern is highly developed, the leader seems very absent. *Schizoid* patterns linked with the detached diplomat: you are disengaged and disconnected from the everyday running of the business.

What we know about success and effectiveness in a leadership role?

Leadership positions afford power in the form of the discretion to act or hold sway one way or the other. Too much discretion or unchecked power allows our naturally selfish tendencies and self-confidence to grow and lead in the direction of abuse of power or leadership derailment, just like a spoiled child will throw ever more problematic tantrums.

Following the definition of a leader is 'whoever takes up the role of the leader', selection processes have looked at suitability. They tend to look for the person most ambitious, experienced and willing to sacrifice. Selection processes are set up in such a way that good qualities, talents, experiences and education are sought, over and above the motivation and the presentation of the candidates. However, Hogan notes that even the best of such procedures look for

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11 leadership overdrive patterns based on 11 well-known personality disorders

Overdrives of the movers and shakers:

- *Antisocial* patterns linked with the charming manipulator: you believe the rules are made to be broken. Do you find it hard to be held accountable for your actions?

- *Passive-aggressive* patterns linked with the playful encourager: what you say is not what you really believe. Do you find it hard to take responsibility for your views and actions?

- *Narcissistic* pattern linked with the glowing Gatsby: you think that you're right and everyone else is wrong. Do you as a leader often think that others are wrong and not up to their jobs?

- *Schizoid* patterns linked with the detached diplomat: you're disengaged and disconnected. Do you often distance yourself from the everyday running of the business?

Overdrives of the rigorous thinkers:

- *Obsessive-compulsive* patterns linked with the responsible workaholic: you get the little things right and the big things wrong. Do you often fret about minutiae whilst losing focus on the big picture?

- *Borderline* patterns linked with the impulsive loyalist: you're subject to mood swings. Do you find it very hard to hear bad news about how the business is going?

- *Paranoid* patterns linked with the brilliant sceptic: you focus on the negatives. Do you often think that people are for or against you, and in particular against you?

- *Schizotypal* patterns linked with the creative daydreamer: you try to be different just for the sake of it. Is your picture of the future often proven wrong?

Overdrives of the sensitive carers:

- *Dependent* patterns linked with the virtuous supporter: you try to win the popularity contest. Are you looking after everyone and trying to make them all feel happy?

- *Histrionic* patterns linked with the accomplished thespian: you need to be the centre of attention. Are you obsessed with your public image?

- *Avoidant* patterns linked with the simmering stalwart: you're afraid to make decisions. Are you concerned or hesitant because of what other people might think or do?

positive assets rather than excluding negatives[2]. Serious derailment criteria such as personality disturbances are completely hidden from ordinary recruitment practice. This includes traditional assessment centres[3].

There is accumulating evidence that overdrive patterns are much more common in higher levels of leadership. On reviewing recent research, Kaiser, LeBreton and Hogan conclude that about a quarter of managers had at least one shadow-side trait sufficiently elevated to be considered a performance risk, while across three samples including 378 senior executives, a much higher percentage (98 per cent) had at least one risk factor[4]. In other words, virtually every board-level leader is at some risk for performance problems related to his or her shadow side, which raises the importance of self-development.
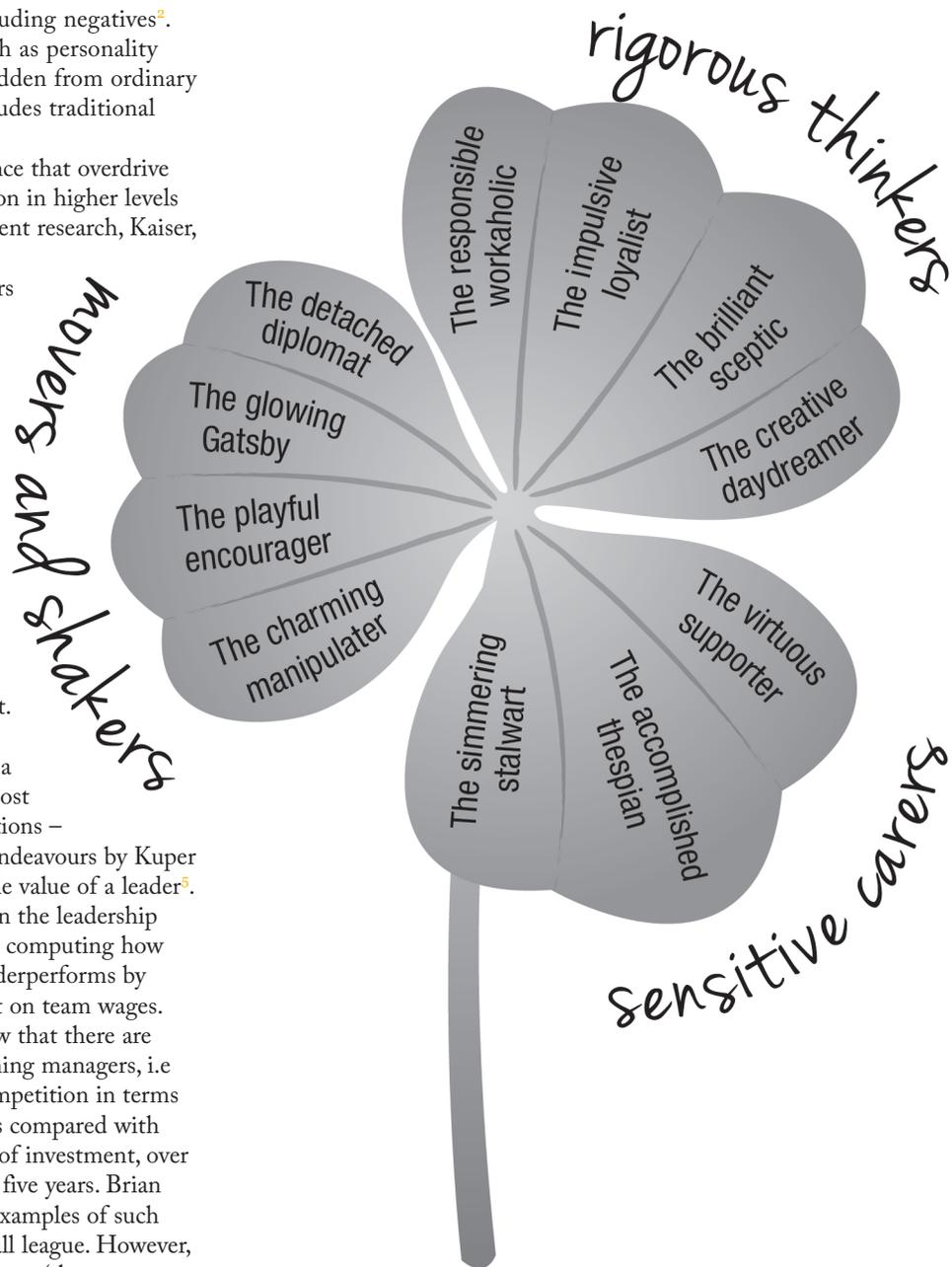
In fact, in professional international sports – probably a more competitive arena than most leadership in business organisations – there have been some fruitful endeavours by Kuper and Szymanski to determine the value of a leader[5]. A precise figure has been put on the leadership ability of a football manager by computing how much the manager over- or underperforms by comparison to the money spent on team wages. Kuper and Szymanski also show that there are some consistently over-performing managers, i.e leaders that outperform the competition in terms of performance of their team as compared with other teams with similar levels of investment, over sustained periods of more than five years. Brian Clough and Bob Paisley were examples of such managers in the English football league. However, apart from those few overachievers, 'the vast majority of managers appear to have almost no impact on their team's performance', a statement which Kuper and Szymanski manage to back up with hard statistics.

It is worth considering that that statement may also be true in business, namely that leaders and their qualities do not make much difference to the bottom line. It would be an even more serious finding in business than in sports because expenditure on business leaders, both in terms of salaries and other expenses, is proportionally much higher than in sport. And even more troubling if one considers the financial and emotional costs of

failing business leadership.

Similar to the sports rankings, Forbes has produced rankings on the best performing American CEOs based on very similar criteria: change in share price relative to own compensation over a six-year period[6]. After the financial crisis exposed the disadvantages of the focus on short-term shareholder benefits and bonuses, the Harvard Business Review has also begun publishing rankings of CEOs based on long-term increase of market capitalisation of corporations[7,8].

They found that the best performing CEOs

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during their tenure within a 12-year period were not the same as the best-paid CEOs or even the 'star' CEOs, and that also geographies and markets made little difference. Hansen et al conclude with the comment: "Taking a longer perspective did bring to light a number of 'hidden gems' – quiet CEOs who delivered outstanding results year in and year out, away from the glare of the cover stories and business school case studies. Their success makes a persuasive argument for a new approach to evaluating CEOs. Only by analysing performance over their tenure and beyond can we begin to understand the nature of great leadership."[8]

The best way therefore to define and measure ongoing leadership success appears to be to judge the achievements of a leader from the perspective of his or her team's effectiveness, as seen from objective results or from the perspective of the team members themselves[9]. The people who will notice leadership success or failure most are those that are dependent on the leadership: the direct reports or team members. However, they are often unable to speak out or may run risks if they do so, therefore surveys should be organised with care, safeguarding the subjects' anonymity. Also, upward feedback should be stimulated as much as possible, so leaders can receive the relevant data for monitoring and maintaining or enhancing their own performance[10].

Countless managers have been distracted and do not spend enough time on enhancing the effectiveness of their team per se. For some reason or other, they are catering too much to the 'other' definition of leadership, the one about 'being in post'. Paradoxically, their intense attention to their leadership role precludes them in large part from truly leading others.

Don't let the shadow side derail you
Failure to restrain the demons within can result in a toxic organisation. Appreciating the benefits of certain attributes, while understanding when they tip into shadow side characteristics provides the key to actively managing them, reducing the risk to the organisation as well as the risk of leadership derailment.

Executives must balance their leadership, and coaches, L&D professionals and HRs have a crucial role to play in working with leaders to provide solutions for dealing with different shadows. In fact, upon reflection, shadows can provide fresh and much-needed insight into leadership and the requisite balance to a leader's drive and success.

Advice in *The Leadership Shadow* for executives includes:
- Keep the process of leading fluid and be open to (sometimes painful) upwards feedback from within the organisation.
- Keep leadership practice healthy and balanced, and be open to (sometimes painful) upwards feedback from their own shadows.
- Be as relational as possible by nurturing relationships – leading not in the abstract and not just indirectly but here and now with colleagues.
- Engage in active and honest (self-) reflection.

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